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The role of organizational context in fostering employee proactive behavior: interplay between HR system configurations and relational climates

Emphasizing the role of the organizational context and adopting a multilevel approach we propose that the interplay between HR system configurations and relational climates has a cross-level effect on employee proactive behavior. Using a sample of 211 employees in 25 companies we show that *the laissez-faire context* – featuring a combination of a weak compliance HR configuration and a strong market-pricing relational climate – is better suited for fostering employee proactive behavior than *the nurturing context*, which is characterized by a strong HR commitment configuration and a strong communal-sharing relational climate. We also found that combining strong commitment HR configuration with weak communal-sharing climate is associated with more employee proactivity. We discuss what our findings suggest about the interaction between HR system configurations and organizational climate dimensions and about their role in influencing individual-level outcomes.

Keywords: HR system configurations; relational climate; proactive behavior; multilevel; organizational context

Introduction

The best way to predict your future is to create it. (Abraham Lincoln)

This quote, commonly used by leaders when asked about how their organizations succeed in adapting to rapidly changing business environment, relates to one of the most frequently used active performance concepts – proactive behavior (Fay & Frese, 2001). At the individual level proactive behavior is about taking initiative in improving current circumstances by challenging status quo rather than passively adapting to present conditions (Crant, 2000; Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006). Adequate levels of employee proactive behaviors are needed for an organization's capability to create its own future; be it through innovation in products or services, transformation of its business model or organizational change. Research has shown that employee proactive behavior results in favorable individual outcomes such as higher level of innovation (Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001), leadership effectiveness (Bateman & Crant, 1993), task performance (Fuller & Marler, 2009) and greater career success (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001), all of which in turn positively contribute to organizational performance and development.

The importance of employee proactivity for contemporary work organizations has motivated substantial research output examining its antecedents. However, most research has focused on the role of individual dispositional characteristics and immediate work environment features (Fay & Frese, 2001; Fritz & Sonnentag, 2009; Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007; Lam, Spreitzer, & Fritz, 2014; Parker & Collins, 2010; Parker et al., 2006), while the role of broader contextual influences is mostly unexplored. We know from extant research that 'situational opportunities and constraints' at the organizational level play a vital role in influencing essential employee behaviors such as organizational citizenship behavior, absenteeism, turnover, and performance (Johns, 2006, p. 386). Therefore, examining the effects of organizational-level factors should in the same vein provide for a more comprehensive understanding of

mechanisms that lead to proactive behavior of individuals in organizational setting and hence contribute to closing the gap between the micro and macro research on employee proactivity (Bamberger, 2008).

In this paper, we aim to unveil the role of organizational context as a cross-level effect in fostering employee proactive behavior (see Johns, 2006). Specifically, we examine how the interplays between relevant HR system configurations (Lepak & Snell, 1999) and generic relational climates (Fiske, 1992; Mossholder, Richardson, & Settoon, 2011) affect proactive behavior of employees. HR systems and organizational climate have for long been among the most influential dimensions of organizational context as far as their effects on employee attitudes and behaviors are concerned (Ferris et al., 1998; Kuenzi & Schminke, 2009). However, they have not yet been used to explain proactive behavior of employees in organizations. Moreover, as Johns notes (2006, p. 389) contextual features have frequently been "studied in a piecemeal fashion, in isolation from each other". This paper attempts to overcome this limitation of extant research by examining the effects of two specific, outcome-relevant, interplays between elements of the organizational context on proactive behavior.

The contributions of this paper are consistent with the strengthening of the multilevel paradigm in both the human resource management and organizational climate research as well as with the need to adopt a more holistic view of organizational context in cross-level research. Recently, the HRM-performance research stream has started studying complex cross-level mechanisms (Den Hartog, Boon, Verburg, & Croon, 2013; Kehoe & Wright, 2013) and found a renewed interest in examining alternative individual-level attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (cf. Kaše, Paauwe, & Batistič, 2014). This paper reinforces this research direction by looking at an important individual level outcome – employee proactive behavior – and examining moderated cross-level effects of HR system configurations. Organizational climate research, on the other hand, has largely focused on examining how facet-specific climates affect respective

outcomes and has consequently been fragmented in many topical research areas (Kuenzi & Schminke, 2009). An investigation of how multiple dimensions of an organizational context operate in concert, such as the one we present below, could contribute to a more thorough understanding of the organizational context-individual outcomes relationship. Finally, we intend to contribute to the efforts to balance employee proactivity research by examining the role of broader context in fostering employee proactivity, which has so far been neglected (Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010).

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Employee proactivity is a goal-driven behavior that has been described as a process consisting of setting a proactive goal and striving to achieve it (Parker et al., 2010). This process is facilitated by individuals' perceptions of self-efficacy, sufficient control and viable cost to achieve the goal, their motives (ranging from purely intrinsic to identified), as well as affective states that prompt their action (Parker et al., 2010). A range of antecedents and moderators at different levels have so far been considered that determine drivers of this process and help us understand variability in individual proactivity in work organizations including dispositional characteristics of individuals, their affect (mood) along with features of their immediate and broader work environment (Bindl & Parker, 2011).

Prior research has examined how individual differences such as personality, KSA (knowledge, skills and abilities) and demographics contribute to variability in employee proactivity. Understandably, proactive personality received most attention among personality traits (see Bateman & Crant, 1993; Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000). Still, other dispositional characteristics including conscientiousness, desire for control, learning goal orientation, future-oriented thinking, intellectual curiosity (Howell & Sheab, 2001), and personality aspects related to one's core self-beliefs have also been shown to

be associated with proactivity (Bindl & Parker, 2011; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, & Lawrence, 2001; Speier & Frese, 1997). Further, it was shown that knowledge, either in form of general job qualifications or more specific domain-relevant knowledge, is important for employee proactivity (Dutton et al., 2001; Fay & Frese, 2001). As Fay and Frese (2001, p. 104) argue: *To be able to take initiative, one needs a good and thorough understanding of what one's work is, that is, one needs job-relevant knowledge, skills, and cognitive ability.* Finally, demographic characteristics such as gender and age are also predictors of proactivity. In particular, men were found to be more proactive then women both in terms of their willingness to engage in proactive job search and in networking behaviors (Maurer, Weiss, & Barbeite, 2003; Warr & Fay, 2001) and age was found to be positively related to on-the-job proactivity (van Veldhoven & Dorenbosch, 2008)

Above and beyond individual differences, researchers have also explored the role of contextual elements influencing proactivity – usually as moderators –, where immediate work and social environment prevailed. Two qualitatively different perspectives can be observed in the literature. According to first one, a 'positive' context provides the necessary resources and creates conditions for vigor, flow, dedication, and feeling of safety, which encourage an individual to set and strive to achieve a proactive goal. Specifically, work designs featuring autonomy, feedback and variety was shown to affect proactivity at work by stimulating perceptions of self-efficacy, control over the work environment, positive affect and intrinsic motivation (Lam et al., 2014; Parker et al., 2006). Similarly, positive immediate social context, represented by trust in coworkers, perceived supportive supervision and transformational leadership (Belschak, Den Hartog, & Fay, 2010; Morrison & Phelps, 1999) were discussed to have positive effect on proactivity. However, it was also proposed that a more 'negative' context could also stimulate proactivity, because individuals will try to resolve a situation they feel uncomfortable with. Indeed, it was shown that job stressors such as time pressure and

situational constraints influence proactive work behaviors (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2009; Ohly, Sonnentag, & Pluntke, 2006). Stressors indicate a mismatch between desired and actual situation and thus energize individuals to take personal initiative to improve the situation.

Less often, the employee proactivity literature examined how the overall interpersonal climate and people management practices facilitated or constrained individual proactive behavior, although calls for more research in this area have been made (e.g. Parker & Collins, 2010). Probably, the lack of research in this area could be attributed to the fact that it is the (broader) context that proactive individuals should by definition strive to change and not act reactively to. Rare contributions that have addressed this issue suggest that initiative and safety climates might be most relevant for stimulating proactive behaviors in organizations (Baer & Frese, 2003; Raub & Liao, 2012). Besides, taking a broader view of work and employment arrangements Van Veldhoven and Dorenbosch (2008) have shown that a bundle of developmental HR practices also facilitates employee proactivity. All of the above mentioned studies addressing higher-level antecedents of proactivity clearly offered additional arguments for claiming that 'positive' contexts are facilitators of employee proactivity. And, as an organizational-level study has shown for post-reorganization performance, creating a proactive climate might in turn have important implications for organizational bottom line (Fay, Lührmann, & Kohl, 2004).

The overall conceptual model

In this paper we draw on the contextual perspective (Johns, 2006) and multilevel approach (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000) to examine the role of the broader organizational context in facilitating proactive behavior of employees. Specifically, we explore how the interplay between selected elements of broader organizational context – relational climates and HR system configurations – affects employee proactive behavior. The overall conceptual model is depicted in Figure 1 and discussed in detail in the sections below.

Both of the above mentioned elements relational (interpersonal) climates and HR system configurations have been mentioned as potentially important but underexplored, higher-level factors of proactivity in organizations (Parker & Collins, 2010; van Veldhoven & Dorenbosch, 2008). To further justify their inclusion in the model, we argue that climates and HR systems are mutually interdependent elements of an organizational context that, when examined together, can exhibit (positive and negative) synergistic effects on various attitudes and behaviors of employees (Gelade & Ivery, 2003; Mossholder et al., 2011; Ostroff & Bowen, 2000). Finally, climates and HR systems bring two different aspects of organizational context to the table. HR systems can be thought of as a designed/intended feature of the organizational context, since they are usually composed of sets of HR policies & practices that were developed to support strategic goals of the organization (Lepak & Snell, 1999). Organizational climates, on the other hand, should be considered as emergent features of a context, because they emerge from individual perceptions in a less- predictable bottom-up process (Fiske, 1992). Examining the interplay between a designed and an emergent element of an organizational context enables us a more holistic understanding about how broader organizational context affects employee proactivity.

In our conceptual model, HR systems are introduced through HR configurations. The latter can be described as distinctive systems of interchangeable HR practices for obtaining, retaining, and developing employees with a specific purpose. For example, Lepak and Snell (1999, 2002) discuss commitment-, productivity-, collaborative-, and compliance-based HR configurations. These configurations are stylized generic HR systems and can be used to manage employees in any employment mode (Lepak & Snell, 2002). HR configurations characterize properties of a part of an organizational context, which affects individuals'

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attitudes and behaviors through carefully designed policies and practices for managing people as well as through expectations and obligations of the employment relationship (e.g., relational vs. transactional). For contrast purposes, only two diametrically opposing HR configurations, commitment- and compliance-based, were used in the model, which in turn allow clearer theoretical theorizing about both extremes.

Interpersonal climates, on the other hand, are represented by relational climates. Drawing on Fiske's (1992) theory of relational models, Mosholder et al. (2011, p. 36) define relational climates as *shared employee perceptions and appraisals of policies, practices, and behaviors affecting interpersonal relationships in a given context*. They determine how social relationships in an organization are comprehended, evaluated, represented, and constructed. They are the schemata people use to construct and construe their relationships. Relational climates thus represent a part of the organizational context, which affects individuals' attitudes and behaviors through shared norms and interactions among people. They are not designed to manage people purposefully as was the case for HR configurations. Rather, the social rules that facilitate and constrain individual behavior emerge spontaneously through interactions with other people and co-evolve with other contextual elements such as HR configurations. Among the four basic types of relational climates, we find communal-sharing, equality-matching, authority-ranking and market-pricing climates. Again, we decided to only include the two climates at the extreme ends of the continuum – the communal-sharing and market-pricing climates.

As a result, our hypothesized model features interplays of selected pairs of HR systems configurations and relational climates, as this interplay appears to crucial for various desired organizational outcomes, like knowledge sharing (e.g. Boer, Berends, & van Baalen, 2011). To be precise, we develop two broader contexts, each consisting of an HR configuration and its respective (fitting) relational climate (cf. Mossholder et al., 2011) – 1) interplay between

commitment-based HR and communal-sharing climate, and 2) interplay between compliance-based HR and market-pricing climate – and hypothesize about their effects on employee proactivity. We first follow the mainstream literature on employee proactivity and hypothesize that a 'positive' broader organizational context fosters employee proactivity. Then, we introduce an alternative hypothesis and argue that a 'negative' context could also create conditions for more proactivity among employees. Therefore, both aspects of the broader organizational context are explored simultaneously. In the next two sections we provide argumentation for our hypotheses.

The 'nurturing' context and employee proactivity

When discussing contexts that have the potential to foster proactive behavior at work, the majority of current literature would argue for a 'positive' context. For the purposes of this paper, we define 'nurturing' context as a caring, trust-based context, where development of employees and the organization is emphasized. Such context facilitates people to believe that they are able to successfully take initiative, instill intrinsic or internalized motivation to persevere in achieving the goal and stimulate positive emotions that will energize them throughout the process (see Parker & Collins, 2010). We argue that a combination of commitment-based HR configuration and communal-sharing relational climate provides these kinds of situational cues.

The name of the 'commitment' HR configuration already clearly communicates the main purpose of this HR system. It is intended to develop a long-term, trusting relationship between the organization and the employee. Since the psychological link between the organization and the employees exposed to this system are strong, the need for control is minimal and employees are given considerable discretion. The system also strongly emphasizes training and development to increase knowledge and skills of the employees, particularly if they are firm-specific. Further, in line with this system work is structured to allow flexibility and

change along with enabling employee's participation in decision-making (Lepak & Snell, 2002). Beside a considerable degree of employment security, performance appraisals are also developmental, which creates a sense of safety for the employees. Finally, although the value is places on well-being and intrinsic motivation (Boxall & Macky, 2009), financial incentives tend to be competence-based and long term, thus encouraging a long-term perspective (Lepak & Snell, 2002).

The other component of the 'nurturing' context is the communal-sharing climate. In this type of climate, individual employees are treated as equivalent members of the community and relationships between them are based on feelings of interpersonal solidarity, belonging and trust (Fiske, 1992; Fiske & Haslam, 2005). Such relationships are in way similar to the ones that occurs among family or clan members (Ouchi, 1980). Work in a communal-sharing climate is carried out following the principle that members of the community contribute what that can without tracking inputs (Clark, 1984). Employee performance in such situations is enhanced by collective commitment, and as such, the dominant employee relationship is likely to be a long-term one requiring open-ended obligations on the part of both the organization and employees (Mossholder et al., 2011). Such environments encourage positive work climate and facilitate perceptions of safety and support among the members.

We posit that when combined, the commitment HR configuration and the communal-sharing climate provide a strong impetus for proactive behavior. Companies adopting the developmental *commitment HR configuration* acquire superior human capital and encourage their employees to continuously engage in knowledge-enhancing activities. This results in employees with a strong knowledge base, which according to Fay and Frese (2001) is a precondition for proactivity in organizational setting. Further, flexible work designs, discretion and opportunities to participate in decision-making contribute to perceptions of being in control, stimulate intrinsic motivation and build confidence to act. In such environments employees

gradually assume ownership of their decisions and take action themselves to improve their work situation (Bindl & Parker, 2011; Grant & Ashford, 2008). Long-term incentives and employment security also contribute their share by diminishing perceived cost of engaging in 'non-standard' behaviors.

These processes are complemented by effects of *communal-sharing climate*. In particular, this type of climate provides necessary safety in interpersonal relationships, reinforces peer and organizational support to individuals, and facilitates positive atmosphere within the community. Being part of supportive and caring community employees will more likely engage in 'riskier' behaviors (Griffin et al., 2007). For example, suggesting new ideas or reporting mistakes from failed personal initiatives is more natural and safer in such settings. Moreover, since personal initiatives usually affect others, trust in supervisor and colleagues (McAllister, 1995) along with positive relations between organizational members (Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, 2003), which are stimulated by communal sharing climate, will also contribute to more proactive behavior.

In organizations that adopt them, commitment HR configuration and communal-sharing climate coevolve and mutually reinforce each other. As discussed above they jointly contribute to enhancing all there motivational processes that lead to proactive behavior of employees. Thereby, their synergistic effects are strongest in equipping employees' with a long-term perspective, ensuring perceptions of safety, stimulating intrinsic motivation and providing opportunities for positive affective states, all of which have been show to lead to proactive behavior. Therefore,

> *Hypothesis 1: Interplay in the organizational context exists between commitment*
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> *HR configuration and communal-sharing climate such that employee proactive*
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> *behavior is stronger in organizations, where the context is characterized by a*

combination of strong commitment HR configuration and strong communal-sharing climate.

The 'laissez-faire' context and employee proactivity

In our review, we also identified a literature that argues that 'negative' contexts can also contribute to proactive behavior at work (Fay & Frese, 2001; Fay & Sonnentag, 2002; Frese & Fay, 2001). Therefore, we decided to build on the logic implicit in this literature and propose an alternative hypothesis. By 'laissez-faire' context, we refer to an environment, which provides the basic HR practices and minimal rules as far as the employment relationship is concerned, while at the same time encourages strong competition among the organizational members (cf. Loury, 1979). In effect, this context is very close to what Mishel and Peake (1982) would call 'a weak situation' and therefore ideal setting for individual initiative. We contend that a combination of a weak compliance-based HR configuration and a strong market-based relational climate provides a setting that illustrates such a setting.

A compliance-based HR configuration is considered an HR system that is purely transactional, short-term oriented and strives to ensure worker compliance with preset rules, regulations, and/or procedures (Lepak & Snell, 2002). The organizations adopting this system believe that employees covered with this system are externally motivated and therefore have to be extensively monitored and controlled (Boxall & Macky, 2009). They also do not show any intentions to put efforts in developing a long-term relationship with them since they assume that their human capital is neither highly valuable nor specific. Compliance HR configuration usually features an explicit statement of economic exchange, low discretion at work, limited training concentrated on enforcing rules and complying with work protocols and hourly wage for accomplishment of specific tasks (Lepak & Snell, 2002). A *weak* compliance-based HR configuration, as we use it in the paper, can be described as an HR system that features minimal

practices for managing employees (mostly limited to administrative, legally required HR activities), minimal rules for compliance, but remains highly transactional and short-term oriented.

The second component of the context, market-pricing relational climate is characterized largely by calculative means-ends considerations among employees. Consistent with game-theoretic perspectives and social exchange theory, relationships in such climate are based on desires to optimize personal outcomes (e.g., money) and are based on proportionality measurements. Values (i.e., ratios of exchange representing individuals' choices among possible outcomes) are part of any sense-making because individuals tend to maximize their 'return on investment' (Fiske, 1992). Since having an accurate a priori assessments of the costs and rewards is difficult, interpersonal relationships in this type of climate are more calculative, volatile, short-termed and dependent on the outcome of the last exchange or event (Mossholder et al., 2011). Rewards are allocated in proportion to task input, thus people are motivated by achievements (Fiske, 1992). People with achievement motivation framework in mind tend to operate in a context where risks, choices, and outcomes are calculable.

We argue that this context, featuring low compliance HR configuration and market-pricing climate, will create a weak situation, in which individualist behaviors, including employee proactivity will be encouraged. The cognitive-motivational process behind proactive behavior stimulated by this context differs from the one in the 'nurturing' context. First, due to the fact that companies adopting low compliance HR configuration provide minimal training and developmental opportunities, individuals must already have the necessary characteristics that enable them to be proactive. This means that the 'laissez-faire' context is to a larger extent determined by attraction-selection-attrition processes (cf. Bretz, Ash, & Dreher, 1989). Employees in companies providing this context exhibit more proactive behavior because such environment already attracts individuals with the right competencies, self-efficacy beliefs, and

motivation. Further, individuals in this kind of context are externally motivated to pursue personal initiatives because they receive a return on their invested activity. Being proactive in calculative settings with minimal rules enhances their personal status, performance, and career prospects (e.g. Grant, Parker, & Collins, 2009). Thereby, individuals do not expect any support by other organizational members or organization itself as long as the 'laissez-faire' context allows them to fulfill personal goals. Thus we posit,

> *Hypothesis 2: Interplay in the organizational context exists between compliance HR configuration and market-pricing climate such that employee proactive behavior is stronger in organizations, where the context is characterized by a combination of weak compliance HR configuration and strong market pricing climate.*

Method

Sample and procedure

We collected data for this study from a sample of 25 small and medium Slovenian companies with an established HR system in 2012 and 2013. All of the included companies have more than 50 employees, this limit was set in order to for the HR system to be in place and relevant for the research setting of this study. The participating companies are from a wide variety of industries (offering both products and services), such as automotive, metal processing, composite materials manufacturing, insurance, IT, motorway management, consulting, healthcare, pharmaceutical, banking, telecommunication, retail, kitchen appliances, and hotel tourism. We used two online questionnaires, one for the HR managers (assessing HR system configurations in their companies) and the other for the employees (providing data on other variables). We collected a total of 211 employee questionnaires, with an average of 8.44 employees per company. One key informant approach was used in terms of the HR managers that assessed HR systems in their companies. We did, however, survey more than one manager

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in 8% of the sample and found sufficient inter-rater agreement among them (ranging from .82 to .96).

Measures

Variables we measured at company and individual levels. We measured all four relational climates and four HR systems, however due to the conceptual model, only two for each were included in the analyses. Commitment and compliance HR systems were reported at company level by HR managers. Communal-sharing and market-pricing climates were reported at individual level and aggregated to company level. Other variables were reported at individual level. All scales used a 7-point Likert scale except where noted differently.

Commitment, and compliance HR systems (reported by the HR managers) were measured using a scale developed by Lepak & Snell (2002). Sample items for commitment HR system: "These employees perform jobs that empower them to make decisions" - $\alpha = .92$. Sample items for compliance HR system: "These employees perform jobs that focus on compliance with rules, regulations, and procedures" - $\alpha = .66$.

Communal-sharing and market-pricing relational climates were measured with eight-item scales by Haslam & Fiske (1999), adapted to suit the working environment (i.e., the company as a whole). Sample items for communal-sharing climate ($\alpha = .89$): "You are a unit-you belong together" and "You tend to develop very similar attitudes and values with your coworkers." Sample items for market-pricing climate ($\alpha = .67$): "What you get from your coworkers is directly proportional to how much you give them." and "Your interactions with your coworkers are strictly rational: you each calculate what your payoffs are, and act accordingly."

Proactive behavior was measured with a 10-item scale adapted from Seibert, Kraimer & Crant (2001) and measuring proactive personality ($\alpha = .82$). The proactive personality scale has

been already successfully used in previous research to tackle proactive behaviors of individuals (Porath & Bateman, 2006) as it reflects a "behavior as a personal disposition - that is, a relatively stable behavioral tendency" (Bateman & Crant, 1993, p. 104). Sample items include "If I see something I don't like, I fix it." and "If I believe in an idea, no obstacle will prevent me from making it happen."

We controlled for **age** and **gender** as studies have found that differences in gender and age might reflect in different engaging in proactive job search, networking behaviors and different perceptions of relational climates (cf. Bindl & Parker, 2011; Fiske, 1992; van Veldhoven & Dorenbosch, 2008).In addition we control also for **employee education**, and **expertise** (for which a proxy for work experience was used). In their research on voicing behavior in groups, LePine and Van Dyne (1998) found that individuals with higher education background are also more likely to speak out with suggestions for improvements. Likewise, job-specific expertise has been found to be positively related to proactivity at work (Dutton et al., 2001). We also controlled for **tenure** (how long an employee has been working for the company in years) and whether or not employees reported to have any **managerial duties** (dummy coded, yes or no). All control variables were self-reported.

In order to avoid problems with common method bias, data were collected by two separate questionnaires: one for the employees and the other for HR managers, who assessed HR systems in their companies. Following such an approach, Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff (2003) state that additional statistical remedies are unnecessary. Nevertheless, as data regarding moderator and outcome variables (relational climates and proactive behavior) were only employee-based, we used the following approaches. After the data collection, we conducted Harman's one-factor test to address the common method variance issue. If common method variance was a serious problem in the study, we would expect a single factor to emerge from a factor analysis or one general factor to account for most of the covariance in the

independent and dependent variables (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The results of the factor analysis demonstrated that no general factor was apparent in the unrotated factor structure, with the first factor accounting for only 30% of the variance.

The items used in our study are part of a large-scale questionnaire; the respondents would therefore probably not have been able to guess the purpose of the study and manipulate their answers to be consistent. In addition, we reverse-coded some items in the questionnaire, which diminishes the risk of biases. Furthermore, Evans (1985) has shown that interaction effects are robust against common method bias. We also conducted an analysis involving marker variables (job satisfaction and work engagement), and while these had some explanatory power, they did not remove the significance of our key variables. We are aware that these tests do not eliminate the threat of common method bias entirely; they do, however, suggest that our results are not driven predominantly by common method variance. Moreover, our results are based on complex estimations that involve multiple independent variables and interaction effects, making it highly unlikely that the results of such models emerge as a result of common method bias (Evans, 1985; Siemsen, Roth, & Oliveira, 2010).

Results

Descriptive statistics, validity, and reliability

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics of all variables analyzed in this study, in addition to their correlations and reliability indexes.

Insert Table 1 about here

Multilevel analysis results

The dataset consisted of two hierarchically nested levels: 211 employees (level-1) nested within 25 groups (level-2). We used hierarchical linear modeling (random coefficient modeling) to test

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the following aspects of our multilevel model: 1) the existence of a multilevel structure (calculating intraclass correlations and within-group agreement), 2) the cross-level effects of selected HR configurations and relational climates on proactive behavior at the individual level, and 3) the interplay between two pairs of respective relational climates and HR configurations at the company level on proactive behavior at the individual level.

To validate the aggregation of individual-level measures of communal-sharing and market-pricing climate on company level we calculated the intraclass correlations (ICCs) and the multi-item within-group agreement ($r_{wg(J)}$). For communal-sharing climate (a slightly skewed shape), the average $r_{wg(8)}$ was .84, ranging from .49 to .98, whereas ICC(1) was .27 and ICC(2) was .76 (F = 4.10, $p = .000$). For market-pricing climate (also a slightly skewed shape), the average $r_{wg(8)}$ was .72, ranging from .25 to .97 with ICC(1) at .26 and ICC(2) at .75 (F = 4.01, $p = .000$). As indicated by James (1982), ICC(1) generally ranges from zero to .50 with a median of .12. The values obtained in our study are above this median and indicate that significant between-group variances exist in terms of perceived motivational climate. There are, however, no definite guidelines for determining acceptable values. Even if there is no such thing as a critical cutoff for $r_{wg(J)}$ estimates, the traditional heuristic cutoff recommended for aggregation is .70 (James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1984; Lance, Butts, & Michels, 2006). Given our particular research question and the fact that we were aggregating measures regarding the relational climate in a company as perceived by the employees using a referent-shift aggregation model, we proceeded to create aggregate measures of communal-sharing and market-pricing climate. Because perceived company climate reflects employees' shared perceptions, an aggregated measure for climate may be the best way to examine its relationship with proactive behavior.

To test our hypotheses, we developed a set of multilevel models based on theoretical predictions by using the incremental improvement procedure demonstrated by Hox (2010). The fixed effects with robust standard errors for all models are presented in Table 2. We started with

the intercept-only model with employee proactive behavior as the dependent variable (see Model 1). Then, we added the level-1 control variables (see Model 1a); only the variable managerial duties was significantly related to proactive behavior.

To examine the cross-level effects of HR system configurations and generic relational climates we then entered (HR commitment and HR compliance configurations and communal-sharing and market-pricing climates as level-2 predictors of proactive behavior. The results indicate that none of the HR system configurations nor any of the generic relational climates displays significant cross-level direct effect on employee proactive behavior (see Table 2, Model 2).

Next, we tested the interaction effects among the HR system configurations and relational climates, respectively. Both interplay hypotheses were supported. Communal-sharing climate demonstrated a significant interaction with commitment HR system (see Table 2, Model 3: interaction term = -.30, SE = .06, p < .01) in predicting employee proactive behavior. As predicted, market-pricing climate also demonstrated a significant interaction with compliance HR system (see Table 2, Model 3: interaction term = -.46, SE = .08, p < .01) in predicting employee proactive behavior.

These effects are shown in Figures 2 and 3, respectively. Interaction effects in Figure 2 first indicate that in companies where the employees are exposed to higher levels of communal-sharing climate, the slope demonstrating the relationship between commitment HR configuration and employee proactive behavior is negative. Simple slope analysis indicated that this line is significantly different from zero (p < .01). The intercept of the lines in Figure 2 is at the value of commitment HR configuration of 4.86, indicating that for around 16% of the firms with the lowest commitment HR configuration, having a higher level of communal-sharing climate is better than low communal-sharing climate. For firms with a higher commitment HR configuration (than the value of 4.86), it is better to have lower levels of communal-sharing

climate to accompany high levels of commitment HR. Apparently, high levels of communal-sharing climate along with high levels of commitment HR configuration in a company result in low levels of proactive behavior by the employees.

Interaction effects portrayed in Figure 3 indicate that in companies, where the employees are exposed to higher levels of market-pricing climate, the slope demonstrating the relationship between compliance HR configuration and employee proactive behavior is negative. Simple slope analysis indicated that this line is significantly different from zero ($p < .01$). High levels of either market-pricing climate or high levels of compliance HR system in a company is good for stimulating employee proactive behavior, whereas when they are both present at high levels simultaneously, this results in lower levels of proactive behavior by the employees.

In auxiliary analyses we also tested for non-hypothesized interplays between all other interactions of HR configurations and relational climates (e.g., collaborative-based HR configuration and market- pricing climate etc.). None of other non-hypothesized pairs of interactions were significantly related to employee proactive behavior, indicating that only interactions that include respective HR configurations and climates significantly predict employee proactivity.

Insert Table 2 about here

Insert Figure 2 about here

Insert Figure 3 about here

Discussion

In this paper we emphasize the role of organizational context in fostering important employee behaviors and study how interplays between relevant HR system configurations and relational climates affect employee proactive behavior. The results generally show that the *laissez-faire context* is better suited for fostering employee proactive behavior than the *nurturing organizational context*. However, our results at the same time indicate that an alternative combination of the commitment HR configuration and communal sharing climate could also be used to encourage employee proactivity. Below we explain the nuances of how both of these mechanisms work.

Consistently with our expectations the *laissez-faire context* (weak compliance HR configuration and strong market-pricing climate) had a positive effect on proactive behavior of employees. It seems that the 'negative', weak situation context is ideally suited for fostering employee proactivity. The questions remains, though, what kind of proactivity is encouraged within this context – pro-organizational, pro-social or more pro-self oriented (cf. Belschak et al., 2010) – and what is its impact on an organizational bottom line. In line with the cues present in the laissez-faire context we speculate that the pro-self oriented behaviors (i.e., aiming for career advancement, financial gains and status) prevail in this setting. For example, they might be using strategies to minimize new tasks to boost performance.

Although not hypothesized, we find an interesting direct effect, which deserves some discussion. Namely, our results show that HR compliance climate relates positively to proactive behavior. In a follow-up structured discussion with representatives of the participating organizations, there was considerable consensus for the following explanation. Compliance HR configuration is perceived as very restraining by the employees, who are exposed to it, so that the large gap between the desired and actual work and employment arrangement provides a strong motivation to purse behaviors that will change the current situation (i.e., they become

very proactive in resourceful in how to trick the system). It goes without saying that this is not the kind of proactivity that companies would like to encourage.

By contrast, the *nurturing context* has not had worked exactly according to our expectations. Results show that organizations can not encourage individual proactivity by pursuing *strong* commitment HR configuration while at the same time encouraging *strong* communal-sharing relational climate, mostly because strong communal-sharing climate does not seem to play its role. The problematic negative effect of strong communal-sharing climate can be explained by the fact that in communal sharing climate individual distinctiveness is ignored and the personal welfare of others is considered significant and above self-concerns (Fiske, 1992; Fiske & Haslam, 2005). At the same time communal-sharing climate might facilitate uniformity of expression, which puts individuals in a position where they want to be like others, conform, and as a results they do not want to stand out from the community by different opinions and behaviors (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998). This in the could be problematic for fostering proactive behavior, because when taking initiative, the individual has to stand out of the group, break-up from conformity, but such behavior could in turn initiate a chain reaction and result in social exclusion of the individual. In the long-run individuals this type of relational climate might therefore restrain individuals from exhibiting behaviors that challenge the status quo. Therefore, it seem that although the communal-sharing climate creates a highly supporting, forgiving and safe context, the need for conformity and equality, which is also emphasized, might be taking too high a toll on employee proactive behaviors.

Therefore, it is understandable that our results also imply that for most of the organizations[i] an alternative combination – strong HR commitment configuration with and weak communal-sharing relational climate – could be used for fostering proactive employee behavior. Consistently with the discussion above, when some safety and interpersonal support are compensated for stronger potential for individual expression, more proactive behaviors will

be in place. Thus, low communal sharing climate boosts the effect of the commitment HR configuration on proactivity as employees in such type of relational climate are more willing to stand out of the group and show and allow non-conforming behaviors such as proactivity (Fiske, 1992).

Theoretical implications

This paper makes a contribution to the strengthening multilevel paradigm in the HRM research. In particular, we show that interplays between specific HRM systems and other contextual elements, in our case relational climates, at the organizational level create conditions that facilitate/constrain important behaviors at the level of individual employees. By examining HR systems and climates in an interplay, we approach organizational context in a more holistic way, which is closer to reality, and allows us to reach more valid conclusions.

In addition, our study is among rare attempts that consider intended (i.e., HR configurations) and emergent (i.e., organizational climate) elements of the context together. The results suggest (see main effects in Table 3) that emergent elements might play even a bigger role that intended ones, but also that mechanisms of interplay between higher-level constructs are more complex than expected (cf. Mossholder et al., 2011) and contingent on the outcome (i.e., individual behavior or attitude) in question. In other words, this study puts forward that there are no universal respective combinations of HR configurations and organizational climate dimensions that would exhibit the same mechanisms and effects across most behaviors individuals can engage in in organizations (e.g., positive/negative synergies). It is more likely that the effects, mechanisms, and even respective combinations of matching organizational context elements will be outcome-dependent.

Finally, this research examines a behavioral outcome that is important for organizations and individuals, but rarely addressed by the HRM researchers (see Tummers, Kruyen,

Vijverberg, & Voesenek, 2013 for an exception). At the same time, there is also lack of literature about the effects of contexts in general on proactive behavior (see Belschak et al., 2010), so this study simultaneously addresses two gaps found in the literature. Moreover, we show that the broader context has a role in fostering employee proactivity and that not only 'positive', but also 'negative' context might foster proactive behavior. The question that remains is what foci proactive behaviors that are fostered by these different contexts have and how they affect the bottom line.

Practical implications

From a practitioner point of view it is very important to understand the organizational context, in which employees operate. Emergent elements of the organizational context are particularly difficult to grasp and might need systematic observation and analysis to be fully understood. Once we understand our organizational climate we can craft HR systems accordingly to achieve intended goals (e.g., in the employee proactivity area).

This research shows that different context (e.g., laissez-faire or context featuring commitment HR configuration and weak communal-sharing climate) can be used to foster proactive behaviors. However, this research does not give a precise answer, what kind of proactive behaviors this context will facilitate. We speculate that the laissez-faire context will stimulate more proactivity, yet will also be less predictable. The interplay of commitment HR configuration and weak communal-sharing climate, on the other hand, will likely result in more pro-organizationally oriented proactivity, so it is a safer bet for organizations.

Practitioners should be aware that interplays of contextual elements do not affect only a single behavior (e.g., proactive behavior), but a number of important employee behaviors and attitudes that all might affect a company's bottom line. The contexts examined here could, beside fostering proactively, have other (positive or negative) effects on other relevant

employee outcomes. It is therefore of utmost importance for organizations to consider, which employee outcomes are most important for success of their organization and then target their systems accordingly.

Limitations and future research directions

This research, like others, is not without limitations. First, by focusing on relational climate and HR configurations we excluded other factors that could influence proactive behaviors. For example, proactive behavior of an individual could also be influenced by the individual trust or collective trust in a work group, supervisor support, socialization tactics in place and social cost of such behavior (Parker et al., 2006). Further research, while not jeopardizing parsimony, could examine effects of even broader composites of meaningful contextual elements such as combinations of HR systems, organizational climate dimensions and dimensions of organizational culture.

Secondly, as our data comes from cross-sectional sample, we cannot unambiguously infer causality. Future research should conduct three-wave longitudinal studies that could make causal claims (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010) in order to overcome these problems. Moreover, as our sample size on level-2 is 25, and is below some suggestions of appropriateness for multilevel modeling (e.g. Maas & Hox, 2005), we may not have sufficient statistical power in multilevel modeling to obtain accurate estimation for hypothesized effects (Scherbaum & Ferreter, 2009). As a consequence results should be taken with caution.

Finally, future research should try to integrate the dispositional and contextual perspective in studying proactive behavior (cf. Parker et al., 2010). Ideally, a future study would feature a multi-level design with rich contextual and individual (dispositional) data. Thereby, the context would include both 'positive' and 'negative' variant and the measure for proactive behavior different would feature dimensions for various foci of an individual's proactive behavior.

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[i] As evident from our results section only in about 16% of organizations with the weakest commitment HR configuration, strong communal sharing actually improves proactivity.

FIGURE 1

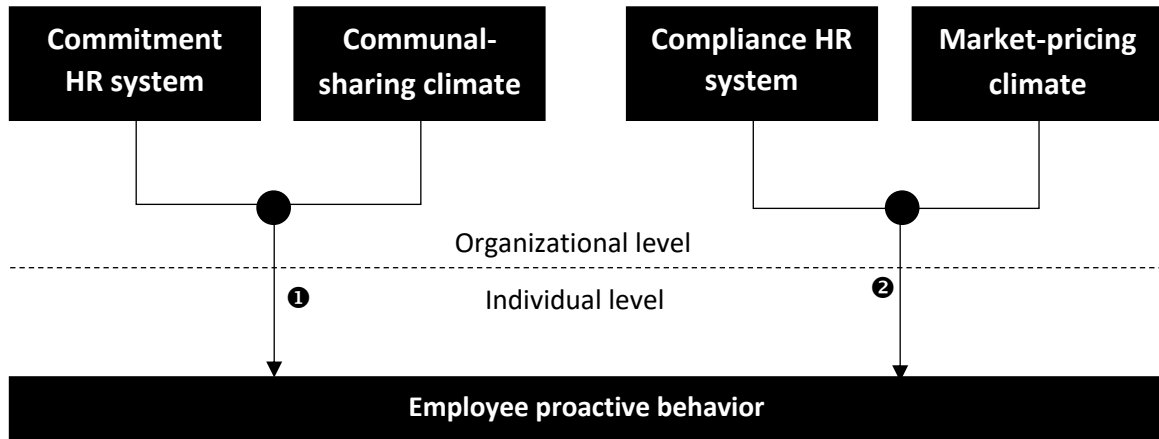**Interplay between selected HR configurations and relational climates as predictors of proactive behavior of employees**

FIGURE 2

Interaction effects between commitment HR configuration and communal-sharing
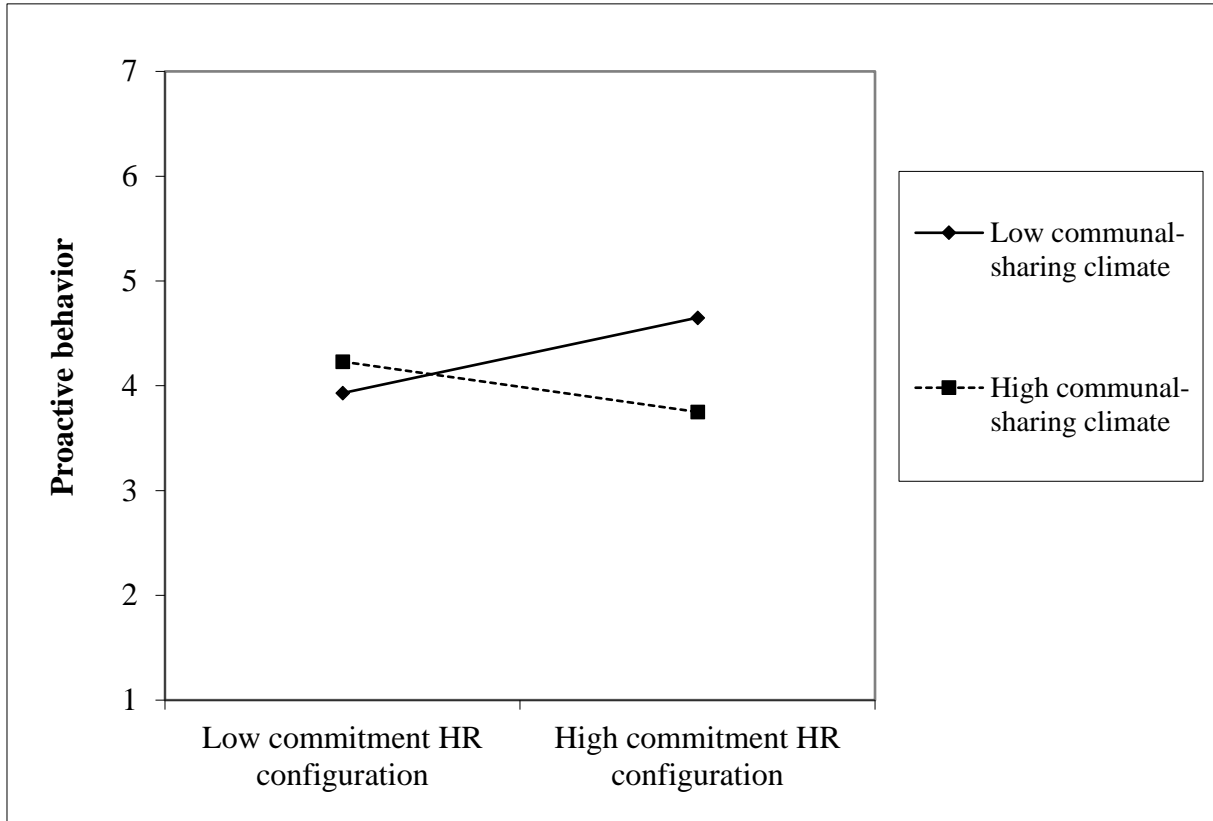
climate in predicting employee proactive behavior

FIGURE 3

Interaction effects between compliance HR configuration and market-pricing climate in
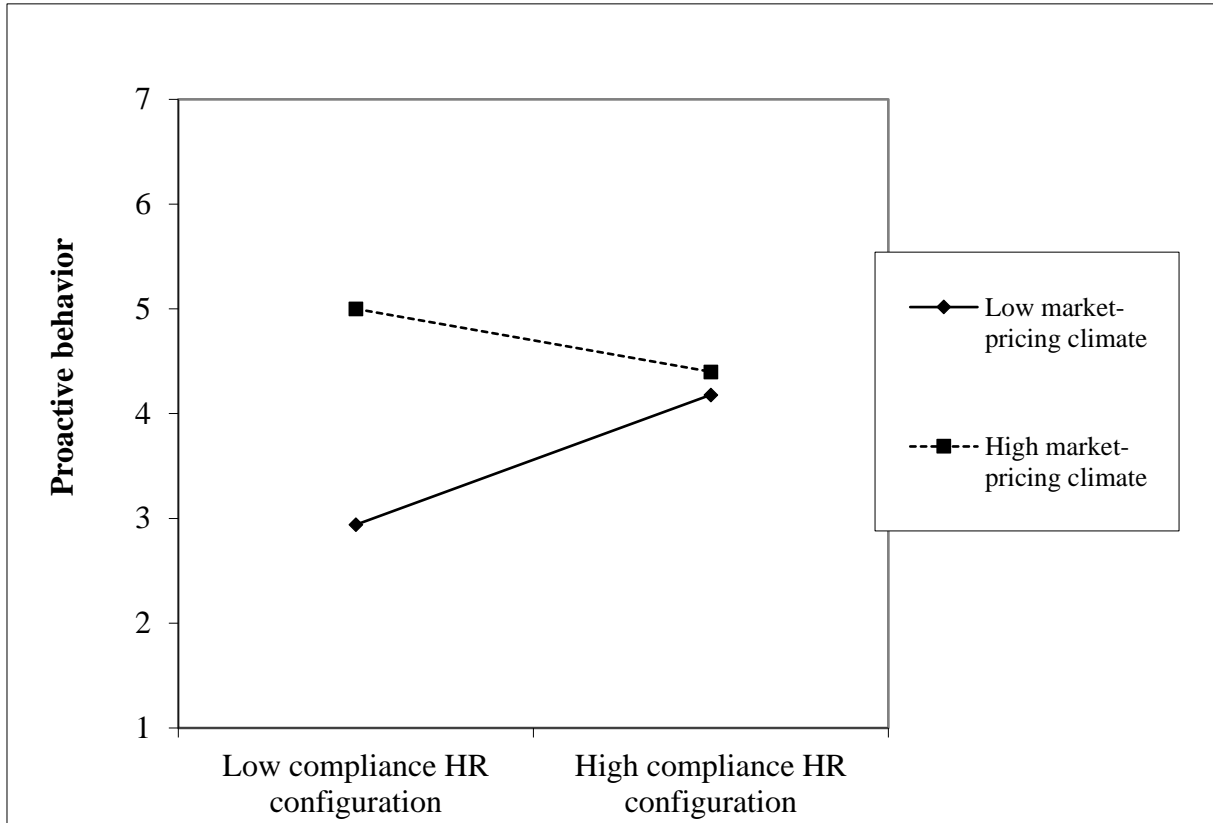
predicting employee proactive behavior

TABLE 1

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables

Variable	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Level 1 (individual level)										
1 Proactive behavior	5.84	.662	(.82)							
2 Communal-sharing climate	5.23	1.20	.18*	(.89)						
3 Market-pricing climate	4.39	.926	.20*	.27**	(.67)					
4 Age	36.93	8.70	.02	-.04	.06	-				
5 Gender	1.52	.510	.02	-.09	-.18**	-.01	-			
6 Education	3.30	.996	-.04	-.05	-.20**	-.08	-.09	-		
7 Expertise	10.83	8.44	.05	.01	.07	.73**	-.01	-.12	-	
8 Managerial duties	1.37	.484	.15*	.10	.05	.07	.09	.17	.09	-
Level 2 (company level)										
1 Compliance HR configuration	4.52	.913	(.66)							
2 Commitment HR configuration	5.43	.595	.50*	(.92)						
3 Communal-sharing climate	5.40	.676	-.06	.17	(.89)					
4 Market-pricing climate	4.36	.561	.21	-.13	-.09	(.67)				

n (level 1) = 211, n (level 2) = 25. Coefficient alphas are on the diagonal in parentheses. * p < .05, ** p < .01. For gender, 1= female, 2= male. For managerial duties, 1=no, 2=yes. Relational climates at level 1 denote employee perceptions, whereas at level 2 they denote aggregated scores at the company level.

TABLE 2

Multilevel analysis results for proactive behavior as the dependent variable

	Model 1	Model 1a	Model 2	Model 3
Level 1				
Intercept	5.79** (.07)	5.57** (.21)	4.02** (1.22)	3.14** (.63)
Age		-.03 (.05)	-.00 (.01)	-.00 (.00)
Gender		.07 (.08)	.08 (.08)	.13 (.08)
Education		-.04 (.04)	-.05 (.04)	-.07 (.04)
Expertise		.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.00 (.00)
Managerial duties		.19* (.09)	.21* (.09)	.23* (.08)
Level 2				
Commitment HR configuration			.10 (.14)	.06 (.09)
Compliance HR configuration			.04 (.11)	.16* (.05)
Communal-sharing climate			-.07 (.08)	-.17** (.05)
Market-pricing climate			.27 (.19)	.57** (.07)
Level 2 Interaction effects (interplays)				
Commitment HR configuration × Communal-sharing climate				-.30** (.06)
Compliance HR configuration × Market-pricing climate				-.46** (.08)
Deviance	418.74	432.69	442.20	426.32
Pseudo R-square		.01	.01	.25

Notes. Entries are estimations of fixed effects with robust standard errors. **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$, †$p < .10$. n (level 1) = 211; n (level 2) = 25 in all models.