

Unlocking mental well-being: The role of workplace social support and organisational justice in the public service


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Orientation: Public service employees are an important conduit through which service delivery occurs. Yet, South African public service employees face challenges that affect how they work.

Research purpose: This study sought to determine the relationship between public service employee's mental health accounting for the role of organisational justice and workplace social support.

Motivation for the study: Calls exist to understand issues of mental health within the confines of the organisation.

Research approach/design and method: A survey approach utilising a convenience sample of 289 public service employees as respondents was utilised. The location of the study was the Eastern Cape province, South Africa.

Main findings: The findings show that workplace social support has a direct and positive relationship with employee mental health. Organisational justice has no significant relationship with employee mental health. Workplace social support was found to fully mediate the relationship between organisational justice and employee mental health.

Practical/managerial implications: Strategies can be put in place that inform the promotion of mental health with the public service. These include the need for support services to promote mental health to address organisational issues that impede the pathway of such interventions.

Contribution/value-add: The findings proffer useful precursors to interventions that address the challenge of mental health.

Keywords: mental health; workplace social support; organisational justice; employees; public service; South Africa.

Introduction

The public service in South Africa is a noted important functionary. The public service in South Africa is noted as crucial in how service delivery is realised for communities (Fihla & Chinyamurindi, 2018). The need exists for the public service in South Africa to continually be in search of opportunities that advance its progress (Chilunjika et al., 2022). The role of aligning how managers and employees work can be an important starting point towards steps of this advancement (Haricharan, 2022). The issue appears to be the need to sort out the organisational dynamics of the public service. Saliently, there is also growing empirical work around how such organisational dynamics can be improved. For instance, the importance of decent work needs attention, especially within the South African public service (Chigbu et al., 2024; Chinyamurindi et al., 2023; Ruzungunde et al., 2023).

Despite the noted importance of the South African public service, some challenges exist. There is growing concern around the issue of counterproductive work behaviour, especially among public service employees (Masukela et al., 2023). Furthermore, there is an acknowledgement of the need to improve aspects related to employee well-being, especially within the South African public service (Haricharan, 2023). The issue of developing the health of public service employees is

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flagged as needing attention (Chigbu et al., 2024). The role of mental health is deemed crucial (Chinyamurindi et al., 2023; Ruzungunde et al., 2023).

A need exists to address these challenges affecting public service employees. Needed continually are strategies, tools and approaches that instil a culture of mental health promotion (Vetter et al., 2024). A positive step to such promotion is espoused in recent discussions and the adoption of the National Health Insurance (Shisana et al., 2024). Such efforts potentially align with driving Goal 3 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (Liu & Li, 2024). Adding voice to this is the growing call for more research, especially around mental health (Vandoni et al., 2024). Potentially, this can also improve aspects related to advancing policies and practices that promote mental health services. The role of employee assistance programmes is noted to be important within the public service. Such efforts are argued as crucial in assisting employees gain support in view of the challenge of mental health (Chinyamurindi et al.). Saliently, employee assistance interventions represent part of the ongoing work of organisational response to the challenge of mental health (Vetter et al., 2024).

From an organisational point of view, some gaps can be noted. Firstly, there is need to understand the potential role that workplace social support plays in addressing stigma that comes with mental health in organisations (Gumus & Avci, 2024). Secondly, given the prevalence of counterproductive behaviours among public service employees (Masukela et al., 2023), a need exists to address such challenges. An attribution could be that such negative behaviours are because of the lack of organisational justice in the organisation. Organisational justice concerns perceptions of fair treatment within the confines of the workplace (Ravina-Ripoll et al., 2023). Such perceptions are driven by the quest to witness equity and justice at work (Haapanen et al., 2024).

Objectives of the study

The study sought to determine the relationship between public service employee's mental health accounting for the role of organisational justice and workplace social support. The study objectives fit within fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 3 around good health and well-being (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). Figure 1 shows the research model of the study:

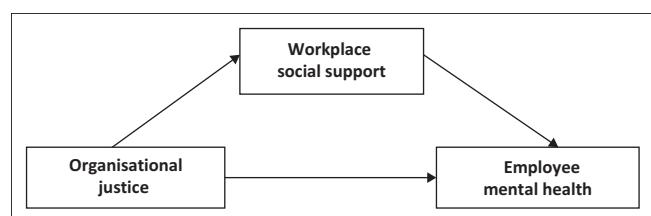


FIGURE 1: Research model.

Conceptual and contextual analysis

Mental well-being is a critical aspect of employee health, particularly in high-stress environments such as public service. In the context of South Africa, public service employees face unique challenges that generally impact their mental health, including high workloads, bureaucratic pressures and resource constraints (Haricharan, 2023; Sibanda & Dlamini, 2018). Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of the factors that affect employee mental well-being. Hence, two pivotal elements in this context are workplace social support and organisational justice, both of which play a significant role in shaping employees' experiences and perceptions of their work environment.

Gumus and Avci (2024) confirmed that workplace social support, encompassing emotional and practical assistance from colleagues and supervisors, is therefore essential for fostering a supportive work environment. This is simply because it helps mitigate the effects of job stress and enhances employees' coping mechanisms, thereby promoting better mental health outcomes. Employees in the South African public service often work under considerable pressure, and strong social support networks can provide a buffer against stress and burnout (Nkosi & Maritz, 2022). Furthermore, by cultivating a culture of mutual support and collaboration, public service organisations can also significantly enhance the mental well-being of their staff. Mental well-being consists of facets such as mental health with an emphasis on how individuals respond to stresses around them and their ability to resolve these stressors.

Organisational justice refers to the perceived fairness of workplace policies and practices, which is crucial for mental well-being (Johnson & Hall, 2019; Ndlovu & Smith, 2021). This implies that when employees believe that decisions are made transparently, equitably and with their best interests in mind, their trust in the organisation increases, which ultimately leads to higher job satisfaction and lower stress levels. Therefore, promoting organisational justice can help address feelings of disenfranchisement and disillusionment among employees (Moyo & Makoni, 2020). This can be enabled by ensuring fair treatment and clear communication, and public service organisations can foster a more positive work environment, thereby unlocking greater mental well-being and productivity among their workforces.

Theoretical framework(s): Job Demands-Resources model and equity theory

The theoretical framework for exploring the mental well-being of employees through the lenses of workplace social support and organisational justice is anchored in several key psychological and organisational theories. One foundational theory applied in the context of this study is the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, which was developed by two organisational psychologists, Arnold Bakker and Evangelia Demerouti (Bakker et al., 2003). Introduced in the early 2000s, the JD-R model posits that every job can be characterised by its specific demands (such as workload and time pressure) and

resources (like social support and autonomy), which influence employee well-being and job performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Greenberg, 1988). This dual-process framework has been widely adopted in research and practice to understand the complex interplay between job characteristics, employee motivation and organisational outcomes. In this context, workplace social support functions as a critical job resource that can alleviate the impact of high job demands by providing employees with emotional and instrumental assistance. This support not only helps in managing stress but also enhances resilience and job satisfaction, contributing to the overall mental well-being of the employees.

Another essential theoretical perspective is the equity theory, which was developed by J. Stacy Adams, a workplace and behavioural psychologist, in the early 1960s (Adams, 1965). The theory proposes that individuals are motivated by fairness in social exchanges within the workplace. Adams argued that employees compare their input (effort, skills, experience) and outcomes (salary, recognition, benefits) to those of others to assess whether they are being treated equitably. Adams (1963) argued that perceptions of equity or inequity can influence job satisfaction, motivation and behaviours such as work effort or intent to leave the organisation, making it a significant framework for understanding employee attitudes and behaviours. Furthermore, according to this theory, employees assess their job satisfaction by comparing the fairness of their inputs (effort, skills, experience) and outcomes (rewards, recognition) with those of others (Adams, 1963, 1965). It is therefore crucial to acknowledge how perceived organisational justice, encompassing distributive, procedural and interactional justice, plays a crucial role in this evaluation. This simply implies that, when employees perceive that they are treated justly and that organisational policies are transparent and equitable, their trust in the organisation increases, and this further improves their mental health and organisational commitment. By integrating this theoretical perspective, this study highlights how enhancing workplace social support and organisational justice can create a more supportive and fair work environment, ultimately unlocking greater mental well-being among public service employees in South Africa.

Triangulating the JD-R model and equity theory provides a robust framework for understanding and enhancing mental well-being among public service employees in South Africa. The JD-R model emphasises the critical role of job resources, such as workplace social support, in mitigating the adverse effects of job demands. The equity theory complements this by focusing on the importance of perceived fairness and justice in shaping employees' attitudes and well-being. Together, these theories suggest that a supportive work environment, characterised by strong social support networks and fair organisational practices, can significantly reduce stress and enhance job satisfaction for employees within the public service. Consequently, by ensuring that employees feel supported and fairly treated, public service organisations can create a balanced and positive work

environment that promotes mental well-being, resilience and productivity. This integrated approach underscores the interdependence of social support and organisational justice in fostering a healthy, engaged and effective workforce.

Hypotheses development

Organisational justice is an enduring experience within organisations (Johnson & Hall, 1988). The quest for such justice has the potential to promote employee voice (Karasek, 1979). This positions the desire to be heard as a critical organisational utility (Ibrahim et al., 2019). Ultimately, the quest for organisational justice will likely result in positive work behaviour and promote employee well-being (Akram et al., 2019). This in turn places importance on the quest for organisational justice as a tool to drive aspects related to equity (Antunez et al., 2018), which can be done through fair policies and procedures within organisations (Perez-Rodriguez et al., 2019). An example to note, especially in South Africa, concerns the advancement of minority groups within the workplace, particularly given the context of exclusion South Africa comes from.

Conversely, any form of organisational injustice likely to be perceived by employees will result in emotional and social distress (Ajala & Bolarinwa, 2015). All this frames organisational justice as an essential factor influencing employee health outcomes (Ahlin, 2019). Often, employees with mental health challenges experience discrimination, poor employment rates, under-employment and reduced wages (Harris et al., 2014). This potentially limits chances for career progression. Based on the presented literature, it can be expected that:

H1: Organisational justice has a direct and positive relationship with employee mental health

Workplace social support emerges as an essential factor in supporting employees, especially in periods of difficulty (Sodeify & Habibpour, 2020). In some instances, the presence of workplace social support has been linked to heightened levels of trust and responsibility (Sodeify & Habibpour, 2020). Workplace social support is thus linked to a harmonious organisation (Ibrahim et al., 2019). Such an organisation becomes an essential context in which employees flourish and are productive (Croppanzano & Molina, 2015; Huong et al., 2016) and one that promotes employee well-being (Virtanen & Elovainio, 2018).

An issue that is associated with the challenge of mental health concerns dealing with stigma. Often, employees who struggle with mental health challenges are considered as unstable, incompetent, crazy or even dangerous (Corrigan et al., 2005). Such stigma is likely to lead to negative stereotypes and discrimination towards those with mental illness within the workplace (Follmer & Jones, 2017). Addressing the issue of stigma requires the support of supervisors and co-workers (Elraz, 2018). Further, addressing such stigma may also address the challenge of reluctance to disclosure (Maclean et al., 2005). In light of this, it is critical to have social support structures in place at the workplace. Based on the presented literature, it can be expected that:

H2: Workplace social support has a direct and positive relationship with employee mental health

Studies show that workplace social support results in social capital that can be used to promote mental health (Ibrahim et al., 2019; Sodeify & Habibpour, 2020). The opposite has been found to increase employee burnout (Basisi & Duygulu, 2018). Employees who lack social support at work are more prone to feel undervalued, according to this notion (Hwang & Ramadas, 2017), resulting in psychological strain, especially on their mental health (Griffin & Clarke, 2011).

The necessity for workplace support measures is heightened by the role that work plays in the lives of those facing mental health challenges. Niekerk (2009) suggested that work serves the utility of providing structure, meaning and purpose for those facing mental health challenges. The very act of employing and giving voice to employees facing mental health challenges can be a form of promotion of serving justice. According to this notion, committing such an act will boost the reputation and culture of the organisation for all employees (Peterson et al., 2017). Based on the presented literature, it can be expected that:

H3: Workplace social support mediates the relationship between organisational justice and employee mental health

Research design

This study followed a quantitative methodology with a postpositivist approach to research, focusing on gathering empirical objective data through measurements in an attempt to test whether the hypothesised model is probable (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Additionally, this study made use of the survey method associated with a correlational design as it enables the study to collect large amounts of data in an inexpensive and short time frame (Cherry, 2023). Lastly, this study used the cross-sectional design, where data will be collected at a singular point in time (Wang & Cheng, 2020).

Research respondents

This study made use of convenience non-probability sampling, where participants are chosen based on their availability and convenience (Wang & Cheng, 2020). The study focused on five public service entities in the Eastern Cape province, South Africa. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed among the entities, and a total of 289 questionnaires were returned and deemed usable for the analysis stage, yielding a response rate of 58%.

Measuring instruments

To estimate the primary variables of the research, the authors used instruments from previous studies. The independent variable, organisational justice, was measured using a 22-item scale developed by Neihoff and Moorman (1993). An example item reads: 'I find that my opinions are respected at work'. The mediator, workplace social support, was measured using a 12-item scale of supervisor and co-worker support adapted from

previous studies (Hobman et al., 2009). An example item reads: 'I feel comfortable asking my co-workers for help if I have a problem'. Finally, the dependent variable was measured using a 6-item scale on mental health, the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Furukawa et al., 2003). For the mental health scale, respondents were asked to indicate how they had felt during the past 30 days concerning: (1) nervousness, (2) hopelessness, (3) restlessness or being fidgety, (4) depression, (5) everything requiring effort and, finally, (6) worthlessness. An example item reads: 'During the past 30 days, I have often felt hopeless'. All scale items were measured on a five-point Likert scale. All scales met the required threshold on reliability and had a rating of 0.70 or more as required (Nunnally, 1978).

Research procedure

The questionnaire was distributed to the participants to complete, and various ethical considerations were taken into account.

Statistical analysis

The researchers opted to use the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27, AMOS version 22 and the Hayes PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013) for analysing the data. Initially, it was necessary to establish the validity and reliability of the research measures. In order to achieve this, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (using AMOS) and a reliability analysis were conducted. After the validation of the scales, a simple mediation analysis was then conducted using the Hayes PROCESS macro. For mediation analysis to be possible, the data were assessed to see whether it met the assumptions for linearity, homoscedasticity, normality of estimation error and independence of observations. After assessing all the necessary assumptions, the Hayes PROCESS macro was then used to address the hypothesised frameworks where the strength of the indirect and the direct effects were used to determine the result of the mediation analysis.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the University of Fort Hare Research Ethics Committee and ethics consent was received on 21 November 2022. The ethics clearance number is REC-270710-028-RA Level 01. Participants were informed of the aim and objectives of the research prior to completing the questionnaire, and their informed consent was obtained. Additionally, ethical issues such as voluntary participation, benefit-risk analysis, anonymity, confidentiality and protecting the participants from any harm were upheld in the study. Also, participants were informed of how their information would be managed and stored and how the results would be made available.

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis and reliability analysis

A CFA coupled with a reliability analysis was conducted to assess the validity and reliability of the study's measurement scales.

Literature was used as a guide on the empirical factors for these tools. For the CFA, literature was used as a guide on the empirical factors, and some model fit indices with their respective criteria were used to examine the goodness of fit of the established measurement models. The goodness-of-fit indices that were adopted include the chi-square value degrees of freedom (df) ratio (denoted as $CMIN/df$), the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The criteria for a good fit were $CMIN/df$ values ≤ 3 (Kline, 1998), CFI and TLI values ≥ 0.95 (Hu & Bentler, 1998) and SRMR as well as RMSEA values ≤ 0.05 (MacCallum et al., 1996). In case the model does not meet the criteria for a good fit, we used the criteria for an acceptable model fit. Thus, for an acceptable model fit, CFI and TLI values $0.90 \leq CFI \text{ or } TLI < 0.95$ (Hooper, et al., 2008); $CMIN/df$ values $3 < CMIN/df \leq 5$ (Marsh & Hocevar, 1985); SRMR values $0.05 < SRMR \leq 0.09$ (Hu & Bentler, 1998) and RMSEA values $0.05 < RMSEA \leq 0.10$ (Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003).

In terms of reliability, a Cronbach's alpha coefficient larger than 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994) indicated acceptable internal consistency, and according to Pallant (2001), an alpha Cronbach's value above 0.60 is considered an acceptable index. To measure composite reliability (CR), the Jöreskog rho coefficient (Jöreskog, 1971) was utilised where the minimum CR value should exceed 0.70 (Hair et al., 2014). Lastly, the convergent validity was assessed by the average variance extracted (AVE), where $AVE > 0.50$ was considered a good convergent validity (Schumacker & Lomax, 2016). A minimum cut-off point of 0.50 is recommended, but < 0.50 can be accepted provided the CR is higher than 0.60, but some studies in the literature indicated that the AVE values < 0.50 are acceptable provided the CR values are > 0.60 (Qin et al., 2022; Raines-Eudy, 2000; Schumacker & Lomax, 2016).

Initially, CFA was conducted on the 20-item organisational justice scale. The most parsimonious model was achieved with only 11 items loading on three empirical factors. Table 1 shows that all factor loadings were above 0.50 indicating satisfactory significance of these items. The established factor structure shows five items for procedural justice (Factor 1), three items for interactional justice (Factor 2) and three items for distributive justice (Factor 3). The value of the average variance extracted for factor 2 is greater than the required minimum of 0.50. However, factor 1 and factor 3 had AVE values less than 0.50. However, even though a minimum cut-off point of 0.50 is recommended, but < 0.50 can be accepted provided the CR is higher than 0.60, and thus, the convergent validity for factor 1 and factor 3 is also deemed adequate. The internal consistency of these factors is statistically acceptable as all the values are more than 0.60 for all the constructs, with an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.623. Further, assessing the Jöreskog rho for measuring CR, the values of CR are also more than 0.60 for all the constructs. These results show that the reliability and CR are adequate for the established measurement model and for the organisational justice measurement tool. Examining the

TABLE 1: The organisational justice confirmatory factor analysis and internal consistency output.

Factors and respective items	CFA loadings	Alpha if item deleted
Factor 1. Procedural justice		
Job decisions are made by the manager in a biased manner	0.682	0.741
My manager makes sure that all employee concerns are heard before job	0.661	0.744
My manager clarifies decisions and provides additional information when	0.629	0.751
All job decisions are applied consistently to all affected employees	0.641	0.748
Employees are allowed to challenge or appeal job decisions made by their	0.645	0.750
Factor 2. Interactional justice		
Concerning decisions made about my job, the manager discusses with me the	0.511	0.862
When making decisions about my job, the manager offers explanations that	0.824	0.636
My manager explains very clearly any decisions made about my job	0.919	0.585
Factor 3. Distributive justice		
I think that my level of pay is fair	0.546	0.629
I consider my work load to be quite fair	0.737	0.461
I feel that my job responsibilities are fair	0.604	0.574

Note: Factor 1 - Cronbach's alpha = 0.787, Joreskog rho = 0.787, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) = 0.425; Factor 2 - Cronbach's alpha = 0.784, Joreskog rho = 0.807, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) = 0.505 and Factor 3 - Cronbach's alpha = 0.656, Joreskog rho = 0.665, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) = 0.402. Overall Cronbach's alpha = 0.623.

CFA, confirmatory factor analysis.

fitness of the established measurement model (see Table 2), the fit indices indicate that the organisational justice model had an acceptable fit for the data. Thus, $CMIN/df$ is 1.281, which is < 3 , and SRMR is 0.049, which is < 0.05 , are both regarded as a good fit. Further, CFI is 0.986, which is greater than 0.95, while TLI is 0.981, which is also above 0.95, and RMSEA of 0.031 with 90% CI (0.000 – 0.054), indicating a good model fit for the organisational justice measurement model.

The employee mental health CFA and internal consistency output are presented in Table 3. The CFA was conducted on the 6-item mental health measurement tool, and the most parsimonious model was achieved with four items with factor loadings above 0.55 for the retained items. The average variance extracted was 0.434, which indicated an acceptable level of convergent reliability because the CR of 0.752 is greater than 0.60. The internal consistency shows a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.750, which reveals a statistically acceptable level of reliability for the mental health tool. In Table 2, the fit indices indicate that the mental health measurement model had a good fit for the data. Thus, $CMIN/df$ is 2.359, which is < 3 , and SRMR is 0.024, which is < 0.05 , are both regarded as a good fit. In addition, CFI is 0.989, which is > 0.95 , and TLI is 0.968, which is also > 0.95 , indicating a good model fit for the mental health measurement model.

Lastly, a CFA was conducted on the 12-item workplace social support scale. The most suitable measurement model was achieved with five items loading on the two empirical factors (see Table 4). Assessing the items for each factor, the established factors were named co-worker support (Factor 1) and supervisor support (Factor 2). The AVE for all the factors

TABLE 2: Model fitness indices for the established measurement models.

Measurement model	CMIN/df	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA	90% CI
Organisational justice	1.281	0.986	0.981	0.049	0.031	0.000–0.054
Employee mental health	2.359	0.989	0.968	0.024	0.069	0.000–0.152
Workplace social support	2.407	0.955	0.888	0.047	0.071	0.024–0.123

CI, confidence interval; CMIN/df, discrepancy/Chi-square divided by degree of freedom; CFI, The comparative fit index; TLI, The Tucker-Lewis index; SRMR, the standardised root mean square residual; RMSEA, the root mean square error of approximation.

TABLE 3: The employee mental health confirmatory factor analysis and internal consistency output.

Factors and respective items	CFA loadings	Alpha if item deleted
Factor 1. Mental health		
During the past 30 days, I have often felt nervous	0.568	0.726
During the past 30 days, I have often felt restless or fidgety	0.653	0.699
During the past 30 days, I have often felt so depressed that nothing	0.661	0.682
During the past 30 days, I have often felt that everything was an	0.740	0.659

Note: Factor 1 - Cronbach's alpha = 0.750, Joreskog rho = 0.752, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) = 0.434.

CFA, confirmatory factor analysis.

TABLE 4: The workplace social support confirmatory factor analysis and internal consistency output.

Factors and respective items	CFA loadings	Alpha if item deleted
Factor 1. Co-worker support		
My co-workers always seem to make time for me if I need to discuss my work	0.909	n/a
When I am frustrated by some aspect of my work, my co-workers try to	0.693	n/a
Factor 2. Supervisor support		
My supervisor helps me figure out how to solve problems	0.989	0.675
My supervisor always seems to make time for me if I need to discuss my work	0.819	0.822
My supervisor cooperates with me to get things done at work	0.709	0.895

Note: Factor 1 - Cronbach's alpha = 0.728; Joreskog rho = 0.787, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) = 0.653; Factor 2 - Cronbach's alpha = 0.857, Joreskog rho = 0.882, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) = 0.717. Overall Cronbach's alpha = 0.833.

CFA, confirmatory factor analysis.

is greater than the required minimum of 0.50. Thus, the convergent validity for the established factors is deemed adequate. The internal consistency of these factors is statistically acceptable as all the values are more than 0.70 for all the constructs, with an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.833. Further, assessing the Jöreskog rho for measuring CR, the values of CR are also more than 0.70 for all the constructs. These results show that the reliability and CR are adequate for the established measurement model for the workplace social support measurement tool. Examining the fitness of the established measurement model (see Table 2), the goodness-of-fit indices indicate that the workplace social support measurement model had a satisfactory acceptable fit for the data. In conclusion, all the measurement models have fulfilled all the model fit requirements and, thus, are suitable for building linkage between factors and determining the contribution of constructs in measuring organisational justice, employee mental health and workplace social support within the sampled organisation. These established variables were then used for further analysis.

TABLE 5: Demographic characteristics.

Demographic variables	Labels	Frequency	%
Gender	Female	146	50.6
	Male	143	49.4
Department	Social development	76	26.3
	Education	84	29.1
	Public works	129	44.6
	Less than a year	6	2.1
Work experience	1–5 years	65	22.5
	6–10 years	87	30.1
	More than 10 years	131	45.3
Employment status	Permanent	202	69.9
	Contract	87	30.1

Descriptive analysis

Demographic characteristics

The respondents in this project consisted of 289 male and female employees, as shown in Table 5. From the table, it can be noted that the majority of employees worked at the Department of Public Works, having more than 6 years of experience on a permanent basis.

Variables descriptive summary

Table 6 shows the results of the descriptive summary of the variables used in this study. All variables and constructs reported moderate mean levels. However, organisational justice (mean = 2.857, standard deviation [SD] = 0.601) and employee mental health (mean = 2.580, SD = 0.511) had slightly lower mean ratings from the sampled participants.

Simple mediation analysis

Using the Hayes PROCESS macro, a simple mediation analysis was conducted to investigate the hypothesis that workplace social support mediates the relationship between organisational justice and employee mental health. Table 7 and Figure 1 show the results of the simple mediation analysis.

Firstly, the findings from Table 7 and Figure 2 show that organisational justice had a significant direct and positive effect on the mediator variable workplace social support ($\beta = 0.520, t = 10.209, p \leq 0.0001$). This shows that organisational justice has a direct and positive relationship with public service employees' perceptions of workplace social support. The finding around the role of organisational justice on workplace social support among public servants is also shown in Figure 2. Thus, higher ratings of reported perceptions of organisational justice are related to higher ratings of employee perceptions of workplace social support. The results also revealed that workplace social support had a significant direct and positive effect on employee mental health ($\beta = 0.500, t = 11.243, p \leq 0.0001$). These results are in support of the mediational hypothesis. This finding also supports the hypothesis that workplace social support directly and positively affects employee mental health (see path b in Figure 2).

Secondly, while controlling for the mediator variable, organisational justice was not a significant predictor of employee mental health ($\beta = 0.079, t = 1.770, p = 0.078$).

TABLE 6: Descriptive summary of main theoretical variables.

Variables	Mean	SD
Organisational justice	2.857	0.601
Employee mental health	2.580	0.511
Workplace social support	3.130	0.605

n = 289. Organisational justice and workplace social support were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – Strongly Disagree, 2 – Disagree, 3 – Neutral, 4 – Agree and 5 – Strongly Agree). Employee mental health was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – All the time, 2 – Most of the time, 3 – Some of the time, 4 – A little of the time, 5 – None of the time). SD, standard deviation.

TABLE 7: Mediation analysis to determine the mediating effect of workplace social support on the relationship between organisational justice and employee mental health.

Effects	Unstandardised beta coefficients		95% confidence interval		Significance of beta coefficients	
	Beta	SE	LLCI	ULCI	t	p
Direct effect(s)						
• OJ (<i>X</i>) → WSS (<i>M</i>)	0.520*	0.051	0.419	0.620	10.209	< 0.0001
• WSS (<i>M</i>) → MH (<i>Y</i>)	0.500*	0.045	0.413	0.588	11.243	< 0.0001
• OJ (<i>X</i>) → MH (<i>Y</i>)	0.079	0.045	-0.009	0.167	1.770	0.0780
Total effect of <i>X</i> on <i>Y</i>	0.339*	0.046	0.249	0.430	7.376	< 0.0001
Indirect effect of <i>X</i> on <i>Y</i>	0.260*	0.033	0.198	0.376	-	-

SE, standard error; LLCI, lower limit confidence interval; ULCI, upper limit confidence interval.

*, Significant effect at alpha = 0.05. Number of bootstrap samples for 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals: 10 000.

Predictor/Independent variable (*X*): Organisational justice (OJ).

Outcome/Dependent variable (*Y*): Employee mental health (MH).

Mediator variable (*M*): Workplace social support (WSS).

As organisational justice is not a significant predictor of employee mental health after controlling for the mediator variable, this result is consistent with full mediation. This result suggests that, while controlling the mediator variable (workplace social support), organisational justice has no direct and positive relationship with employee mental health.

However, the total effect of organisational justice on employee mental health is statistically significant ($\beta = 0.339$, $t = 7.376$, $p \leq 0.0001$). A 95% bias-corrected confidence interval based on 10 000 bootstrap samples indicated that the indirect effect ($\beta = 0.260$) was statistically significant (95% CI [0.198 to 0.376]). Thus, employees reported greater mental health even after considering organisational justice's indirect effect through workplace social support. These findings are consistent with full mediation. Higher levels of organisational justice were associated with employee mental health scores that were approximately 0.260 points higher, as mediated by workplace social support. In conclusion, workplace social support fully mediates the relationship between organisational justice and employee mental health.

Discussion of findings

The study sought to determine the relationship between public service employee's mental health accounting for the role of organisational justice and workplace social support. In relation to the JD-R model and equity theory, employees' perception of organisational justice practices can have an impact on workplace social support, thereby impacting the mental well-being of the employees. In essence, employee perceptions around the promotion of organisational justice within the workplace support the promotion of employee

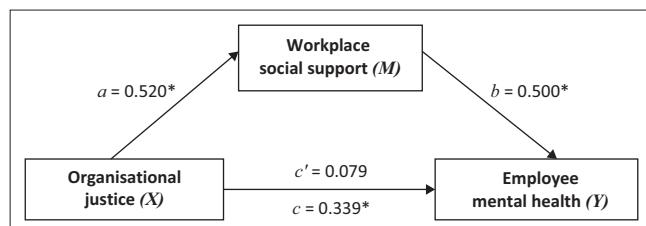


FIGURE 2: Simple mediation results. Simple mediation model for the mediating effect of workplace social support on the relationship between organisational justice and employee mental health. Note: a is the direct effect of organisational justice on workplace social support; b is the direct effect of workplace social support on employee mental health; c' is the direct effect of organisational justice on employee mental health; c is the total effect of organisational justice on employee mental health. All effects are unstandardised. *, $p < 0.05$.

well-being (Ahmed et al., 2018; Elayan & Shamout, 2020; Hsu et al., 2019; Huong et al., 2016; Kumar, 2022; Majumdar & Kumar, 2022).

Perceived organisational justice is a vital factor, as procedural justice characterised by transparent and equal decision-making procedures contributes to the development of a stable and psychologically secure environment for workers (Kim & Kiura, 2023); distributive justice, which involves equitably sharing outcomes, fosters feelings of contentment, bolsters self-esteem and improves work satisfaction (Roberson & Scott, 2022) and interactional justice, which involves the fair and ethical treatment of individuals in interpersonal interactions, fosters a feeling of inclusion and social assistance inside the organisational context (Agarwal, 2014). Hence, organisational justice fosters a positive organisational environment, enhancing employee satisfaction, involvement and overall well-being by reducing stress levels, increasing work satisfaction and cultivating a supportive culture inside the organisation (Elayan, 2024). The study, therefore, supports the results found by Nimmo (2018), who stated that mental and physical health, sickness absence, job performance and job turnover are strongly correlated with organisational justice. Low levels of organisational justice are also associated with chronic embitterment, which has adverse effects on health and work.

It has also been noted in the study that workplace social support had a significant effect on employee mental health. When employees have supportive co-workers and supervisors, they have strong support resources that can be used to buffer stress, reduce feelings of loneliness and enhance a sense of belonging. This is also consistent with a recent systematic review of social support in the management sciences that points to the role of social support as a positive catalyst that can facilitate employee mental health (Bavik et al., 2020; Harunavamwe & Ward, 2022; Kelloway et al., 2023; Koelmel et al., 2017). Therefore, social interactions play an important role in one's life, and research notes how social support is conducive to health and well-being and predictive of health-promoting behaviours (Johnsen et al., 2018).

Workplace social support fully mediates the relationship between organisational justice and employee mental health.

When employees perceive their organisations or supervisors disregard their efforts at work, they consequently experience lower levels of support, and their levels of psychological disorders increase as their mental health decreases (Nazir et al., 2018). On the other hand, the fairness that employees perceive creates a degree of trust between employees and their organisations, and as a result, those with higher levels of perceived social support will have psychological resources to deal with mental health issues (Viljoen, 2022). Workplace social support enhances a sense of being able to cope effectively with the demands of various roles, which, in turn, reduces stressor that has an effect on mental health. Abbas and Weiwei (2021) provided empirical findings that examine the link between organisational justice and the development of leader-member exchange relationships, as well as its effects on employee's psychological well-being.

Impact of workplace support on mental well-being

The exploration of workplace social support among public service employees in South Africa reveals a strong correlation between supportive work environments and improved mental well-being. Our findings indicate that high levels of workplace social support, including emotional and instrumental assistance from colleagues and supervisors, significantly enhance employees' mental health. This is consistent with the JD-R model, which posits that every job can be characterised by its specific demands (such as workload and time pressure) and resources (like social support and autonomy), which influence employee well-being and job performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Data suggest that employees perceiving their work environment as supportive report lower levels of anxiety, depression and burnout. This underscores the critical role of workplace support in fostering mental health among public service employees, who often operate under high-stress conditions.

Influence of equity theory on mental well-being

In addition to the JD-R model social support, the perception of equity through the equity theory significantly impacts employees' mental well-being. The theory proposes that individuals are motivated by fairness in social exchanges within the workplace. Adams (1963) argued that employees compare their input (effort, skills, experience) and outcomes (salary, recognition, benefits) to those of others to assess whether they are being treated equitably. Therefore, in line with the findings of the study, employees perceiving fairness in resource distribution, decision-making processes and interpersonal treatment reported higher job satisfaction and psychological well-being (Viljoen, 2022). Sequentially, this finding aligns with the equity theory, by emphasising on the importance of perceived fairness in the workplace. Adams (1965) argued that when employees feel they are treated fairly, their stress levels decrease and their overall mental health improves, highlighting the importance of equitable practices in organisational management.

Synergistic effect of social support and organisational justice

The combined effect of workplace social support and organisational justice presents a comprehensive framework for understanding and enhancing mental well-being in the public sector. Our study demonstrates that integrating these two factors creates a synergistic effect, leading to a holistic approach to employee well-being. Public service organisations can benefit from implementing policies that promote both social support and fairness, addressing multiple dimensions of employee needs (Abbas & Weiwei, 2021). This can be done by fostering a supportive and just work environment, and public service organisations in South Africa can improve mental health outcomes, enhance overall organisational performance and increase employee retention (Fihla & Chinyamurindi, 2018; Haricharan, 2023). This integrated approach provides a practical blueprint for other sectors aiming to improve workplace mental well-being.

Practical implications for public service organisations

The findings from this study have significant practical implications for public service organisations aiming to enhance employee mental well-being. Initially, it is essential for these organisations to develop and implement comprehensive support systems that foster both peer and supervisory support. This can be achieved through regular training programmes focused on building supportive work cultures, as well as through the establishment of mentorship and peer support networks. Additionally, as argued by Adams (1965, 1963); Bakker and Demerouti (2007), creating channels for open communication where employees can express their concerns and seek support without fear of reprisal is crucial. By prioritising these support mechanisms, organisations can effectively reduce workplace stress and improve overall employee well-being. Therefore, policymakers and organisational leaders should consider integrating principles of organisational justice into their policies and procedures to further bolster mental well-being among employees. This includes ensuring transparency in decision-making processes, providing clear and consistent communication regarding organisational changes and implementing fair and equitable resource distribution practices.

Limitations of the study

This study was a cross-sectional design, which captured data at a single point in time. Future research could benefit from longitudinal designs to establish causal relationships and better understand how organisational justice and workplace social support influence employee mental health over time. The study focused on a specific sample or population (e.g. public service entities). As such, the generalisability of the findings to other industries or settings may be limited. Future research should aim to replicate these findings in diverse occupational contexts. The use of convenience sampling and self-report instruments could also limit the findings as possible sample bias could affect the results. Future studies can, therefore, make use of

probability sampling methods and mixed methods or longitudinal studies. Future research should also focus on longitudinal studies to examine the long-term effects of workplace social support and organisational justice on mental well-being. Additionally, exploring the role of cultural factors in shaping perceptions of support and organisational justice in diverse public service environments could also provide deeper insights. By continuing to investigate these areas, researchers can offer more targeted recommendations to improve workplace mental health across different contexts.

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Authors' contributions

T.S.M., M.G.M., T.C.M. and W.T.C. contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript.

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Data availability

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

Disclaimer

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