

The perceived fairness and consistency of disciplinary practices in selected police stations



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Orientation: The fair and consistent application of disciplinary policies and procedures in government institutions is vital to nurture professional, ethical and bias-free workspace. This further circumvents unequal treatment in the workplace which may lead to aggrieved civil servants and a hostile work environment.

Research purpose: This study evaluated the perceived fairness and consistency of the disciplinary practices within the South African Police Service.

Motivation for the study: Literature has established that employees of the Police Service and their representatives often felt that the disciplinary actions and procedures applied by the organisation were biased and failed to accomplish the essential goals of objectivity and consistency.

Research approach/design and method: Quantitative research approach was employed in this study. Closed-ended Likert-scale questionnaire was administered to 286 employees of the South African Police Service based in the Tshwane District. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics.

Main findings: The findings revealed that employees from the four police stations held a general perception that the disciplinary practices of South African Police Service (SAPS) are applied unfairly and inconsistently. Employees from Sunnyside Police Station held a more different perception as compared to employees from Pretoria West and Brooklyn Police Stations.

Practical/managerial implications: Disciplinary policies that embrace and foster principles of uniform conduct across, thus improving employees' morale and maintaining a healthy working environment are vital.

Contribution/value-add: A plethora of research has been conducted exclusively on the effectiveness of disciplinary procedures. Therefore, this study has uniquely provided significant insights into the partiality of disciplinary practices.

Keywords: consistency; fairness; justice; police stations; South African Police Service.

Introduction

At the heart of every government institution is the goal of effective and efficient service delivery to the public. The extent of such service delivery can only be realised through employees' behaviour that conforms to the behavioural and performance standards established by the organisation. It is within the same vein that every government institution is required to have in place disciplinary codes and procedures to cultivate within the public servants ethical and professional behaviour that will ensure effective and efficient service delivery (Factsheet, 2021). The South African Police Service leadership experiences difficulties in applying disciplinary measures. While there are laws and policies in the organisation, implementation has been a challenge. The disciplinary procedures implemented by the SAPS department had always been an area of great concern for all the parties involved in the process, in that the management was frustrated by the time it took for the allegations of misconduct to be investigated and finalised. Meanwhile, the employees and their representatives believed that the disciplinary procedures implemented by the SAPS department failed to accomplish the essential goals of consistency and objectivity (Stephens, 2019).

Discipline is one of the most important elements in organisations (Okolie & Udom, 2019, p. 91). Discipline is used to rectify behaviour that opposes the organisational policies and regulations and it helps to maintain labour relations in the workplace (Otto & Ukpere, 2020, p. 214). Discipline

remains a linchpin of any organisation's performance and development (Maryani et al., 2021). Well-disciplined workforce implies self-control, orderliness, good behaviour and obedience to the rules and instructions of the employer (Dhillon et al., 2021). Therefore, discipline plays a crucial role in creating disciplined and productive employees (Simorangkir et al., 2021).

Within the SAPS, the ill-discipline of police officials has been attributed to issues that relate to the injustice of the labour practice by the police departments that includes favouritism and corruption, consequently leading to poor police performance, engagement in criminal activities and undermining the organisation code of conduct (Obonyo, 2019). Further, Mokgolo and Dikotla (2021) observed that the modern-day discipline is applied by organisational leaders solely to further their personal agendas. Hence, disciplinary issues have been handled in a way that creates conflict and hatred in most organisations (Mokgolo & Dikotla, 2021).

This study is intended to investigate the perceived fairness and consistency of disciplinary practices at four police stations within the Tshwane District SAPS. In essence, the study evaluated the employee's perception in relation to the fairness and consistency of disciplinary practices in SAPS. Following this introduction, the article will present a review of the literature, followed by the theoretical framework upon which the research question hinges; this will be followed by the research methods that were used to collect and analyse the data, then a presentation of the results, then a discussion of the results and how they link to the literature, and finally, we shall present a conclusion drawn from the results and areas for further research.

Literature review

Fairness in disciplinary practices

The rationale of the workplace disciplinary code is to ensure that employees are not subjected to disciplinary processes at the behest of impetuous commanders (Bendix, 2019). Moreover, Shilumani (2020) states that in order to achieve desirable reliability in the application of disciplinary penalties, employees must be made aware of the consequences of the transgression of the rules. Therefore, organisations must put in place codes that spell out common offences and possible disciplinary actions. Because discipline cannot be randomly applied whenever an employee transgresses a rule, a disciplinary code is necessary as it categorises the transgressions of disciplinary rules according to their state of seriousness (Bendix, 2019). The disciplinary code of conduct can be defined as an official paper that prescribes to employees the established principles by which they must abide (Okolie & Udom, 2019). The manner in which employees are expected to behave towards their colleagues and the organisation at large as directed by the organisation's set of values and rules is usually set out in the code of conduct (Akosa et al., 2020). Indeed, Bendix (2019) posits that such

established codes bestow legitimacy on the disciplining of employees. The disciplinary codes must be straightforward and constructive statements that highlight the behaviour required from employees (Shilumani, 2020). This will enable organisations to instil ethical behaviour and enhance transparency, integrity and responsibility (Xin et al., 2021).

In the context of South African workplace laws, employers are bound to develop a system of progressive classified disciplinary measures that will in diverse ways attempt to correct employees' behaviour prior to declaring the employment relationship as being intolerable and impossible to continue. A disciplinary procedure may be defined as a detailed process that specifies what principles, policies and actions an employee will be subjected to should he or she commit an offence or fail to observe the established disciplinary rules (Shilumani, 2020). Okolie and Udom (2019) outline the general progressive disciplinary procedure that organisations usually adopt in case an employee engages in misconduct or transgresses the organisational rules. This process begins with issuing an informal warning to an employee who has committed a first or less serious offence. The employee's immediate commander is responsible for the administration of this warning. In case an employee has committed a first but serious offence or has repeated less serious offences, a formal written warning will be issued to the employee. If an employee continually fails to conform to or observe the established organisational rules, further disciplinary action will be applied, and such disciplinary action may entail dismissal. The disciplinary procedure followed may vary from one organisation to another depending on the size, complexity and organisational policies.

Managers have the responsibility to ensure that both current employees and new incumbents are continuously made aware of the organisation's rules through orientation and induction programmes (Otto & Ukpere, 2020). Stephens (2019) agrees that to ensure that employees not only know what is expected from them by their organisation but also have the skills required to meet such expectations, it is of paramount importance that the organisation institutes in-service training. Indeed, the code of conduct can be effectively enforced through training. The employees' day-to-day conduct must be guided through in-service training that enables them to embrace the code of conduct (Akosa et al., 2020). Furthermore, managers must also be trained in all the appropriate and essential aspects of handling discipline in the workplace (Okolie & Udom, 2019). Given this discussion, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H1: There is fairness in the manner in which discipline is applied at the four police stations within SAPS.

Consistency in disciplinary practices

The Code of Good Practice requires every employer to have in place disciplinary principles that instil uniformity in conduct across the organisation. Furthermore, Item 7(b)(iii) of the Code of Good Practice states that such disciplinary

principles must be applied consistently to ensure that fairness prevails in the working environment. According to Ehlers (2020), the principles of fairness and consistency are of paramount importance in an employment relationship, as these two principles empower the employer to curb the possibility of unwanted conflicts and dissatisfaction among the employees. Moreover, inconsistent application of disciplinary rules may confuse employees about the expected conduct in the workplace. Obonyo (2019) attributes the police officers' ill-discipline to issues that relate to unjust labour practices by the police departments, such as favouritism and corruption, which lead to poor performance and engagement in criminal activities and undermine the organisation's code of conduct. According to Mokgolo and Dikotla (2021), modern-day discipline is applied by organisational leaders solely to further their personal agendas. This notion is based on the observation that disciplinary measures are applied in a biased manner and usually depend on the closeness of an individual to the organisation.

Line managers often adopt the practical rather than the theoretical approach to dealing with employees' discipline, with their decisions based on instinctive feelings and gut reactions rather than the established procedure (Saundry et al., 2021). Indeed, line managers in their capacity as experts in their area of specialty may not be well informed on matters involving human relations; therefore, the HR function must play a supportive role in assisting managers to effectively implement workplace discipline and deal with matters that emanate from it (Kubheka, 2018). This is simply based on the fact that HR practitioners have a huge influence on managers' consistency and compliance with the established legal framework when making disciplinary decisions. According to Knight (2016), there are two types of inconsistencies that can be found in disciplinary proceedings: historical and contemporaneous inconsistencies.

Historical inconsistency

According to Grogan (2020, p. 211), historical inconsistency occurs when an employer finds one employee guilty of misconduct that he/she has tolerated from other employees in the past. Indeed, Du Plessis and Fouche (2020) state that similar cases must be handled in a similar manner. However, Bendix (2019) argues that consistency should not be assumed to mean similar sanctions but rather similar treatment. The sanction imposed will depend on the merits of the disciplinary transgression committed.

Historical inconsistency was established in the case of *Cape Town City Council v Mashito and others*, in which the respondent, Mr Nongqokwana, was dismissed on allegations that he had abandoned his ambulance personnel duties when he organised other employees to gather in a kitchen to raise their concerns. According to the employer, the personnel had acted irresponsibly and were found guilty of misconduct and dismissed. However, the court established a historical inconsistency in that an employee at Mitchells Plain Station had previously been given a final warning for similar

misconduct, while Mr Nongqokwana had been dismissed. Therefore, the court ordered the reinstatement of the applicant with a final warning as a sanction imposed on employees of the Mitchells Plain Station.

Moreover, in *Westonaria Local Municipality v SALGBC*, an employee was found guilty of fraud and dismissed from the municipality. This was after the municipality had discovered that the employee did not possess the requisite Grade 12 for the position she was employed in. However, when the employee challenged the fairness of the dismissal, the municipality in defence argued that a previous employee had not been dismissed because she had entered into a plea-bargaining agreement to testify in an alleged case of corruption against another employee. The Labour Court (LC) focused on the historic attitude of the employer. According to the court, the employer had failed to consider the principle of consistency when determining the penalty for the presently accused employee. Similarly, a historic inconsistency was established in *Chetty v Toyota South Africa*, where an employee was dismissed for racial utterances while the employee who had previously committed similar misconduct was only issued with a warning. Indeed, in a case involving the *Minister of Correctional Services v Mthembu NO*, the court ruled in favour of a warden who had been dismissed while the employer had taken more lenient disciplinary measures against offenders in the past that had exposed themselves to similar activities of corruption.

Contemporaneous inconsistency

According to Shabangu et al. (2022), contemporaneous inconsistency occurs when dissimilar sanctions are imposed on two or more employees who have committed similar disciplinary transgressions in approximately the same period. Indeed, it will be an inconsistent approach to impose a penalty on one employee while a blind eye is turned to other employees who have committed a similar transgression. Moreover, Shabangu et al. (2022) argue that an employer will be guilty of contemporaneous inconsistency where individual circumstances are considered during a decision to impose a sanction for misconduct that was collectively committed by a number of employees in the same period. Bendix (2019) states that these individual circumstances relate to an employee's length of service, disciplinary records, previous performance and position within the organisation.

Contemporaneous inconsistency was established in the case of *CEPPWAWU & others v Metrofile (Pty) Ltd*, in which the dismissal of one employee who had obstructed entry to a branch during industrial action was found to be unfair by the court, as other employees from a different branch were issued with a final written warning for committing a similar transgression. Moreover, in *Edgars Consolidated Ltd (Edcon) v CCMA*, one employee was dismissed for contravening the company's regulations when sending an email to an external person with racist content. However, the employee challenged the dismissal on the grounds that the employer

had failed to initiate disciplinary measures against the employee who had originally sent the email to the latter. Indeed, the LC had established that both the employees were guilty of misconduct and the employer was guilty of inconsistency without a valid reason for his failure to initiate disciplinary steps against the other employee.

Another case of contemporaneous inconsistency was established in a case involving *NUM v Free State Consolidated Gold Mine (Operations) Ltd*, in which employees were found guilty of misconduct after having engaged in a national strike and were all charged with absence from work without permission. However, the employer only dismissed employees who had had warnings. According to the court, employees individually made decisions to participate in collective action. Therefore, the misconduct committed by dismissed employees was similar to those committed by the employees who had been given warnings. As a result, the court established that it was unfair and inequitable for the employer to apply selective dismissal for the misconduct that was collectively committed. Similarly, in *SACTWU v Novel Spinners*, employees collectively refused to work for a period of 3 h and were charged with absenteeism.

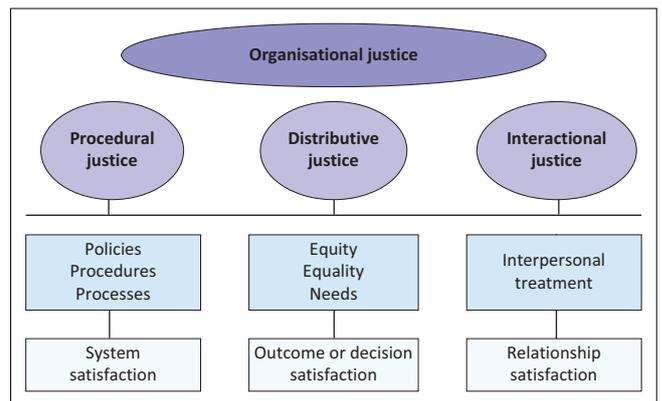
However, the employer only dismissed employees who had final warnings on their disciplinary records. Lastly, in *SATAWU v Ikhwezi Bus Service (Pty) Ltd*, the court refused to consider the employer's reasons for not dismissing bus drivers who had no previous disciplinary records. In its defence, the company argued that they could not afford to dismiss all the bus drivers. Therefore, dismissal was only imposed on those with previous disciplinary records. However, according to the court, previous disciplinary transgressions of individual employees could not be used to justify a differentiation in the penalty for collective misconduct. Given this background, the following hypothesis was developed:

H2: There is no consistency in the application of discipline among four police stations within SAPS.

Theoretical framework

Organisational justice theory

This study draws from the organisational justice theory. Organisational justice can be defined as the employees' perceptions of the morality and fairness of the managers' behaviour (Malyon, 2019). According to this theory, employees perceive fairness as an indicator of justice, and unfair treatment of employees can trigger unwanted workplace behaviours that include tensions, grievances, absenteeism and social loafing (Ehlers, 2020). Organisational justice researchers agree that managers' behaviour must meet three principles to be considered fair and ethical (Coetzee, 2005; Godbless & Goddey, 2020; Jameel et al., 2020; Virtanen & Elovainio, 2018). These three principles – procedural, distributive and interactional justice – are illustrated in Figure 1.



Source: Coetzee, M. (2005). *The fairness of affirmative action: An organizational justice perspective*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Pretoria

FIGURE 1: Organisational justice.

Procedural justice

Procedural justice is based on the impartiality that is adopted in the principles and processes that are applied by organisations to reach certain decisions (Virtanen & Elovainio, 2018). Positive behaviour is triggered when employees are of the opinion that the decisions that are made by the management are unbiased (Malik et al., 2019). Indeed, Ehlers (2020) argues that employees will limit their work output and disrupt work processes if they perceive forms of subjectivity in the decision-making processes. A previous study conducted in the Police Service has established that employees of the Police Service and their representatives often feel that the disciplinary procedures that are applied by the organisation are biased and fail to accomplish the essential goals of fairness and consistency – considering hearsay instead of facts when determining actions that must be instituted in instances of misconduct (Stephens, 2019).

Distributive justice

In contrast to the definition of procedural justice, the principle of distributive justice relates to the impartiality observed in the outcomes of the decisions reached by the organisation (Godbless & Goddey, 2020). Furthermore, distributive justice is concerned with the rule of equity: individuals usually compare the outcomes of the decisions taken against them with those of others within the workplace to determine fairness in decision-making (Jameel et al., 2020). Previous research by Obonyo (2019) has attributed the police officers' ill-discipline to issues that relate to unjust labour practices by the police departments, such as favouritism and corruption, which lead to poor performance and engagement in criminal activities and undermine the organisation's code of conduct.

Interactional justice

This principle relates to fairness in individual treatment during decision-making (Jameel et al., 2020). Employees pay attention to the manner in which they receive feedback, particularly from their managers. Indeed, employees appreciate an organisation that treats them as valuable members, demonstrates its commitment to act in a manner that is beneficial to both parties and affords employees the opportunity to express their opinions (Fouquereau et al., 2020).

Indeed, previous research has established that circumstances like management arrogance, the absence of employee grievance management tools, the lack of appropriate communication channels, the misuse of employees by the organisation and poor leadership styles also trigger behaviour from the employees that transgress the organisational rules (Sishi, 2022).

Employees' reaction to perceived organisational injustice

This study observes that employees will exhibit counter-behaviour in reaction to the perceived organisational injustices; this can manifest in multiple ways, such as destruction, sabotage, absenteeism and theft, which will eventually threaten the existence of the organisation (Khattak et al., 2019). This entails that in response to perceived organisational injustices, employees will cautiously engage in transgression of ethical rules with the intention to collapse the overall organisational system (Khattak et al., 2019). The perceived justice in organisational processes and principles evokes the spirit of fairness and equity in the employment relationship and the parties will have a relationship that is based on trust and honesty (Ehlers, 2020). Contrary to that, the perception of injustice in an employment relationship may trigger acts of misconduct from the employees, acts that deviate from the organisation's disciplinary rules. These negative outcomes will therefore require the organisation to institute disciplinary processes against the offenders. However, this can be avoided if fairness and consistency are maintained when applying organisational processes and principles to reach decisions that affect others (Otto & Ukpere, 2020).

Research method

Research approach

The study adopted a quantitative research approach that focused on individual conduct that could simply be measured or counted (Cozby & Bates 2015). These measurements which were produced through a quantitative approach were advantageous to this study to accurately establish differences in the respondents' perceptions of the trends and patterns of an investigated social phenomenon (Bryman, 2012).

Research design

The study was further conducted in a descriptive cross-sectional research design in which the data were collected only once from the four police stations based in Tshwane District.

Sample

The study targeted a combined total number of 1186 employees from four identified police stations that are based in the Tshwane District, South African Police Service. The researcher adopted a probability sampling strategy, whereby stratified random sampling was utilised to sample a total of about 286 employees from the four police stations. The sample size was calculated using the formula $f = n/N$ (Bless

et al., 2014) to get each stratum from four different identified police stations. The employees had to satisfy certain inclusion criteria in order to be considered for the study. These criteria included employees with 2 years of tenure and above; employees who are permanently employed; and in a case of a supervisor, one must have 2 years of experience in the supervisory role.

Research instrument

A Likert-type questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument for the study, with 24 closed-ended questions and multiple-choice answers from which respondents could choose their answers. The questionnaire comprised two sections. Section A contained questions regarding biographical data, which assisted in describing the sample. Section B contained questions on disciplinary practices, which enabled the researcher to operationalise the perception of the respondent in relation to the investigated phenomenon. The researcher calculated Cronbach's alpha that generated the correlation coefficient of 0.9794 which is above the thumb rule of 0.7 and which indicated high internal reliability of the research instrument.

Statistical analysis

The study adopted the two nonparametric tests – the Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests – to assess the median differences between groups' categories and the perceived practice. These nonparametric tests were further applied to determine the level of significant difference between two or more independent variables. The statistically significant differences were assessed through *p*-values and at a 5% level where a *p*-value less than or equal to 0.05 suggests enough evidence to conclude that there is a statistically significant difference between the groups of study and the outcomes (Bless et al., 2014, p. 301).

Ethical considerations

Formal written permission was granted by the Provincial Commissioner Gauteng SAPS for the study to be conducted within the research setting. Ethical clearance was issued by the Research Ethics Committee of Tshwane University of Technology prior to the commencement of the study (reference: FCRE2022/FR/03/001-MS(3)). The respondents signed the informed consent form in which they were assured about the principles of confidentiality and voluntary which were incorporated in this research study.

Results

Analysis of demographic profile

As depicted in Table 1, 51.05% of the sample represented the female gender, while 48.95% represented the male gender. Moreover, it is evident in Table 1 that the highest response rate was between the ages of 41 years and 50 years which represented 40.91% of the sample, while the lowest response rate was between the ages of 21 years and 30 years which

TABLE 1: Biographical features of the sample.

Characteristic	<i>N</i>	%
Gender		
Male	140	48.95
Female	146	51.05
Age group (in years)		
21–30	30	10.49
31–40	82	28.67
41–50	117	40.91
51–65	57	19.93
Educational level		
Grade 12 or matric level or less	124	43.36
Diploma	95	33.22
Degree or BTech	45	15.73
Postgraduate or honours	14	4.90
Master's degree	4	1.40
Other	4	1.40
Occupational level		
Constable	41	14.34
Sergeant	93	32.52
Warrant officer	37	12.94
Captain	44	15.38
Lieutenant colonel	27	9.44
Colonel	3	1.05
Other	41	14.34
Years of experience		
2 and above	9	3.15
3–5	19	6.64
6–10	29	10.14
11–20	137	47.90
21 and above	92	32.17

represented 10.49% of the sample. Table 1 further indicates that the majority of respondents had Grade 12 qualification which represented 43.36%, followed by 33.22% of respondents who are in possession of the diploma. Therefore, Grade 12 as the requirement in policing and as the education category that represented the highest percentage (43.36%) has proved that the four police stations based in the Tshwane District SAPS considered candidates who are qualified.

Another highest response rate comes from the employees with the rank of sergeant which represented 32.52% of the sample. Moreover, the demographic results further revealed that the respondents of employees with 2 years or less of experience provided a low response rate of 3.15%, while the respondents who had 11 years to 20 years of experience provided the highest response rate of 47.90%. This response rate has satisfied the sample inclusion criteria which requested employees with at least 2 years and above of experience.

Fairness in disciplinary practices

The results in Table 2 show that the respondents held a relatively positive response to this question ($\bar{x} = 3.12, s = 1.46$) and perceived the truth of the statement at around 62%. This confirms that there is a fair distribution of scores. A total of 79 (27.62%) respondents held a disagreeing view pertaining to this statement. Moreover, 207 (72.37%) respondents tend to agree with the view that there is a fair application of disciplinary practices in the SAPS. Therefore, based on the

TABLE 2: Distribution of responses for items relating to fairness.

Response option	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
Definitely false	22	7.69	7.69
Mostly false	22	7.69	15.38
More false than true	35	12.24	27.62
More true than false	81	28.32	55.94
Mostly true	72	25.17	81.12
Definitely true	54	18.88	100.00

TABLE 3: Results of Kruskal–Wallis test in terms of police stations and fairness of discipline.

Police stations	<i>N</i>	Mean of rank	<i>df</i>	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Brooklyn	54	8609.00	3	12.864	0.0049
Pretoria Central	118	16510.00	-	-	-
Pretoria West	45	7676.00	-	-	-
Sunnyside	69	8246.00	-	-	-

df, degrees of freedom.

above analysis, it can be argued that the respondents in this study perceived the disciplinary practices of SAPS to be generally fair. Indeed, the literature confirms that when there is perceived justice in the organisation processes and principles, such justice will evoke the spirit of fairness and equity in the employment relationship and the parties will have a relationship that is based on trust and honesty (Ehlers, 2020, p.4). However, literature further reports that disciplinary issues have been handled in a way that creates conflict and hatred in most organisations (Mokgolo & Dikotla, 2021). Hence, the inferential statistics of Kruskal–Wallis tests were performed to measure the fairness of disciplinary practices from employees' perceptions based in different police stations.

As depicted in Table 3, the Kruskal–Wallis test was performed and the results of the analysis yielded a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 12.864, p < 0.05$). The results established that the employees from the four police stations had different perceptions with regard to the practice of fair discipline in the SAPS. Indeed, literature has shown that negative discipline, with its punitive nature, does not guarantee behavioural change in those who have deviated from the required standards (Rodgers, 2018). Moreover, Helfers et al. (2020) further argued that negative discipline that values a punitive approach in managing employees' behaviour can trigger in the affected employees a feeling of frustration and perceived injustice about the organisation's disciplinary procedures.

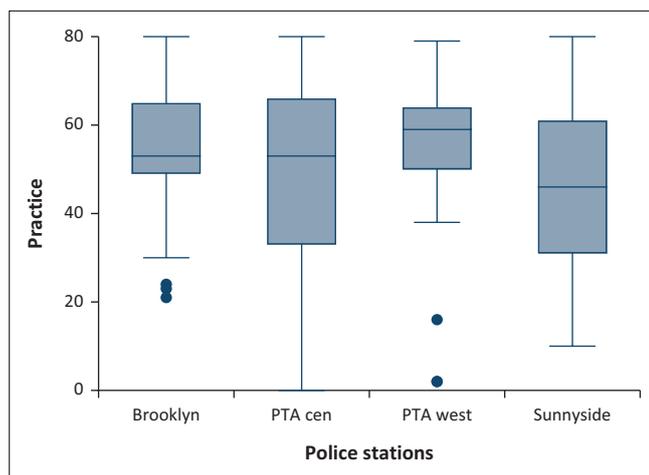
Therefore, Dunn's multiple comparison test was performed to indicate which police stations differed significantly, as depicted in Table 4. Statistically significant relationships are highlighted.

The results in Table 4 indicated that there was a significant difference in the perceptions of fair disciplinary practice in the SAPS between the police stations of Sunnyside and Brooklyn ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, the pairwise comparison results revealed significant differences between the police stations of Sunnyside and Pretoria West ($p < 0.05$). Moreover, the results of pairwise multiple comparisons suggest that

TABLE 4: Results of Dunn’s pairwise comparison test on police stations.

Police stations → ↓	Brooklyn	Pretoria Central	Pretoria West
Pretoria Central	1.436383 0.4527	- -	- -
Pretoria West	-0.668278 1.0000	-2.116829 0.1028	- -
Sunnyside	2.657476 0.0236	1.628807 0.3101	3.223837 0.0038

Statistically significant relationships are bolded.



PTA cen, Pretoria Central; PTA west, Pretoria West.

FIGURE 2: The differences in perceptions on the fairness of the SAPS disciplinary procedure among different police stations.

Sunnyside was the police station that tended to differ most from other police stations (Brooklyn and Pretoria West) with regard to the perception of fair disciplinary practices in the SAPS. These results confirm the findings of literature by Otto and Ukpere (2020, p. 217) that have argued that effective management of workplace discipline has been a challenge in organisations and the primary source of conflict at work. Notwithstanding that, the findings of literature by Mokgolo and Dikotla (2021) have further argued that disciplinary issues have been handled in a way that creates conflict and hatred in most organisations.

The box plot in Figure 2 shows a significant difference ($\chi^2 = 12.864, p < 0.05$) in terms of the Kruskal–Wallis test for differences between the perceptions of different police stations with regard to the SAPS disciplinary practices. Whiskers represent minimum and maximum values, while the boxes show 25% – 75% data ranges. The horizontal lines within the boxes depict the median, and the points outside the Whiskers denote the outliers. A box plot for the Brooklyn Police Station is positively skewed, and the perception median score is not different from the perception median value for Pretoria Central SAPS. A box plot for Pretoria West Police Station is negatively skewed. The box plot for Sunnyside Police Station is symmetric as it indicates no skew: the median is in the centre of the data set and the Whiskers are of equal length (upper quartile is equal to lower quartile). The differences between Sunnyside and Pretoria West and Sunnyside and Brooklyn can be seen clearly through the box plot.

TABLE 5: Distribution of responses for items relating to consistency.

Response option	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
Definitely false	22	7.69	7.69
Mostly false	23	8.04	15.73
More false than true	42	14.69	30.42
More true than false	77	26.92	57.34
Mostly true	75	26.22	83.57
Definitely true	47	16.43	100.00

TABLE 6: Results of Kruskal–Wallis test in terms of police stations and consistency of discipline.

Police stations	N	Mean of rank	df	χ^2	p
Brooklyn	54	8536.00	3	8.569	0.05
Pretoria Central	118	16901.50	-	-	-
Pretoria West	45	7195.50	-	-	-
Sunnyside	69	8408.00	-	-	-

df, degrees of freedom.

Consistency in disciplinary practices

The results in Table 5 depict that the respondents held a relatively negative response to this question ($\bar{x} = 3.05, s = 1.44$) and perceived the truth of the statement at around 61%. This has illustrated varying perceptions pertaining to this statement. Although 199 (69.57%) respondents agree that there is consistency in the application of disciplinary practices in the SAPS, almost 87 (30.42%) respondents hold a different view, which suggests disagreeing with the statement that there is consistency in the application of disciplinary practices. Therefore, the above statistics illustrate erratic views pertaining to these statements. Indeed, these erratic views were confirmed by literature that argues that employees of the SAPS and their representatives often feel that the disciplinary practices applied by the organisation are biased and have failed to accomplish the essential goal of objectivity and consistency (Stephens, 2019, p. 1).

As depicted in Table 6, the Kruskal–Wallis test was performed and the results of analysis yielded a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 8.569, p < 0.05$). The results have shown that the employees from the four police stations shared different perceptions with regard to the practice of consistency in the SAPS disciplinary practices. Indeed, the literature argues that issues such as favouritism and corruption which are related to unjust labour practices contribute to police officers’ ill-discipline (Obonyo, 2019). Meanwhile, the findings of literature by Mokgolo and Dikotla (2021) have further argued that modern-day discipline is applied by organisational leaders solely to further their personal agendas. This notion was based on the observation that disciplinary practices are applied in a biased manner and usually depend on the closeness of an individual to the organisation.

Therefore, Dunn’s multiple comparison test was performed to indicate which police stations differed significantly, as depicted in Table 7. Statistically significant relationships are highlighted.

The results in Table 7 indicated that there was a significant difference in the perceptions of consistency of disciplinary practice in the SAPS between the police stations of Sunnyside

and Brooklyn ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, the pairwise comparison results revealed significant differences between the police stations of Sunnyside and Pretoria West ($p < 0.05$). Moreover, the results of pairwise multiple comparisons suggest that Sunnyside Police Station tended to differ most from other police stations (Brooklyn and Pretoria West) with regard to the perception of consistency of disciplinary practices in the SAPS. These results confirm the findings of literature that argue that the SAPS leadership experiences difficulties in applying disciplinary practices consistently. While there are laws and policies in the organisation, implementation has been a challenge.

The box plot in Figure 3 shows a significant difference ($\chi^2 = 8.569$, $p < 0.05$) in terms of the Kruskal–Wallis test for differences between the perceptions of different police stations with regard to the consistency of the SAPS disciplinary practices. Whiskers represent minimum and maximum values, while the boxes show 25% – 75% data ranges. The horizontal lines within the boxes depict the median, and the points outside the Whiskers denote the outliers. A box plot for the Brooklyn Police Station is positively skewed, and the perception median score is not different from the perception median value for Pretoria Central SAPS. A box plot for Pretoria West Police Station is negatively skewed, and the perception median score is different from the perception median score of Sunnyside SAPS. The box plot for Sunnyside Police Station indicates a negative skew: the Whiskers are not of equal length (the

upper quartile is smaller than the lower quartile). The differences between Sunnyside and Pretoria West and Sunnyside and Brooklyn can be seen clearly through the box plot.

Discussion of findings

The analysis of data illustrated that disciplinary practices in the SAPS are generally perceived to be significantly different. This suggests that the practice of discipline in the SAPS should be regarded as a problematic management area, which requires management's serious attention. This significant difference in the perception of the SAPS disciplinary practices was observed through a thorough analysis of the following objectives:

Fairness of disciplinary practices

The inferential statistics of the Kruskal–Wallis tests were performed to determine employees' perceptions of fairness in the disciplinary practices between the four police stations. The results of the analysis yielded statistically significant differences with regard to the perceptions of fair application of disciplinary practices ($\chi^2 = 12.864$, $p < 0.05$). The results establish that the employees from the four police stations shared different perceptions with regard to the practice of fairness in the disciplinary practices of SAPS.

Moreover, Dunn's multiple comparison tests were performed to indicate which police stations differed significantly. The results of pairwise multiple comparisons indicated that Sunnyside had the most police stations that tended to differ from other stations (Brooklyn and Pretoria West) in the perceptions of fairness of disciplinary practices in the SAPS. These results confirmed that there is perceived lack of fairness in the disciplinary practices of the SAPS. Therefore, on the basis of the results depicted in Table 3 which yielded a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 12.864$, $p < 0.05$), the study rejects Hypothesis 1, which argues that there is fairness in the disciplinary practices of the SAPS. Moreover, these results have validated the findings of the literature which found that employees of the SAPS and their representatives have long time felt that the disciplinary actions and procedures as applied by the organisation are biased and failed to accomplish the essential goals of objectivity and consistency (Stephens, 2019). However, the literature argues that an organisation must adopt a positive and fair approach to maintaining employee discipline as an effort to demonstrate its intention to rehabilitate employees' deviant behaviour rather than to punish such behaviour (Rodgers, 2018). The findings of this study have contrastingly established that the SAPS disciplinary practices have been handled in a manner that has triggered employees' feelings of frustration and perceived unfairness about the organisation's disciplinary procedures.

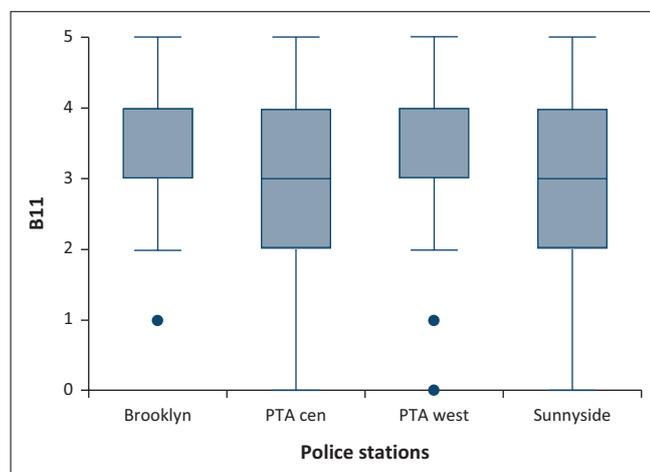
Consistency of disciplinary practices

The inferential statistics of the Kruskal–Wallis test were used to determine employees' perceptions of consistency in the

TABLE 7: Results of Dunn's pairwise comparison test on police stations.

Police stations → ↓	Brooklyn	Pretoria Central	Pretoria West
Pretoria Central	1.118296 0.7903	-	-
Pretoria West	-0.111992 1.0000	-1.177684 0.7168	-
Sunnyside	2.467883 0.0408	1.746347 0.2423	2.458071 0.0419

Statistically significant relationships are bolded.



PTA cen, Pretoria Central; PTA west, Pretoria West.

FIGURE 3: Differences in perceptions of consistent discipline among the different police stations.

SAPS disciplinary practices. The empirical results have established significant differences in the perceptions of consistent application of discipline between the four police stations in SAPS ($\chi^2 = 8.569, p < 0.05$). This entails that employees from the four police stations held a view that discipline is not applied consistently in the SAPS.

Therefore, this study supports Hypothesis 2 on the basis of the results of Kruskal–Wallis tests which are shown in Table 6 that yielded statistically significant differences in the employees' perceptions of consistent application of discipline between the four police stations ($\chi^2 = 8.569, p < 0.05$). These results validate the findings of the study by Saundry et al. (2021), which has indicated that line managers often adopt the practical rather than the theoretical approach to dealing with employees' discipline, with their decisions based on instinctive feelings and gut reactions rather than the established procedure. As such these results confirm the findings of literature which have reported that modern-day discipline is applied by organisational leaders solely to further their personal agendas, on the basis that disciplinary measures are applied in a biased manner and usually depend on the closeness of an individual to the organisation.

Moreover, the results of this study have established that although literature argues in terms of the Code of Good Practice, every employer is required to have in place disciplinary principles that instil uniformity across the organisation. Fundamentally because the principle of consistency empowers the employer to curb the possibility of unwanted conflicts and dissatisfaction among the employees (Ehlers, 2020). The results of this study have incongruently established that the SAPS disciplinary practices have been handled in a way that creates conflict and hatred within the organisation.

The results of this study could further suggest that both historical and contemporaneous inconsistencies are not maintained when discipline is applied. The study conducted by Shabangu et al. (2022) reports that aspects such as 'dislike' and 'favourites' may cause inconsistency in the application of the disciplinary procedures. The study further reported that organisational leaders usually have their own favourites in the organisation who are mostly treated differently from other employees. This entails that an employee who is not a 'favourite' will suffer punishment for every error or act which deviates from the organisational procedure. Meanwhile, a 'disliked' employee will be disciplined for misconduct, while a 'liked' employee would not be disciplined. Consequently, this has led to organisations suffering serious litigations which range from damage payments imposed on employers to fines and penalties which are imposed by the courts. For instance, in the case of Cape Town City Council v Mashito and others, the court ordered the reinstatement of the applicant with a final warning, whereas in the case of SATAWU v Ikhwezi Bus Service (Pty) Ltd, the court refused to consider the employer's reasons for not dismissing bus drivers who had

no previous disciplinary records. The court held the position that previous disciplinary transgressions of individual employees could not be used to justify a differentiation in a penalty for collective misconduct. As a result, the court ordered the reinstatement of the employees with compensation. Therefore, organisations are bound to ensure that historic and contemporaneous consistency is maintained in the application of disciplinary procedures.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, firstly, it is recommended that proper employee grievance management tools and appropriate communication channels to demonstrate an interest in employee circumstances and concerns be put in place. Secondly, managers must at all times apply the organisation discipline fairly and consistently to enhance the employee's perceived justice in the organisational processes. Based on the results of the Kruskal–Wallis test, management of SAPS should revisit the disciplinary policy and incorporate within it principles of uniformity of conduct across the organisation and ensure that the disciplinary practices are applied fairly and consistently in all the working environments.

Practical implications

The results of the study have necessitated the revision of discipline policy by the organisational management. The management must ensure that the discipline policy incorporates the principles that foster uniform conduct in its different working environments. The management must further ensure that such disciplinary principles are applied fairly and consistently across all working environments. There should be a standardised form of discipline across all divisions, provinces, districts and police stations in order to avoid the triggering employee's perceptions of unfair and inconsistent application of disciplinary practice, which may further confuse employees about the expected conduct in the workplace.

Limitations of the study

The questionnaire method failed to collect data on the feelings of employees in the organisation. This entails that no conclusions on feelings were made; therefore, further qualitative or mixed research is subsequently recommended. Moreover, the data were collected at a single point in time (cross-sectional), which raises concerns about whether the findings would still be the same had the data been collected over a long period (longitudinal).

Recommendations for future research

This study has without any doubt successfully identified the significant difference in the perception of employees with regard to the fairness of disciplinary practices within the SAPS. However, additional qualitative or mixed-method research would be beneficial to the research arena in which this research should focus on identifying employees' feelings

and job satisfaction in relation to the perceptions of unfair and inconsistent discipline. Moreover, another research that would focus on the factors that contribute to the perceived significant differences in the perception of disciplinary practices would also be beneficial to the research fraternity.

Conclusions

The fundamental objective of this study was to investigate the perceived fairness and consistency of the disciplinary practices at Tshwane District office within the SAPS. Analysis of data from a questionnaire survey provided proof that disciplinary practices in the SAPS are generally perceived to be significantly different in terms of fairness and consistency. This suggests that the practice of discipline in SAPS should be regarded as a problematic management area, which demands further investigation.

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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

T.A.M. conducted the research study as part of his Master's degree. He wrote the first draft. T.L.N. acted as the supervisor, and reviewed and refined the draft. M.M.M. acted as a co-supervisor.

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