

Leadership, management and organisational implications for public service employee well-being and performance

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Orientation: With the significant changes in the organisational context and the nature of work, greater focus on employee well-being is central to the quality of work life (QWL) and effective organisations.

Research purpose: This article examines the complex and dynamic interplay between the multidimensional affective, behavioural, relational and socio-cultural dimensions in mediating employee well-being and organisational performance in a transforming South African provincial government.

Motivation for the study: Theoretical models and public reforms have focused on the formal, transactional and technical aspects in understanding organisational performance and employee well-being, with less attention given to the behavioural, socio-cultural and interpersonal dimensions.

Research approach/design and method: This qualitative study in two provincial government departments with 43 public servants (rank levels 6–15) applied the integral theory-based, four-quadrant model. The Dynamic Inquiry (DI) interview method and inductive thematic analytical processes were used. The Management Performance Assessment Tool (MPAT) assessment reports of the two departments were analysed.

Main findings: The four dominant themes that emerged from this study – social exclusion, leadership behaviours, public service orientation and governance – display complex patterns and relationships related to well-being and performance. Among these are the negative effects of power and bureaucratic cultures; hierarchical, command and control governance systems and dissonant leadership behaviours.

Practical/managerial implications: The results have public policy and practice implications for public governance, management and leadership development, organisational design and culture, and performance management.

Contribution/value-add: By applying an integrated research approach, multiple determinants of well-being and their intermediation were elucidated. The findings offer epistemological and methodological implications for human resource management (HRM) scholarship.

Keywords: public service; well-being; performance; governance; public leadership; organisational culture.

Introduction

The prosperity of a nation is integrally linked to the health and well-being of its people. Public service organisations as providers of essential services therefore have a critical role in supporting the welfare of citizens through effectively implementing public policies. This role was dramatically brought to the fore during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, drawing attention to serious shortcomings in public governance and service delivery. Although, prior to the pandemic, public policymakers and administrators were experiencing major challenges in realising their mandate (Garikipati & Kambhampati, 2021; Huang, 2020; Kellis & Ran, 2013), and this is notwithstanding numerous public service reform initiatives. Consequently, citizen resistance against government has escalated, while bureaucratic trust has waned.

This state of public affairs invites important epistemological questions to be asked regarding public service transformation in a multidimensional, interdependent and interdisciplinary 21st-century environment (Pirson, 2021; Van Wart, 2011). The theoretical frameworks associated with 20th-century

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modernist discourse: grounded in empiricism, rationalism, positivism and reductionism are making way for post-modernist approaches, which are non-hierarchical, integrative, eclectic and holistic (Robledo, 2009; Van Wart, 2011). Mirroring this shift, public organisations are also under pressure to move from task oriented, mainly productivity focused (Cvenkel, 2020) and command and control management approaches to citizen-and employee-centric, service-dominant, networked, relational and affective governance, such as the New Public Governance paradigm (Betancourt & Vivier, 2021; Osborne et al., 2013) and transformational leadership paradigms (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007; Dirani et al., 2020). However, in reality, rationalistic, transactional and market-oriented perspectives continue to dictate public service reform thinking and practice (Pedersen & Hartley, 2008; Pirson, 2021; Vigoda-Gadot & Meisler, 2010), notwithstanding the paradoxes and the negative effects of decades of New Public Management's (NPM) dominance (Hood & Peters, 2004; Osborne et al., 2013), for example, the latter's stressful effects on public employees' well-being (Cvenkel, 2020).

Against this evolving public governance landscape, modest attention is given to affective, behavioural, socio-cultural and relational dimensions within public organisations (Betancourt & Vivier, 2021; Robledo, 2009; Vigoda-Gadot & Meisler, 2010). Despite mounting evidence confirming the importance of these dimensions in the workplace and their positive impact on employee well-being and organisational performance (Goleman et al., 2002; Guest, 2017; Huang, 2020; Kowalski & Loretto, 2017), it is evident that public administration and HRM practice have been largely dominated by prevailing transactional and top-down governance approaches and leadership styles (Chipkin & Meny-Gibert, 2012; Robledo, 2009; Vigoda-Gadot & Meisler, 2010), while generally human resource management (HRM) theory and research focuses mainly on improving performance, with employee concerns a subordinate consideration (Guest, 2017).

Additionally, the prevalence of a Western epistemological approach, the conspicuous dearth of literature on post-colonial public organisations and leadership (Ngoma, 2007) or viewing public governance and leadership through the lens of African constructs like Ubuntu ('a person is a person through other persons') (Asamoah & Yeboah-Assiamah, 2019; Ogude, 2019) and the existence of cultural relativism and biases warrants research into other appropriate and culturally specific public service paradigms and practices (House & Aditya, 1997; Miao et al., 2018). Consequently, substantial research endeavours are warranted for understanding and reframing public service organisational realities and exploring alternative models of management, leadership, governance, well-being, culture and performance (Betancourt & Vivier, 2021; Guest, 2017; Kellis & Ran, 2013; Morse & Buss, 2008; Van Wart, 2011).

Research purpose and objectives

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the complex and dynamic interplay between the multidimensional

affective, behavioural, relational and socio-cultural dimensions in mediating employee well-being and organisational performance in a South African provincial government. This article also comes as a response to civil society's growing demand globally for capable, caring, relational and accountable public leadership and governance (Betancourt & Vivier, 2021; Fourie & Poggenpoel, 2017; Mosimege & Masiya, 2021).

Literature review

Rethinking the nature of public institutions and employee well-being

The state of public management and governance calls for a profound reconceptualising, recasting and regeneration of public affairs at all levels (Betancourt & Vivier, 2021; Cvenkel, 2020; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007; Van Wart, 2011), as significant change is necessary to effectively govern in a 21st century, inter-dependent, dynamically complex and uncertain environment. In realising meaningful changes in public governance, several scholars emphasise the critical necessity to transform public service institutional arrangements – decision-making, systems, structures, processes, policies and strategies (Betancourt & Vivier, 2021; Guest, 2017; Kowalski & Loretto, 2017; Osborne et al., 2013; Pedersen & Hartley, 2008). Yet, predominantly, public institutions are perduring residues of the industrial 'machine' age (Morgan, 1986; Robledo, 2009) and transactional NPM practices, with the attendant intrinsic and archaic deficiencies. To meet the new challenges, citizens are demanding sound public governance – caring, responsive, effective, accountable, inclusive and transparent governments (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020).

In this context, public organisations and their leaders are expected to make fundamental individual and organisational shifts: for public institutions, the historical strong hierarchical traditions and command and control governance structures and systems (Benington & Hartley, 2011) and for public leaders, appropriate values and competencies (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007). These shifts warrant alternative and innovative public governance models (Cvenkel, 2020; Van Wart, 2011). In the pursuit of a modern, citizen-centric and networked public service, scholars raise concern with the state of public scholarship in understanding the distinct, complex and transforming public service environment (Betancourt & Vivier, 2021; Frederickson & Matkin, 2007; Morse & Buss, 2008).

Central to the transforming agenda is the prevailing machine image of organisations (Morgan, 1986; Robledo, 2009) that has dominated public leaders' thinking through concepts of control, predictability and standardisation 'despite [these concepts'] disharmony with the larger world' (Senge et al., 2004, p. 5). These earlier models have endured in the public service landscape, aptly described by Benington and Hartley (2011, p. 17) metaphorically as 'the machinery of government, levers of power, chain of command, and cogs in the machine ...'. While the machine model with standardised products

and Taylorist division of labour may have suited the industrial age in a relatively stable context (Benington & Hartley, 2011; Osborne et al., 2013; Pirson, 2021), the current 'permanent white water' environment and, in particular, global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic have vividly illustrated their inherent inadequacies.

In the shadow of this machine metaphor, many organisations emerge as 'hierarchical, control-oriented, bureaucratic, and inflexible', driven by efficiency and certainty (Robledo, 2009, p. 62). The fundamental problem with this paradigm is that the human side of an organisation is neglected (Guest, 2017; Pirson, 2021; Robledo, 2009). Employees are regarded as extensions of tools and extrinsic rewards, such as money, are largely used for motivation. The result is the erosion of personal agency and social capital (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007; Pirson, 2021; Vigoda-Gadot & Meisler, 2010), where empathy is 'sacrificed in the name of efficiency and cost effectiveness' (Goleman, 2006, p. 252). In ushering a new culture of public governance, Betancourt and Vivier (2021) challenge public administration and political science disciplines in how public governance knowledge is constructed and produced, proposing an integrative and contemplative approach 'to embrace experiential, first-person practices' in 'attending to and surfacing embodied affective and relational dimensions of experience' (Betancourt & Vivier, 2021, p. 608). Such an approach is expected to improve the quality of public governance and foster employee well-being.

Employee well-being and HRM

In current times, with significant changes in the organisational context and the nature of work, greater focus on employee well-being is central to the quality of work life (QWL) and effective organisations (Cvenkel, 2020), yet HRM literature has shown limited interest in employee well-being, focusing primarily on performance (Guest, 2017). Pirson (2021, p. 1194) concurs that management research views 'human beings as instruments to the imperatives of organizational performance', highlighting the deficiencies of economic and utilitarian paradigms' focus on efficiency and effectiveness, with less attention to 'ethical, social, and developmental aspects of human nature' (Pirson, 2021, p. 1190), thereby instrumentalising human beings. The evidence base of well-being research within the public sector remains limited (Cvenkel, 2020) despite evidence showing causality between well-being and positive job performance outcomes at individual and organisational levels (Guest, 2017; Kowalski & Loretto, 2017; OECD, 2013; Wright & Cropanzano, 2000).

The literature on well-being distinguishes two central concepts of well-being: eudaimonia (e.g. growth, meaning, authenticity, excellence) and hedonia (e.g. pleasure, enjoyment, comfort, absence of distress) (Der Kinderen & Kharpova, 2021; Huta & Waterman, 2014). Four categories of eudaimonia were identified by Huta and Waterman (2014, pp. 1432–1433): (1) orientations (orientations, values, motives and goals), (2) behaviours (behavioural content and activity characteristics),

(3) experiences (subjective experiences, emotions and cognitive appraisals) and (4) functioning (positive psychological functioning, mental health and flourishing). A key contributor to well-being scholarship, Carol Ryff (1989) proposed six psychological well-being dimensions: (1) self-acceptance, (2) positive relations with others, (3) personal growth, (4) purpose in life, (5) environmental mastery and (6) autonomy (see also Ryff, 2013). While positive psychological well-being relates to both affective and cognitive experiences of well-being, and optimal functioning, it remains a neglected research area in management studies (Cvenkel, 2020; Der Kinderen & Kharpova, 2021).

Related to these conceptualisations of well-being, and supported by workplace evidence, Guest (2017) proposes five distinctive sets of human resource (HR) practices, namely investing in employees, providing engaging work, positive social and physical environment, voice and organisational support. These practices are linked to well-being and a more positive employment relationship and, consequently, positive performance outcomes at the individual and organisational levels. Certainly, given these positive effects, identifying practices to promote employee well-being is surely a core function of HRM and human resource professionals (Cvenkel, 2020; Guest, 2017; Kowalski & Loretto, 2017), particularly in the COVID-19 pandemic context. In these uncertain and stressful times, the psychological well-being of employees is severely affected and has a negative impact on QWL and performance outcomes. Given that 'high well-being will be reflected in psychological and physical health and positive social relationships at work' (Guest, 2017, p. 32), arguably, this dire situation demands greater focus on supporting workplace well-being (Cvenkel, 2020; Der Kinderen & Kharpova, 2021). For instance, psychological well-being is about 'feeling good and functioning effectively'; however, this state is 'compromised when negative emotions are extreme or very long lasting and interfere with a person's ability to function in his or her daily life' (Huppert, 2009, p. 137).

The transforming South African public service management context

Given the impersonal and alienating machine metaphor, the ethos of the democratic SA constitution obliges the recasting of public service institutional design, values and behaviours of public servants and public leaders. These values include caring, belonging, accountability, equality, accessibility and responsibility regarding public governance. Citizens perceive or experience public institutions through the affective expressions and social interactions of public officials (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007). To realise the constitutional expectations, the National Development Plan (NDP) (RSA, 2012) vision asserts that building a capable developmental state requires new kinds of knowledge, abilities, behaviours, attitudes and leadership – together with an increase in overall professionalism in the delivery of public services.

Considering the significant transformation of the SA state (Chipkin & Lipietz, 2012; Von Holdt, 2010, 2022) and the current governance challenges, two fundamental

conventional modes of rhetoric that infuse public institutional reform, namely orthodox administrative theory and realpolitik (March & Olson, 1983) are appropriate. The first rhetoric focuses on the reorganisation of administrative structures and procedures in pursuit of efficiency, effectiveness, economy and control of bureaucratic hierarchies. The second rhetoric represents the 'political struggle among contending interests ... within the bureaucracy and outside, [which] seek access, representation, control, and policy benefits' (March & Olson, 1983, pp. 282–283).

The Judicial Commission on State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector's report (RSA, 2022) highlights how powerful political forces and senior public officials have greatly influenced both modes of rhetoric, manifesting in the capture of key organs of state, burgeoning corruption and rent seeking, thus reflecting the use of power to promote self-interest of politicians and their business acolytes in entrenching mechanisms for future dominance. These behaviours and execution of state power have seriously impeded the building of a caring, capable and ethical state and have negatively influenced the organisational culture of public institutions (RSA, 2022; Von Holdt, 2022). Similarly, the Auditor General's Consolidated General Report on National and Provincial Audit Outcomes (Auditor General of South Africa, 2021) paints a bleak picture of chronic incidences of maladministration reported over the past decade.

A key objective of the SA democratic state's transformation policies (RSA, 1995, p. 3) was to empower, challenge and motivate senior public managers to be '... leaders, visionaries, initiators and effective communicators and decision-makers, capable of responding pro-actively to the challenges of the change process'. However, the lacklustre performance of senior public managers to realise this vision has distressed the transitioning democratic state and citizens. Over the years, the Auditor General (Auditor General of South Africa, 2021) has stressed the leadership challenges across all three spheres of government, for example:

Decisive action by leadership is required for meaningful improvement in audit outcomes. Leadership must also demand greater collective effort in strengthening control environments in order to achieve improved audit outcomes and, ultimately, service delivery to citizens. (p. 10)

Furthermore, studies have indicated that SA provincial departmental leaders 'do not have the appropriate transformational skills to manage their departments effectively and efficiently' and that employees have negative perceptions of their managers' leadership behaviours and competence (Mokgolo et al., 2012, p. 7). Likewise, Kotzé and Venter (2011) observed significant differences in overall emotional intelligence (EI) scores between effective and ineffective SA public middle-level provincial managers and a deficit of certain EI competencies at the managerial level. Another SA provincial government study (Haricharan, 2022) showed significant and positive correlations between executive managers' leadership performance and their EI competence in all four EI clusters: self-awareness, self-

management, social awareness and relationship management. Several meta-analyses and studies (e.g. O'Boyle et al., 2011) confirm the importance of affect and EI in management and leadership performance (Görgens-Ekermans & Roux, 2021).

Research design

Research paradigm and analytical framework

This qualitative study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, in which reality is intersubjectively and socially constructed (Angen, 2000). This paradigm is well supported by Wilber's (2000) integral theory-based four-quadrant model, which is applied in this study to understand how behavioural, social and cultural factors mediate well-being and performance. Each corner of Wilber's (2000) quadrant represents a distinct domain (intentional, behavioural, cultural and social) of organisational reality – that is, either the interior or exterior consciousness of the individual or the collective (Figure 1). Each of the four domains embodies differing levels of growth, development or evolution of the individual and the organisation (Divine, 2009; Wilber, 2000).

Following Wilber's (2000) model, this study of a provincial government's executive and senior managers and their subordinates seeks to interrogate their personal characteristics (intentional domain), which manifest as individual and collective behaviours (behavioural and cultural domains), mediated through social and governance systems (social domain). It attempts to do this through a study of perceived needs at individual, team, leader and organisational levels in achieving high work performance.

Research setting

Using convenience sampling, the research was undertaken (before the COVID-19 pandemic) in two departments of a poorly performing provincial government in South Africa with high levels of poverty and inequality (Auditor General of South Africa, 2021; RSA, 2016, 2017, 2018). An analysis of the national government's Management Performance Assessment Tool (MPAT) assessment reports (RSA, 2016, 2017, 2018) for these two provincial departments, indicates

Intentional domain	Behavioural domain
Individual consciousness (subjective awareness) Represents an individual's internal consciousness, i.e. emotional, mental, spiritual, values, sensations, meaning and experiences.	Individual behaviour (objective) Represents the individual's observable behaviours and actions.
Cultural domain	Social domain
Collective awareness (inter-subjective) Represents relationships, community, a shared sense of reality, shared language, norms, symbols, meaning, cohesion and belonging.	Social systems and governance (inter-objective) Represents the organisational structures, systems, resources, plans, strategies, shared actions, measurement and performance.

Source: Adapted from Divine, L. (2009). Looking AT and looking AS the client: The quadrants as a type of structure lens. *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice*, 4(1), 21–40 and Wilber, K. (2000). *A theory of everything: An integral vision for business, politics, science, and spirituality*, Shambhala

FIGURE 1: Analytical framework: The four-quadrant model representing the domains of workplace reality.

recurring low performance scores (1/4) in several of the four key performance areas (KPA's), namely strategic management, governance and accountability, human resource management and financial management. Similar performance results were also observed across the other nine provincial departments in this province (RSA, 2016, 2017, 2018). Some of the specific areas receiving frequent low scores were performance monitoring, service delivery implementation, accountability, ethics, risk management, expenditure management, HR practice and administration, and performance management (RSA, 2016, 2017, 2018).

Sampling

The sample of 43 ($n = 43$) interviewees was selected using convenience sampling. The purpose of the study was explained to interviewees, who were invited to participate on a confidential and anonymous basis. Table 1 indicates interviewees' rank levels.

The duration of employment for the employees at the provincial government (including the previous homeland administration) ranged from 1 to 27 years, with an average duration of 9.3 years. Of the 43 interviewees, 80% were employed after 1994 and the years they served in their current role ranged from 1 to 15 years (with an average of 7 years).

Data collection

A qualitative research approach was most appropriate to frame the complex and multiple personal, social and cultural realities represented in the institutional context. For this purpose, the Dynamic Inquiry (DI) (London & McMillen, 1992) interview method (involving qualitative conversational techniques) was applied to uncover subjective emotional realities and underlying cultural issues within the departments. The interview protocol was composed of four broad questions aimed at four levels of the organisational system (London & McMillen, 1992; McKee et al., 2008):

1. Individual: What do you personally need to be more effective in your job?
2. Team: What do you think your team needs to be successful?
3. Leadership team: What do you think the executive and senior managers in your department need to do to be successful?
4. Organisational culture: In your view, what sort of culture does your department need to be successful?

On average, the interviews lasted 1 h and were tape-recorded, after which they were transcribed.

TABLE 1: Interview sample for the two departments across rank levels.

Department	Administration (Levels 6–8)	Middle managers (Levels 9–12)	Senior managers (Level 13)	Executive managers (Levels 14–15)	Total (Levels 6–15)
1	5	9	8	2	24
2	5	9	3	2	19
Total	10	18	11	4	43

Data analysis

All 43 interview transcripts were selected for analysis using three inductive thematic analytical processes, namely divergent, convergent and deep analysis (McKee et al., 2008). Firstly, the divergent process examined the organisational context in which interviews occurred to explore a wide range of emotional responses, metaphors and dynamic tensions, which were then clustered and coded. Secondly, the coded data were subjected to thematic analysis, a distillation process through which highly contextualised themes emerged. This process was performed for each department across the four levels of rank. Finally, the aggregated themes were interpreted through layers of analysis and placed into organisational narratives related to dynamics at two levels: intergroup (among the four ranks) and inter-departmental (between the departments), generating a set of four dominant themes and related sub-themes.

Research procedure and ethical considerations

Permission for the study was granted by the provincial government's Office of the Premier. The voluntary participation of all participants was sought through informed consent. The identity of all participants and the data collected is strictly anonymous and confidential. The researcher complied with the ethical procedure guidelines set out by Stellenbosch University.

Results

Four dominant themes – social exclusion, leadership behaviours, public service orientation and governance – emerged from the thematic analysis. Figure 2 present a summary of the themes and sub-themes.

The remainder of this section provides a brief discussion of the themes and sub-themes that emerged during the DI interviews. This is followed by a discussion of findings and conclusion.

Intentional domain	Behavioural domain
Individual consciousness (subjective awareness) Social exclusion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equality and equity • Recognition and reward • Voice 	Individual behaviour (objective) Leadership behaviours <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resonant leadership styles • Dissonant leadership styles
Cultural domain	Social domain
Collective awareness (inter-subjective) Public service orientation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serving • Caring • Belonging 	Social systems and governance (inter-objective) Governance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bureaucratic culture • Power culture.

Source: Adapted from Divine, L. (2009). Looking AT and looking AS the client: The quadrants as a type of structure lens. *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice*, 4(1), 21–40 and Wilber, K. (2000). *A theory of everything: An integral vision for business, politics, science, and spirituality*, Shambhala

FIGURE 2: Dominant themes and sub-themes from the inductive analysis framed in the four-quadrant model.

Social exclusion

The original concept of social exclusion (also referred to as ostracism) relates primarily to social dynamics within broader society. However, this concept may be applied to other social systems too, such as organisations (Reece, 2021; Scott et al., 2014). Social exclusion is considered a multidimensional concept relating to both economic-structural exclusion and social-cultural exclusion (Jehoel-Gijsbers & Vrooman, 2007). In this study, both types of exclusion were experienced, taking the form of three sets of related sub-themes: equality and equity, voice and listening, and recognition and reward.

Equality and equity

While most interviewees espoused values such as impartiality, transparency, consistency, fairness, honesty and parity, their work experiences were of inequality and inequity. A middle manager, in the department for 10 years (D1, M9, F, L12), shared her experiences and noted the consequences of unfair behaviours on organisational culture:

‘There is unfairness and inconsistency where those that are not working are rewarded and those that are working are not rewarded. There is no honesty and candidness. Supervisors are not able to face and tell people the truth. Team spirit, cohesiveness and work culture are affected if people are not treated fairly.’

Her peer agreed that it was ‘important to treat people fairly so that everyone feels equally valued’, and yet this individual also experienced ‘unfairness and inequality’ in the workplace, as well as favouritism:

‘What happens here is that when something is requested by someone else, it gets attention. Depends on who you are and if you are liked by management.’ (D1, M1, M, L9)

Further, he challenges his leaders to ‘do away with this culture of favouritism’ and to ensure consistency and uniformity in applying policies and procedures in decision-making, for example in granting salary increases.

Despite an overwhelming desire for social inclusion and cohesion among public service employees, the social-cultural dimension of exclusion was found to be common in this study. This manifested as a reported tendency for employees to create inner- and outer circles, sub-cultures and countercultures, which resulted in factions and social alienation. Inner circles with political ties and ‘outer circles with fewer opportunities’, (D1, S7, M, L13) along with a ‘them-and-us mentality’, (D1, S8, M, L13) and iniquitous social practices were frequently noted and ascribed to an entrenched rank-consciousness attitude at the level of senior management, as noted by a senior manager:

‘In the inner circle you don’t have to have the skills to do the job, you have better opportunities because of your political ties ... Those in the outer circle have less opportunities. Countercultures are formed by the outer circle for protection. Most join unions.’ (D1, S7, M, L13)

This section illustrates how the sub-theme of equality and equity influences social exclusion. Participants referred to both types of exclusion (Jehoel-Gijsbers & Vrooman, 2007): economic-structural exclusion, in the form of unequal distribution of resources, recognition and rewards (e.g. through favouritism) and social-cultural exclusion, through inadequate social and cultural integration (‘inner circle and outer circle’, ‘sub-cultures’ and ‘counter-cultures’), resulting in social alienation or factionalism.

Voice

Across all levels, interviewees expressed a desire for communication that was personal, respectful, open, sensitive, clear, consistent and regular. To achieve this, they indicated an expectation to be able to express their thoughts, ideas and feelings without fear and with a reasonable prospect of being listened to. This yearning contrasts starkly with their executive and senior managers’ (referred to as their leaders) top-down communication practices. To employees, it was clear that their leaders were ‘not spending enough time listening to the staff and talking to them’, (D1, M1, M, L9) as shared by a middle manager. The perceived lack of consideration for their ideas was a common source of angst among middle managers:

‘Our ideas are not even recorded anywhere so that they are included in future plans. This is very frustrating. We see no reason to come up with ideas anymore because they are not taken into consideration. We would like our ideas to be appreciated because this makes us feel we are making a contribution and our voices are heard.’ (D1, M1, M, L9)

Administrative officials had the most acute experience of the workplace power distance, as their leaders were invariably experienced as being ‘not accessible’, with the effect of ‘alienating the spade workers [*administrative staff*] in decision-making ...’ (D2, A2, F, L8). For example, a long service administration officer strongly expressed that her leaders ‘*ayifikeleleki*’, (D2, A1, F, L7) an isiXhosa word meaning ‘not accessible’. She added that this results in a huge gap between the leaders and their followers. Her peer affirmed the power distance between the senior and junior rank levels:

‘In the Department there is a tendency of alienating the spade workers [*referring to the administrative staff*] in decision-making, thereby creating an impression that they are not that much important in the Department.’ (D2, A2, F, L8)

Recognition and rewards

The multiple axes of inequality and inequity are intrinsically related to the theme of recognition and rewards. This theme was revealed as being bound up with an appreciation for ideas, knowledge, work done, consideration, gratitude, encouragement, affirmation, positive feedback, respect, recognition of potential and personal growth. These were considered crucial factors for an individual and a team’s morale and motivation, which in turn was seen as supporting better results, improved performance and a more positive attitude.

However, the interviewees' experiences of this type of positive feedback were almost universally limited. For example, two HR administrators confirmed that their senior managers displayed minimal interest in 'individual potential and performance' (D1, A1, F, L6) and that their contribution remained unrecognised, despite improving their educational qualifications. They warned that non-recognition of high performers would lead to demotivation and that these individuals would 'start performing at a mediocre level', (D1, A2, F, L7) as they see no benefits in performing well.

The Performance Management Development System (PMDS), which comprises performance measurement processes linked to an individual's development plan, received strong criticism across all departments and levels, with several interviewees questioning the legitimacy and fairness in applying the system. A middle manager with functional responsibility for the PMDS, stressed that leaders needed to take greater accountability in implementing the system, as this would 'ensure proper recognition of success and avoid rewarding failure' (D2, M1, M, L11). He also stressed that it ought not to be applied punitively.

Leadership behaviours

Two divergent sets of leadership style were revealed throughout the course of this research (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Goleman et al., 2002). Each style is understood to affect an organisation's climate and culture and consequently individual and organisational performance (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). The first style may be termed 'resonant' (i.e. visionary, coaching, affiliative and democratic), exhibiting parallels with transformational and emerging leadership theories (e.g. ethical, spiritual, servant and authentic).

The second style is termed 'dissonant' leadership and is associated with transactional and task-focused practices, encompassing pace-setting and commanding behaviours. This style of leadership tends to produce groups that feel emotionally discordant and operate in a climate of 'anger, fear, apathy or even sullen silence' (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005, p. 21). Exemplary leaders are capable of using a repertoire of styles in each situation, drawing more on resonant styles.

Many officials interviewed in this study lamented both the incompetence of their managers and the absence of inspiring and visionary leaders who were incapable of resonant leadership. Instead, there was a common experience of overly dissonant styles that seemed directionless, indecisive, incoherent and inconsistent, as well as lacking 'understanding of real issues or the big picture', (D1, A2, F, L7) as shared by an administrative official. The result, expressed by a middle manager, was mixed messages and confusion, which inevitably led to teams becoming 'demoralised and frustrated'. (D1, M1, M, L9)

Several managers suggested that their leaders needed mentors and coaches and identified EI as one of the 'biggest competencies that ... leadership lacks'. (D2, M9, M, L12) Confirming this, a senior manager conceded:

'At times, I am quite authoritative because of the work that must be done ... my team and I need coaching skills ...' (D2, S2, F, L13)

Leaders were also perceived to be intolerant of mistakes, accustomed to giving harsh and public criticisms, inclined to view their subordinates as lazy and incompetent and predisposed to expect failure. Middle management interviewees gave examples of such behaviours:

'Leadership tends to be more punitive when applying corrective measures, rather than being of assistance when one transgresses unknowingly.' (D1, M5, M, L10)

'You are told that you are useless every day and that demotivates you.' (D2, M7, F, L12)

Predominantly, interviewees desired caring, trusting, respectful, sensitive, empathetic and people-centred leaders (in essence, they desired what is known in the literature as an 'affiliative style' of leadership that prioritises relationship building, see Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Goleman et al., 2002). In contrast, their leaders' behaviours produced a dispiriting effect leading to dysfunctional relationships, as a middle manager shared:

'It is important to always ensure that the manner in which leadership relates to staff and the manner in which they speak to staff encourages good behaviour instead of breaking spirits.' (D2, M9, M, L12)

A frequent example of 'breaking spirits' was the disrespect that leaders were said to show towards their subordinates, with one middle manager stating that 'extreme rudeness is the order of the day here'. (D2, M1, M, L11)

Additionally, the issue of 'rank-consciousness' was a recurring sub-theme, with administrative staff and middle managers frequently observing that their leaders expected to be addressed by their positional titles. Most interviewees explicitly voiced their resistance to rank consciousness and noted the sense of alienation they experienced as a result (expressed as voicelessness, a lack of recognition and a sense of unfairness and demotivation).

Finally, subordinates commonly alluded to a dissonant pacesetting leadership style that included frenetic, hurried, chaotic and crisis-driven management behaviours. The negative effect of such behaviours has been described in the literature as the 'sacrifice cycle' (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005), which leads to increased incidences of illness, stress, burnout, depression and absenteeism – and indeed, this was reported by departmental HR practitioners. A middle manager suggested that leaders needed to slow down and become 'fully aware of what is happening around' them so that they 'appreciate even those little things that seem small but [are] important'. (D1, M9, M, L12)

Social systems and governance: Power culture and bureaucratic culture

The provincial government's institutional design and governance systems were predominantly viewed as alienating,

rigid, centralised, resource poor and excessively rule-bound bureaucracies. This stood in stark contrast to what employees desired in their workplace culture, which was expressed variously as the need for decentralised and delegated power, agile and efficient organisational systems and processes, fair performance management systems, coordinated planning and organisational resources. Interviewees considered these things imperative for achieving well-being, exemplary performances and effective service delivery.

The dominant discourse of the actual workplace environment centred on two concepts of culture: 'bureaucratic culture' and 'power culture'. Bureaucratic culture was characterised by time consuming, lengthy and steep hierarchical management and administrative processes ('red-tape') that negatively affected motivation, productivity and performance. As one middle manager complained:

'... it goes from person to person down the hierarchy ... we're not aware that work is coming. Everything we do, we have to get approved, but the senior managers is [sic] not in the office. A request for a meeting with the other provincial departments had [sic] to pass through six offices for signatures.' (D1, M4, F, L10)

A senior manager agreed that the workplace culture was rigid and called for organisational flexibility, agility and a renewed focus on citizens instead of controls to address 'implementation paralyses'. (D1, M9, M, L12)

The second concept, 'power culture', was experienced as the centralisation of power, indecisiveness, mistrust and rank consciousness. This culture was perceived to be related to the hierarchical ('rank and file') nature of the interviewees' public service institution and responsible for producing significant negative effects on organisational commitment and performance. One middle manager expressed this in the following way:

'I have found that it is only senior and executive management that can help me when I get stuck because here officials are very status conscious – they only respond if an official of the same or more senior rank requests them to do something.' (D1, M6, F, L11)

An administrative officer put it like this:

'... they don't want to lose anything. They won't give anyone else the mandate ... there's an element of a lack of trust. No one will say 'please lead this group while I'm away.' (D1, A5, F, L8)

Public service orientation

Despite the experiences of social exclusion, dissonant leadership and bureaucratic and power cultures, interviewees passionately expressed their dedication and commitment to public service. Many considered the SA government's Batho Pele beliefs (to care, to serve and to belong) as the foundation for their desired organisational culture. They defined public service within a people-centred, socially responsible, accountable, professional, service-oriented,

empathetic and ethical paradigm – as expressed by an executive manager:

'You need a caring culture where officials are willing to provide support to communities. Batho Pele principles must guide government officials when performing their tasks. There must be passion to help people in need of government services.' (D1, E2, M, L14)

Similarly, others spoke zealously of their calling to public service, such as a senior manager:

'[W]e are here to serve ... [O]ur people are still very poor and depend on us for quality service for the betterment of their lives. We should not disappoint them.' (D1, S8, M, L13)

However, several barriers hinder the realisation of their espoused public service values. For instance, the interviewees did not feel a sense of care and belonging in their own organisations, which clearly affected their motivation to serve. A middle manager expressed their concern in the following way:

'When people come to work, they don't feel like they belong. If you don't belong, you don't care ... our leaders must walk, talk, breathe the Batho Pele principles.' (D1, M2, F, L10)

Discussion

The four dominant themes that emerged from this study (social exclusion, leadership behaviours, public service orientation and governance), display patterns of contextual polarities and paradoxes between the SA democratic state's aspirational transformation ethos, public servants' expectations and workplace reality. These divergences span the fields of pathos and hope, neglect and caring, self- and people-centeredness, belonging and alienation, disenchantment and enthusiasm and resonance and dissonance.

Despite the immensely difficult organisational realities, interviewees at all levels of rank expressed a strong conviction and commitment to public service. However, these were compromised by experiences of social exclusion and polarisation between the marginalised (powerless, alienated and dispirited subordinates) and the mainstream (powerful, indifferent and disconnected executive and senior managers). This polarisation was exacerbated by the rigid, centralised, authoritarian and hierarchical governance systems that were found to predominate for the participants in this study. The outcome is a climate of demotivation, social antagonism, silence and submission that compromises well-being and performance at all organisational levels.

Viewed through multiple lenses of workplace experiences, this study offers three key insights.

Adopting a holistic approach to understanding the dynamic and interconnected nature of public organisations

This article's findings exemplify the complex interconnections and mutual influences that occur in and between the different



FIGURE 3: Presentation of the study's dominant and sub-themes showing the dynamic and interconnected nature of public organisations representing wholeness, integration and flow.

domains of reality (Wilber, 2000) in an organisation – which can be appropriately illustrated as broken intersecting circles (see Figure 3), representing wholeness, integration and flow. Shown like this, it is possible to illustrate the dynamic nature of organisations as complex adaptive systems or even organisms (Morgan, 1986), rather than the more traditional mechanistic view of workplace reality, in which people are ‘depersonalized and anonymous’ or ‘nothing more than a box in an organizational chart’ (Robledo, 2009, p. 62).

A holistic approach of inquiry that considers different realms of realities – across rank levels – provides depth and a nuanced understanding of the multidimensional determinants at play in a public service organisation setting. Such framing pays attention to the four categories of eudaimonia (orientations, behaviours, experiences and functioning), as identified by Huta and Waterman (2014), in understanding individual and collective values, motives, goals, subjective experiences, emotions, behaviours, cognitive appraisals and psychological functioning in the workplace (Cvenkel, 2020; Der Kinderen & Kharpova, 2021). Furthermore, this approach can reveal the complex intermediation of employee eudaimonic well-being and performance; rather than the narrow, perfunctory and positivist NPM metrics of performance, limited to measuring efficiency, effectiveness and economy (March & Olson, 1983; Osborne et al., 2013). In the context of volatility, complexity and uncertainty (heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic), ‘local and national politics cannot be simply calibrated in terms of rational efficiency’ (Pedersen & Hartley, 2008, p. 333). The pandemic notwithstanding, it is reasonable to expect public organisations to respond to their multiple complex realities with greater awareness, empathy and sophistication than the findings of this study reveal, as well as with greater flexibility, agility and adaptability (Dirani et al., 2020; Garikipati & Kambhampati, 2021; Huang, 2020).

The dynamically complex relationship between social exclusion, well-being and performance

‘The father of psychology’, William James (1890), once observed the enervating effects of social exclusion or ostracism:

No more fiendish punishment could be devised ... If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met ‘cut us dead,’ and acted as if we were non-existing things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruellest bodily tortures would be a relief ... (pp. 293–294)

Modern social neuroscience research on physical and emotional pain confirms James’ visionary insights in 1890 regarding the effects of social exclusion, which has been found to result in a decrease in mental and psychological well-being and motivation in the workplace (Reece et al., 2021). Chen et al. (2008, p. 789) even found that ‘threats to social inclusion led to physiological changes consistent with preparation for a physical threat’. Given the importance of psychological well-being on performance, it is clearly essential to address social exclusion if one wishes to achieve optimal functioning in the workplace (Cvenkel, 2020; Guest, 2017).

Distressingly, more than 70% of professionals report experiences of social exclusion or ostracism in the workplace (Reece, 2021). As mentioned above, these experiences have an adverse impact on employees’ lives in a variety of ways (Wu et al., 2012), affecting their eudaimonic well-being including their relationships with others, self-acceptance, personal growth, environmental mastery (Ryff, 2013), self-esteem, productivity and performance (Ferris et al., 2014; Leung et al., 2011). For all that, few studies have been done about exclusion and its antecedents in the workplace or how individuals cope with it (Reece, 2021; Scott et al., 2014).

The current study’s findings indicate a complex relationship between the distributional and relational dimensions of exclusion (Jehoel-Gijsbers & Vrooman, 2007). Employees reported experiencing both dimensions in the form of the unequal distribution of resources, unfair performance management systems, power distance, social alienation, lack of voice and inadequate cultural integration. The findings indicate that all four categories of employees eudaimonic well-being – orientations, behaviours, experiences and functioning – were negatively affected, which, in turn, had a detrimental impact on their positive psychological well-being, as well as their personal development, organisational climate and culture and institutional performance. These findings confirm the results of previous studies that have shown how negative emotions increase and positive emotions (Reece et al., 2021) and self-esteem decrease (Ferris et al., 2014) because of social exclusion. Notably, positive emotions result in ‘positive cognitions, positive behaviours and increased cognitive capability’, and that these, in turn, drive positive emotions and therefore positive relationships and functioning effectively (Huppert, 2009, p. 137). All these factors are at the core of eudaimonic well-being (Cvenkel, 2020; Der Kinderen & Kharpova, 2021; Huta & Waterman, 2014; Ryff, 2013).

In addition, evidence from social neuroscience suggests that fairness, equity and co-operation lead to 'higher happiness ratings and increased activity in several reward regions of the brain' (Tabibnia & Lieberman, 2007, pp. 97–98). This evidence reveals social reinforcers – fairness and co-operation – to be intrinsically rewarding and likely to increase intrinsic motivation, as well as predicting better performance outcomes and individual satisfaction. Likewise, equity theory argues that perceptions of fairness are motivational, and under-reward arouses an unpleasant emotional state and dissonance (Mowday, 1991). Moreover, when an employee experiences injustice in the workplace, the individual may decide to 'get back' at the organisation by exhibiting deviant behaviour (Rajah et al., 2011; Reece et al., 2021).

This study observed the negative impact of a punitive and unfair performance management system on employees' motivation and self-worth. Conversely, participative and developmental performance management encourage deeper levels of feeling of belonging, trust, fairness and security with concomitant high QWL and strong employment relationship (Guest, 2017). The antecedents of well-being related to the HR practice of organisational support, such as 'participative, supportive management and an organisational climate that facilitates employee involvement' ensures a positive employment relationship and high QWL (Guest, 2017, p. 34). The role of voice, a recurring theme in this study, is another HRM practice area, which is integral to well-being and positive performance outcomes and requires HRM practices that adopt 'extensive two-way communication, opportunities for individual expression of voice ... and relevant forms of collective representation' (Guest, 2017, p. 34).

This study also provided support for Levin's (2009, p. 966) analysis of workplace surveys in the SA public service, which revealed a 'great deal of discontent among ordinary public servants on the grounds of their [*management's*] perceived incompetence, poor communication and bias'. Levin (2009, p. 966) also noted that public service employees experienced substantial 'resentment of head office and management, who are seen as frequently absent and disengaged or micro-managing and autocratic'. The current study confirms these findings, which continue to challenge managers and policymakers as underscored in the Auditor General of South Africa and government performance audits (Auditor General of South Africa, 2021; RSA, 2016, 2017, 2018).

The South African Employee Health and Wellness Strategic Framework for the Public Service (RSA, 2019) recognises international frameworks on decent work and worker health and legislative obligations; however, the framework contains no references to scholarship on well-being in the workplace or a SA public service contextual analysis on well-being or awareness of the issues raised in the literature and in the findings of this study. Rather, it takes the traditional bureaucratic and project planning approach and presents tables of vague inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes, without a theory of change in tackling the complex and multidimensional area of eudaimonic well-being. To achieve

the framework's objective on organisational wellness in promoting 'an organisational culture that is conducive to individual and organisational wellness and work-life balance to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the Public Service' (RSA, 2019, p. 48) requires further studies on employee well-being that adopts a holistic approach as presented in this study.

The interplay between power culture, leadership behaviours, governance and performance

In the current study, dissonant leadership behaviours emerged as a dominant theme that significantly affected employee well-being. Dissonant leaders were regarded as conservative, commanding, power- and rank-conscious, intimidating, uncaring and frenetic. These behaviours had a direct and negative impact on the self-esteem, morale, aspirations and motivation of subordinates and on the organisation's climate and culture. This, in turn, resulted in high levels of stress, illness, despondency, demotivation and social antagonism. The final consequence of this dynamic is ultimately visible in the compromising of individual, team, leadership and organisational performances – as has been reported by the provincial government's below average performance ratings in national performance audits (Auditor General of South Africa, 2021; RSA, 2013, 2016, 2017, 2018).

Consistent with these findings, a SA national government study on public leadership transition (Haricharan & Wyley, 2013) found that:

Authoritarian and task-driven political and public administrative leadership considerably worsens the anxiety and difficulty experienced by senior managers entering the public service. (pp. 137–138)

The implication of this national study was that the public service organisational culture into which leaders must transition was discordant and hostile, with newly appointed senior managers having to cope through self-sacrifice as they attempted to 'stay afloat, occasionally swim, [*and avoid*] sinking altogether' (Haricharan & Wyley, 2013, p. 146).

It is worth recognising that the authoritarian leadership behaviours reported in this study are allowed to thrive in rigid and hierarchical institutional architectures, such as were observed in the offices of the provincial government. Moreover, the dominant narratives of bureaucratic culture and power culture that were identified, buttress the practices of dissonant leadership. These results are consistent with other research findings in the SA public service (Haricharan, 2022; Haricharan & Wyley, 2013; Levin, 2009; Von Holdt, 2010).

Conversely, it must be noted that positive psychological well-being and the practice of meaningful work are good motivators that encourage employees to be better colleagues, with greater job involvement and superior performance

outputs (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Der Kinderen & Kharpova, 2021; Guest, 2017; Huta & Waterman, 2014; Ryff, 2013). Specifically, resonant leadership styles (i.e. styles that emphasise EI competence in self-awareness, social awareness, self-management and relationship management) promote an inclusive, relational, caring and supportive workplace culture (Goleman et al., 2002; Vigoda-Gadot & Meisler, 2010). In addition, these clusters of EI competencies are positively correlated to leadership performance as observed in a similar public service setting study (Haricharan, 2022). It is clear from the current study that employees overwhelmingly preferred the positive use of socialised power (through resonant leadership) for societal good over more personalised power-driven dissonant self-centred leadership styles, as conceptualised by McClelland (1998). Similarly, Asamoah and Yeboah-Assiamah (2019, p. 317) assert that the prevalence of corruption and poor leadership in Africa is 'anticultural, anti-human, anti-ethical and anti-Africa' and argue that public leadership and governance is to 'develop the skills of all and caring for the society', in the understanding of human identity and consciousness (Ogude, 2019).

Conclusion

Public service leaders must navigate the volatile, uncertain and multi-dimensional complexities of rapidly shifting 21st-century worlds. While traversing these turbulent waters, it is crucial to know which forms of institutional architecture, organisational culture, values and behaviours best serve public leaders as they embrace and confront the evolving public governance transformation challenges. Once properly understood, these forms must serve employee well-being and the performance of public institutions that are entrusted with safeguarding democratic principles and public values while improving the quality of life of all citizens.

Generally, public reform initiatives focus on the formal, rational, structural and technical aspects of public institutions – with less attention given to the human side. In contrast, this paper sought to understand the complex and dynamic inter-relationships between the multidimensional behavioural, social and cultural domains that characterise workplace realities and their influence on public servants' well-being and institutional performance. To achieve this understanding, this qualitative study took a holistic and integrated approach to examine the different realms of consciousness that traverse a provincial government in South Africa.

The findings reveal complex intersectionality and a dialectical relationship between different domains of workplace reality in mediating well-being and performance. The findings have epistemological and methodological implications for scholarship, notably in HRM, and policy and practice implications for public policymakers and administrators. Further research is warranted into new approaches and models to public governance and leadership thinking and practice, particularly in eudaimonic well-being given the drastic negative consequences of psychological functioning and its antecedents in the public service. As well-being is considered a

key pillar of humanistic management (Pirson, 2021), scholars strongly call for HRM research, policy and practice that give greater priority to promoting the achievement of the six dimensions of eudaimonic well-being (Ryff, 2013) in pursuit of employees' personal growth and organisational excellence. After all, the prosperity of a nation is inherently linked to the well-being of public servants and public institutions.

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Author's contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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