



Ethical violations: Shortlisting and interviewing processes in the South African public service



Authors:

Manasseh M. Mokgolo¹ 
Maoka Dikotla² 

Affiliations:

¹Directorate of Leadership and Human Resources Review, Branch Leadership and Management Practices, Office of the Public Service Commission, Pretoria, South Africa

²Department of Information Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Limpopo, Polokwane, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Manasseh Mokgolo,
manasem@opsc.gov.za

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Background: Ethics, integrity and accountability in public service departments have weakened. These departments face ethical violations in recruitment, shortlisting, interviewing and appointment processes despite the presence of human resource management prescripts in place.

Aim: This study aimed to probe the level of ethical violations in recruitment, shortlisting and interviewing processes, and describe the challenges faced by human resource practitioners and panel members in South Africa's public service departments.

Setting: Both the national and provincial public service departments of South Africa.

Methods: The study adopted the qualitative modernistic research approach. A semi-structured electronic questionnaire was used to gather views from 528 participants, including human resource practitioners and line managers serving as panel members.

Results: Ethical violations result in human resource practitioners and panel members being compromised, maltreated, victimised and bullied in the workplace. During recruitment, shortlisting, interviewing and appointment stages, abuses of power, undisclosed conflicts of interest and even patronage by political heads and top-and-middle management are acutely rife. Ethical violations inhibit the human resource functionary from building an ethical, professional and capable public service.

Conclusion: Ethical violations during recruitment phases are exacerbated by political heads and top management's observable disregard of prescripts.

Contribution: This study will encourage management to consider human resource practitioners' role in managing ethical dilemmas and galvanise employees towards maintaining ethics and jointly desisting from unethical practices.

Keywords: conflict of interests; ethics; ethical violations; human resource practitioners; public service; management; political heads; shortlisting.

Introduction

'Workplace should not be a place of war, but a place of peace, being ethical cannot be taught cause it's a character issue' (Naidu n.d. cited in Dimmock & Fisher 2017:11). The erosion of ethical standards, rule of law, and human dignity in government has exacerbated while integrity and accountability have weakened the uphill efforts towards building an ethical, professional and capable public service. Ethical violations, particularly in human resources management (HRM) functions have eroded the integrity of public administration. These violations have caustic effects, *inter alia*, on the department's governance, performance, discipline, wellbeing and service delivery (Motshwane 2018). Pearson and Ndlovu (2018) maintained that ethical problems drive away many ethical and best employees, particularly those who do not wish to be part of an unethical and yet loyalist environment. Some prescripts and government strategic documents, that is, the values and principles enshrined in section 195(1)(a)(b)(c)(g)(h) of the Constitution of South Africa (1996); White Paper on HRM in the Public Service (1997); National Development Plan (NDP) Vision 2030; and the Government Outcome 12, require all public servants, including political heads, to promote and maintain high ethical and integrity standards; effective and efficient use of resources; transparency and accountability; and meritocratic HRM practices. Section 96(1) of the Constitution further requires all public servants to act according to the prescripts and a code of ethics in their execution of day-to-day duties. However, in South Africa's public service, a complex, triadic environment involving different constituencies with incompatible expectations, norms, standards and self-interests inhibits the public service from adhering to the prescripts (Dobie 2019; Ekwoaba, Ikeje & Ufoma 2015).

Despite having comprehensive HRM prescripts in place, the public service faces ethical conundrums pertaining to the various stages of recruitment, shortlisting, interviewing and appointment (RSIA) processes. An organisation's HRM prescripts and codes of ethics are the bedrock for shaping employee conduct, behaviour and attitudes; they are the fulcrum of people's development (Ekwoaba et al. 2015; Ukpabi & Salaudeen 2021). Their functions include emboldening moral decision-making and developing an ethically accountable culture (Smith, Rohr & Panton 2018). Seemingly, departments still fail to recognise the importance of complying with prescripts and codes of ethics (Public Service Commission [PSC] 2017, 2018a, 2020). This thwarts possibilities of establishing an ethical and professional culture (Smith et al. 2018). However, meritocratic recruitment enables organisations to invest in human capital and develop organisational integrity (Deserranno & León Ciliotta 2021; Motshwane 2018; Mokgolo & Dikotla 2021). Ethics, morality and integrity need to be explored because they have wide-ranging implications for human resource practitioners. If positively espoused, ethics and HRM functions can positively impact employees' morale, trust, relations, wellbeing, retention, productivity and ultimately lead to better service delivery (Mdletye & Hlongwane 2019; Rop & Sang 2019; Ruggeri et al. 2020).

Public Service Commission's (e.g. 2017, 2018a, 2018b) studies reveal that employees, including human resource practitioners and line managers serving as panel members, witness some misleading advertisements or vague adverts of certain positions in the public service. These advertisements are often tailored for certain connected individuals. Media reports further expose major and minor acts of unethical practices and dishonesty relating to RSIA processes in the public service (see Bellé & Cantarelli 2017; Schoeman 2016; Setumo 2020). The PSC, as an oversight institution, has been overwhelmed with complaints related to recruitment ethical dilemmas reported by the general public and interest groups (Pearson & Ndlovu 2018), and grievances lodged by the majority of public servants relating to undue political influences, dishonesty, irregular appointments, promotions, and lateral transfers (PSC 2017, 2018b). If these ethical dilemmas are not curbed, they will emasculate the ideals of meritocratic, accountable, transparent and professional public service. A meritocratic recruitment system is where individuals are recruited, shortlisted, appointed and promoted to positions and incentivised based on their ability to do the job (Deserranno & León Ciliotta 2021; PSC 2016), and not on their family background, ethnicity, age, gender, nationality, affiliations and political relations (Ramburuth-Hurt 2020).

This article focused on ethical violations in RSIA processes, and the attendant challenges faced by human resource practitioners and panel members in public service departments. The objectives of the study were to: (1) determine the contributory factors to ethical violations throughout RSIA undertakings and (2) determine whether human resource practitioners and panel members are

properly empowered to strengthen HRM ethics and to make ethical decisions in public service departments.

Background and context

Shortlisting and interviewing are key fundamentals of recruitment activities. Recruitment is the art of attracting a group of prospective candidates to apply for a vacant position in an organisation (Ukpabi & Salaudeen 2021). Shortlisting entails identifying suitable candidates from a pool of applicants who best meet the requirements of a position (Luballo & Simon 2017). Interviewing determines whether a candidate will be appointed or not to the position they are interviewing for (Ukpabi & Salaudeen 2021). Linked to RSIA are ethics and integrity.

Ethics and integrity as vital principles in public service have attracted attention from researchers worldwide (Bellé & Cantarelli 2017; Chukwuemeka 2021; Dutelle & Taylor 2018). However, these aspects have received minimal attention in the South African context (Lutchman 2021; Motshwane 2018; Singo 2018). Ethics in HRM as a substratum of an organisation indoctrinate and prevent causes of overt-and-covert unethical practices and ameliorate performance (Sharif et al. 2017; Singo 2018; Smith et al. 2018; Villegas et al. 2019). Thus, ethics in HRM functions inculcate a sense of high ethical culture (Rop & Sang 2019). Ethics encapsulate a set of moral principles that govern the conduct and behaviour of an individual or a group of people in society, occupations, sectors or work setting (Dimmock & Fisher 2017; Dutelle & Taylor 2018; Van Vuuren & Rossouw 2020). In the workplace, ethics include knowing what is right and wrong, good and bad, virtuous and evil, just and unjust, responsible and irresponsible (Chukwuemeka 2021; Motshwane 2018; Singo 2018).

Public service departments comprise people from dissimilar cultural and ethnic backgrounds, with different beliefs, personalities, morals and values, which should be regulated (Motshwane 2018) and reconciled vertically and horizontally by HRM units to be pronounced as ethical (PSC 2022). Therefore, ethical conduct contributes towards achieving effectiveness and efficiency. Human resources practitioners champion desired ethical norms, values and principles (SABPP 2017). According to Pimenta (2015), when human resource practitioners are empowered and supported by management to exercise autonomy, they can proactively discourage ethical violations even though the promotion of ethical standards remains the primary responsibility of line managers (Ukpabi & Salaudeen 2021; Ulrich 2017; Villegas et al. 2019). Mokgolo (2017:87) stated that 'HR practitioners' roles are multifaceted and integrated and must be held in balance with one another' to sustain efficiency, effectiveness and gain competitive advantage. Generally, social behaviour is a consequence of a social process (Sharif et al. 2017). Chukwuemeka's (2021), SABPP's (2017) and Van Vuuren and Rossouw's (2020) findings revealed that in the South African political, socio-economic and professional context, human resource practitioners in the public service are deliberately underpowered and exposed to unethical practices.

Ethical dilemmas in an organisation are propounded by the:

[M]ultifaceted demands placed on HR practitioners in which personal, professional and organisational beliefs, expectations, values, and needs conflict as a result of environmental influences upon HRM functions, duties, roles, services and activities. (Pimenta 2015:25)

Ethical violations include processes, practices and conduct that violate approved HRM and organisation prescripts (SABPP 2017; Van Vuuren & Rossouw 2020). Recruitment, shortlisting, interviewing and appointment practices and HRM functions are violated in the public sector (Deserranno & León Ciliotta 2021; Fathmath, Azam & Ahmad 2021; Luballo & Simon 2017; PSC 2017, 2018a, 2018b; Rop & Sang 2019; Smith et al. 2018). Such violations have considerable ethical and legal implications, which can lead to employees' low morale, dissatisfaction, conflict and exodus. Smith et al. (2018:67) maintained that 'a weak HRM department creates a weak organisational ethical and moral culture'. Sebola (2018:59) proffered that ethics awareness, education and reinforcement in 'public administration should not merely promote ethical conduct but also morale and enthusiasm'.

The study deployed three ethical theories and two organisational theories underpinning RSIA processes, namely Kant's (1889) Deontology Ethics; Aristotle's (384–322 BC) Virtue Ethics; Mill's (1863) Utilitarianism Ethics; Adams's (1965) Equity Theory and Blau's (1964) Social Exchange Theory, respectively.

Firstly, the Deontological Theory propagates that individuals must obey existing rules and actions when executing their duties and engaging in decision-making. The theory further states that ethical choices are clear when the rules are explicit and formal, and that actions or decisions are right or wrong, irrespective of the consequences (Singo 2018). Secondly, the Virtue Ethics Theory focuses on a person's character, integrity and honesty in relation to a situation rather than specific actions as a first step towards correct action or decisions. The theory holds that ethical characters cannot be learned overnight but can be developed through practice and thereafter enable a person to become habitually comfortable with dealing with circumstances (Dimmock & Fisher 2017). Durant (1885–1981:54) concurred that '... we are what we repeatedly do, excellence then, is not an act but a habit'. Thirdly, Utilitarianism Ethics Theory purports that the consequences of an individual's actions are either predictable or measurable based on substantial information and facts of ethicality (Mill 2018). Fourthly, Equity Theory avers that employees relate the fairness, consistency and justice of their actions, decisions and consequences to their social and work context. When employees experience inequity and injustice, they may experience poor emotional, physical and psychological wellbeing and performance (Mokgolo & Barnard 2019). Fifthly, the Social Exchange Theory (Blau 1964) resonates with ethics in RSIA processes in that ethical morality predicates on the principle that the

leadership and management must fairly and consistently treat, support and protect everyone in the organisation for their mutual benefits and wellbeing.

The next section elucidates this study's research approach, data collection tool, population and sampling process, data analytical method and ethical considerations.

Research methods and design

The qualitative modernistic research approach was adopted in this study for its usability as an iterative process (Aspers & Corte 2019; Remenyi 2014). It is undergirded 'ontologically by the belief of modernistic stance in order to solve complexity of the research problem' and it enables a researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Mokgolo & Dikotla 2021:2). In this study, the data were gathered using a semi-structured e-questionnaire comprising a total of 26 open, structured questions. The Office of the PSC data archive was a sampling structure for the departments selected for the study. The population of this study consisted of both national and provincial public service departments. Researchers selected 30% of the 42 national and 103 provincial departments to participate in the study. A unit of qualifying human resource practitioners and line managers who routinely serve as panel members was selected. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 283 human resource practitioners and 245 panel members from each department. Overall, a sample of 528 respondents participated in the study.

Thematic analysis was used to integrate and analyse the data collected (Braun & Clarke 2006). It uncovers appropriate themes in the data at various stages of developing, reviewing, describing, grouping and ordering themes (Attride-Stirling 2001). National and provincial departments considered the permission letter granted by the PSC to conduct the study as an ethical consent. It enabled the researchers to describe the themes that emerged from the data.

Ethical considerations

National and provincial departments considered the permission and ethical clearance granted by the PSC to conduct the study as an ethical consent. All ethical standards for research were followed in this study regarding the direct contact with human subjects.

The PSC abides by section 195 of chapter 10, which outlines the constitutional values and principles governing public administration. This study observed the subsequent ethical considerations:

- all the participants and/or respondents were informed of the purpose and objectives of the study
- they were assured that their responses will be used for the purposes of the study

- they were assured that the findings will be aggregated in order to protect their rights to confidentiality and anonymity
- acceptance of participation and return of the e-questionnaire was therefore taken as consent to voluntarily participate in the study.

The Office of the Public Service Commission supported and granted permission and ethical clearance to conduct the study

Results

During data analysis, several themes emerged and were categorised, namely formulation of advertisement in the department; manifestation and experience of ethical violations pertaining to RSIA; possible conflicts of interest during RSIA processes and the impact of ethical violations on employees' wellbeing. These themes are supported by ethical theories and organisational theories explained under the conceptual framework.

Formulation of advertisement in the department

The participants were cognisant of the HRM's prescripts that govern the public service administration, including RSIA, which help their departments when drafting an advertisement and finalising advertisement processes for position(s). In terms of the Constitution (1996), public service departments must ensure 'employment and a good HRM practices that are based on ability, objectivity and fairness'. However, the general response from the participants was that:

Most departments intentionally tailor vague adverts or relax job requirements or even appoint desired panel members at the request of some political head and/or top management to shortlist and appoint their preferred person(s) whether the person(s) meet(s) the requirements of the position or not. They often compromise RSIA courses and HR practitioners are then utilised as conduits to fulfil their ulterior motives.

Also problematic was that when some participants reported:

Ethical violation practices or attempted to provide guidance to ensure compliance from some panel members, with regard to senior-and-middle management positions, they were side-lined as future secretariats or panel members. They were silently victimised or harassed or frequently bullied and received no support from some line managers, accounting office and/or even political heads.

Makhanya (2021), Pearson and Ndlovu (2018) and Ramburuth-Hurt (2020) found that in the public service, position requirements are manipulated at the request of some politicians, executive and/or line management with a clandestine motive. Pimenta (2015:8) posited that unethical behaviours, *inter alia*, cheating advertisement, misrepresentation of information, political interference in appointment, nepotism and deception 'are becoming banal and are helping to perpetuate a cynical vision towards ethics

and accountability'. The PSC (2020, 2022) explained that in such instances, consequence management must be imposed on people who manipulate job requirements for ulterior motives.

The responses depict double-dealing challenges, with evident collusion. The RSIA stages are by nature biased and subjective because each panel decides differently from the others. Indeed, some studies acknowledge that the RSIA processes are susceptible to innate subjectivity, which are 'becoming a silent epidemic' in public organisations (Mokgolo & Barnard 2019; Motshwane 2018; Ukpabi & Salaudeen 2021). This epidemic goes unreported for fear of reprisal, harassment, victimisation, bullying, blocking of promotion, etc. (PSC 2018a, 2018b, 2020). A study conducted by Mokgolo and Dikotla (2021:4) found that subjectivity in HRM practices and organisational processes of the public service is generally ascribed to 'personal predispositions, misuse of power and political pressures associated with officials' disobeying prescripts or resorting to some unethical actions for their own or others' ulterior motives. Gibbons (2012:8) concluded that 'no matter how sound your prescripts or systems are, all unethical practices or corruption start with either employees or management' supported by a person with legitimate and/or coercive power. Most participants mentioned that there are numerous unresolved or deliberately ignored grievances and complaints relating to RSIA, most of which are swept under the carpet. One participant said:

'Based on my experience in labour relations and investigating some grievances, disputes or complaints relating to recruitment processes are given to "yes, master" or unethical protégée investigators who will not find any flaws with the process.' (P07, HRP, 17 August 2021)

The participant's views confirmed a plethora of irregular appointment and promotional practices reported in various online and media print platforms because employees have no confidence in the internal grievance and dispute resolution structures; hence, they seek fairness, justice, transparency and accountability outside the departments. Media platforms then play an important oversight role in reporting unethical actions and decisions of public service departments. According to the PSC (2022), unethical practices have brought the public service into disrepute and have cast doubt even on the good work accomplished by enthusiastic and trustworthy employees. On the whole, government departments are not immune to unethical conduct and practices (Ramburuth-Hurt 2020; Ukpabi & Salaudeen 2021).

Manifestation and experiences of ethical violations pertaining to recruitment, shortlisting, interviewing and appointment processes

Scholars (e.g. Chukwuemeka 2021; Singo 2018; Smith et al. 2018; Van Vuuren & Rossouw 2020) substantiate that ethical dilemmas are common in different professions, sectors, work settings, but are often skyrocketed in the public sector. The

advertisement of posts and employment of people in modern-day organisations are largely characterised by perilous ethical dilemmas because of political control (Qobo & Ngcaweni 2021; Singo 2018; Shava & Mazenda 2021). Compounding the problem is that human resource practitioners and panel members are inadequately skilled and authorised to prevent this control. Ethical violations need to be critically explored because they negatively yield long- and short term effects on employees' morale, retention, productivity, satisfaction, commitment and wellbeing (Motshwane 2018). In line with this, two participants said that:

'Underperforming candidates during the interviews are appointed in the spirit of employment equity only to learn later that they are either related to some top/middle managers or panel members.' (P10, HRP, 20 October 2021)

'Most political heads, heads of department and some HR managers often overlook HR practitioners' and some panels' advises, guidance and recommendations to promote good governance, ethics and integrity standards.' (P12, SMS, 20 October 2021)

Dobie (2019), Singo (2018), Shava and Mazenda (2021) reported that in most government departments, recruitment activities and processes are compromised to favour cadres with no relevant experiences and qualifications for the position advertised. Brunette's (2020), PSC's (2022); Steijn and Giauque's (2021) findings revealed that most positions in both national and provincial departments are susceptible to ethical violations while senior and middle management positions are sporadically endemic to nepotism, favouritism, bribery, patronage and appointment by conflicted panel members (internal or external) as well as discrimination of well deserving internal staff against favoured candidates. Fathmath et al.'s (2021:74) study found that recruitment activities and routes in most government departments are characterised by widespread 'power abuses, corruptions, high nepotism and ultimately, fail to achieve government objectives with unqualified and less-qualified employees'. Most participants alleged that:

An interplay of unethical practices results in internal candidates with potentials feeling despondent, distrusting, depressed and ultimately exiting the departments – thus loss of institutional memories. Lastly, most ethics committees established and/or ethics representatives tasked to advocate ethics and morals standards to ensure good governance and excellence are distrusted because they report straight to the ethical violations champions and are classified as '*dimpipi*' (spies) for their whistleblowing.

According to one participant:

'[T]he underlying ethical violations in the departments stem from political heads and top management culture that covertly and deliberately encourage ethical standards to be ignored.' (P62, SMS, 15 November 2020)

This practice is prevalent in the public service and thrives against the government's explicit panacea to stimulate a values-driven public service (Lutchman 2021; Ngcaweni 2022; PSC 2016; Shava & Mazenda 2021).

Possible conflicts of interest during recruitment, shortlisting, interviewing and appointment processes

The NDP's Vision 2030 echoes the promotion of meritocracy, integrity and fair application of the rule of law in the workplace to maintain the public service's competitive advantage. Section 96(1) of the Constitution (1996) requires members of the cabinet and ordinary public servants to act according to all the prescripts and codes prescribed by national legislation to maintain ethical actions and decisions. Therefore, all public servants must respect the rule of law, practice accountability, transparency and virtues of good governance in all their roles and responsibilities, including the declaration of interest where necessary (Mubangizi 2020; PSC 2020; Qobo & Ngcaweni 2021).

The results in this study show some departments ensure that panel members are inducted, trained on the application of RSIA systems; criteria that are acceptable in RSIA, and significance of signing a declaration of interest form, while other departments do not. Most participants stated that it is the responsibility of human resource practitioners as secretariats and advisers to elucidate the ethical dilemmas such as conflicts of interest, inconsistent rating and other matters of concern before they commence with any RSIA processes. Studies show that raising awareness and training on issues of conflict of interest always ensure ethical sustenance (King IV Report 2016), and create a conducive environment for honesty, accountability, consistent, collective and ethical decisions, and actions by all stakeholders (Brunette 2020; Chukwuemeka 2021; Lutchman 2021; Mubangizi 2020).

Dutelle and Taylor (2018) noted that a conflict of interest exists:

[W]hen a person is in any relationship with another individual that requires that person to make judgements based on others' behalf, or when that person has a special interest that tends to interfere with proper decision-making within that relationship or incident. (p. 67)

King IV Report on Corporate Governance for South (2016) defined conflict of interest as:

[A] conflict of interest, used in relation to members of the governing body and its committees, occurs when there is a direct or indirect conflict, in fact or in appearance, between the interests of such member and that of the organisation. It applies to financial, economic and other interests in any opportunity from which the organisation may benefit, as well as use of the property of the organisation, including information. It also applies to the member's related parties holding such interests. (p. 11)

To most participants, a conflict of interest was perceived thus:

'If a panel member is related to a candidate whether as a guardian, child, wife, husband, in-laws; friend, relative, affiliation member, former schoolmate or college mate, former colleagues, neighbour, girlfriend, ex-wife, ex-girlfriend and so on but does not declare it beforehand.' (P82, HRP, 17 November 2021)

The study's findings show that conflict of interest occurs during RSIA processes and should be discouraged in the public service. Some participants alleged that:

'Some top-and-line management instruct some panel members not to complete the conflict of interest forms to avoid being implicated. When HR practitioners follow-up with the panel member(s) to sign the forms, they are told the matter will be dealt with by the panel chair and they never revert, that is the end.' (P17, HRP, 20 June 2021)

or

'[P]anel members will try to find petty reasons to issue written warnings, dismiss or suspend you without any concrete, factual evidence or simply bottleneck your promotion in the department or lateral transfer to another directorate or department.' (P44, SMS, 20 October 2021; P69, SMS, 04 November 2021; P06, SMS, 20 June 2021)

This evinces a direct and overt misunderstanding of conflict of interest by some management, which results in perpetuated unethical practices. Chukwuemeka (2021) noted that maintaining compliance with prescripts is not difficult, but handling and averting unethical practices in a workplace is quite a daunting task. Kanyane (2007:Xii) argued that in dealing with the conflict of interest, 'a legal solution is not a panacea to eliminate conflict of interest practices hence a need to integrate the legal imperative with good governance and ethical conduct'. This study can help political heads and all public servants to avoid conflicts of interest, abuse of powers and unprofessionalism and in turn set an example for an ethical, professional and capable public service.

Impact of ethical violations on employees' wellbeing in departments

Employees' wellbeing entails 'personal happiness or feeling good and living safely and healthily' (Nzonzo 2017:38). It is a fundamental source of motivation, satisfaction and morale for employees in the workplace. The government needs competent, innovative, selfless and ethical people (Lutchman 2021; Ngcaweni 2022). Such people are capable of restoring trust and confidence in the public service, which will further strengthen its credibility (Ramburuth-Hurt 2020; Singo 2018). To attain this, public service management needs to create an environment that forbids unethical conduct across all levels of management and operation (Motshwane 2018). Most participants highlighted their health, safety and wellbeing at work as important. Their experience of RSIA ethical dilemmas and conflicting roles exposed them to unfair treatment, victimisation, bullying and harassment, all of which resulted in stress and some depression. They also stated that they were inundated with unending mediocrity emanating from bias, favouritism, nepotism, political interferences and other irregular practices. According to most of the participants:

It is discouraging and frustrating to be overlooked for promotion at the expense of a preferred ill-qualified and experienced internal or external candidate or management's moles, and still be expected to groom such person. There is also the deplorable unfair-and-unjust application of consequence management in the public service, where some top-and-middle managers or

their protégées are involved in some RSIA unethical practices. Discipline is absent but if ethical violations involve some subordinates or less favoured employee, drastic measures are instituted immediately to set an example. The double standards instil fear in employees, which keeps them from reporting actual or suspected ethical violations.

Makhanya (2021) and PSC (2018a, 2018b, 2022) reported that some employees are ostracised, victimised, maltreated, bullied, overlooked for promotions and even merit awards because of their disclosure of unethical practices in public service. Hence, the participants lamented that this unethical dilemma contributed to their distress, frustration, low morale, poor working relations, turnover and reluctance to go beyond the call of duty. Therefore, unethical norms and standards have a great impact on the employee's physical, emotional, psychological and wellbeing (Mokgolo & Barnard 2019; Ruggeri et al. 2020), performance and delivery of services (Makhanya 2021; Steijn & Giauque 2021). One participant said:

Ethical violations in recruitment, shortlisting, interviewing and appointment practices have calamitous, observable and unobservable consequences on some employees' wellbeing and health; on the other hand, others experience steadiness, happiness because of rewards they receive for partaking in unethical practices.

Panin (1890:92) concurred that 'to seek virtue for the sake of reward is to dig for iron with a spade of gold'. Panin's thought is always the case in most public service departments. Generally, employees' wellbeing can be influenced positively or negatively by a variety of factors, that is, management and leadership style, organisational culture and prescripts to obtain optimal wellbeing (Mokgolo & Barnard 2019; Ruggeri et al. 2020).

Discussion

Ethical violations deleteriously affect employees' satisfaction, commitment, productivity and morale (Mdlletye & Hlongwane 2019), wellbeing (Makhanya 2021; Ruggeri et al. 2020), and decrease their effectiveness and responsiveness. Motshwane (2018), Smith et al. (2018) and Villegas et al. (2019) conceded that ethics are the backbone of HRM functions. Therefore, human resource practitioners should be seen as ethical enablers and gatekeepers (Villegas et al. 2019). In this study, human resource practitioners in the organogram of public service appeared to be in strategic positions to enforce prescripts and to hold top management accountable for any unethical practices. However, practically speaking, they were not fulfilling that role because of their own power imbalance. Bayat and Meyer (2014, cited in Motshwane 2018) opined that the incongruence of political heads', top management's and professional employees' norms, values and principles could amplify such power imbalances and result in ethical dilemmas such as moral dualism. Consequentially, the participants will continue to find themselves in ethical conflicting situations, forced to serve opposing constituencies with incompatible expectations (PSC 2022). In such a context, they will be confronted by

malevolent norms, values and principles, as opposed to benevolence. An ethical philosophy undergirding public service must begin with the management's enthusiasm and commitment to integrate and maintain ethical discipline into organisational systems, processes and practices (Fathmath et al. 2021; Ramburuth-Hurt 2020).

Dobie (2019:2) found that government departments and institutions disregard prescripts, compromise codes of ethics and conduct, which seems to be 'a euphemism for political interference, particularly for top management positions'. Sebola (2018) added that the complex problem of departments' disregard of prescripts is not only a contradiction of the politics-administrative interface, but also a legal and ethical problem. Brunette (2020) and Pearson and Ndlovu (2018) also noted the disregard of ethical practices in RSIA processes by the unethical involvement of political heads, top management and other public servants. Qobo and Ngcaweni (2021) and Dobie (2019) submitted that for public service to be ethical, capable and professional, the removal of political influence and its perceived consequences is paramount.

A fair, just and consistent application of prescripts, especially in RSIA stages and impartial consequence management for unethical actions without fear, favour or prejudice motivate employees to uphold high ethical standards and integrity (Motshwane 2018; Smith et al. 2018; Villegas et al. 2019). It maximises employees' wellbeing, morale, productivity, commitment, efficiency and effectiveness (Fathmath et al. 2021; Mdletye & Hlongwane 2019). Such employees are likely to automatically internalise ethics, values, principles, derive a greater sense of wellbeing and morale as well as satisfaction at work (Motshwane 2018). Therefore, management and human resource units must create an ethical work environment that maximises and cultivates human potential – one that is also effective in policy execution (Qobo & Ngcaweni 2021). Smith et al. (2018:75), like the researchers, posited that when top-down and bottom-up organisation structures 'integrate ethical decision-making into practice, their organisations are positioned to create added value and optimise wealth creation while delivering quality services, responsively, efficiently and effectively'. Mubangizi (2020) averred that leadership and management can create an environment which ensures that ethics and morals are automatically instilled on public servants, confirming that social behaviour is a consequence of an interchange process (Sharif et al. 2017).

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited to national and provincial human resource practitioners and line managers serving as RSIA panel members in the public service. It did not include political heads, head of departments and executive management. There is still room to gain insights into ethical violations in RSIA processes at a local government context. This study's findings cannot be generalised to all other settings. The data collection instrument developed for this study relied solely on the participants' viewpoints and

experiences, which may be largely subjective. Focus was mainly on ethical violations in RSIA phases in the public service of South Africa. The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on HRM in the public sector. There is a need for longitudinal studies on prevalent ethical violations of RSIA stages across spheres of government. Therefore, future research should employ dissimilar methodologies in lieu of the limitations of this study.

Conclusion

Ethical violations during RSIA phases often occur to combat meritocracy, integrity, transparency and accountability. Human resource practitioners and panel members are often compromised, harassed, unfairly treated, victimised and bullied. Moreover, abuses of power, patronage and conflict of interests among some panel members or human resource practitioners are acutely rife, further undermining prescripts and departments' strategic goals. If ethical violations in HRM processes and practices persist, employees, organisations and even citizens will suffer dire consequences. Therefore, the HRM functionary should be empowered to build an ethical, professional and capable public service without undue political interference.

Sections 195(1)(a) of the Constitution (1996) vanguard the promotion and maintenance of professional ethical standards in the public service; Section 33(1) states that 'everyone has the right to administrative action that is lawful, reasonable and procedurally fair'; Section 96(1) avers that all public servants, including political heads 'must act in accordance with a code of ethics prescribed by national legislation' and other subordinate prescripts. The key principles such as integrity, impartiality, transparency and accountability are pronounced as an integral part of ethics in the workplace and should be observed in the public service in pursuit of good governance and public administration excellence. Strategic government documents such as Delivery Agreement for Outcome 12; NDP Vision 2030; and King IV Report on Corporate Governance for South Africa, among others, support the findings of this study and literature by emphasising the holistic application of meritocratic HRM functions; ethical organisational process, systems and practices; decision and actions based on objectivity, fairness and openness. All of these are the missing pieces of the puzzles needed to establish an ethically sound public service in South Africa.

The main recommendations of the study are: (1) Political heads and all levels of management in the public service should be effectively trained on governmental ethics framework to prevent unethical practices; (2) All public servants must be impelled to sign the Code of Conduct for public service and anti-corruption pledges every year to curb unethical practices in the public service; (3) Lastly, abuse of power must be prescribed as a criminal offence to cleanse undue political influences in the public service. These recommendations resonate with deontology ethics theory, virtue ethics theory, utilitarianism ethics theory, equity theory

and social exchange theory. These theories accent that good or bad actions or decisions have a final cause, which can be predicted, explained and judged based on substantial information and facts of ethicality. This study serves as an impetus for the micro, mezza and macro levels to dissuade potential ethical violations within dynamic political and socio-economic environment.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

M.M.M. wrote the original draft manuscripts and contributed conceptually to the design and findings while M.A.D. contributed to the writing, review and editing of the article.

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Disclaimer

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