

Financial Rewards, Organizational Justice, and Employee Disengagement: The Roles of Favoritism and Political Interference in a South African Municipality

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Abstract

Cultural studies lack research on how valuing the individual versus the group affects employees' investment in their work. This research examines how financial rewards affect employee engagement in a government organisation and how the culture's individualistic or collectivistic nature alters that effect. The researcher used standard, face-to-face interviews in which people were free to answer at length. To address the research questions, the interview guide included 20 open-ended questions covering five main areas of thought. The researcher analysed the interview data using a 'constant comparison' method and examined the meaning within the responses. The researcher then sorted the data by how the themes were similar and how they differed. The municipality does offer financial bonuses to its staff. However, because of politics, unfairness, a lack of justice, and favouritism, employees feel they are not being paid fairly, which makes them unhappy and distances them from the organisation and their roles. The municipality is neither individualistic nor group-focused. When the balance between valuing the individual and valuing the group is lacking, financial rewards are less effective at increasing employee engagement. This study shows how an organisation operates, and the balance between valuing the individual and the group determines the extent to which financial rewards affect employee engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

The "public sector" covers both national and local government. Several changes in how people are paid and rewarded are happening in South Africa: good salaries and complete benefits packages,

pay that differs depending on the person, bonuses based on how well they do, rewards that are not financial, tailoring rewards to what each employee needs, and using tech to manage rewards (Raath & Phillips, 2023). It seems modern human resource (HR) practices are very slow to be adopted by charities and local government (Branka & Marija, 2021). In the business world, reward schemes have become very popular to get the most out of a company's people, breaking down walls between departments that manage staff and leading to more work, lower staff costs, and happier employees.

But despite working well for employees in the private sector (Stoeckmann, 2010), it remains debatable whether they are useful in the public sector. Aktar et al. (2012), Kiley (2018), Nel et al. (2020), Tsede and Kutin (2013), and Werner (2020) divide reward systems into two parts: extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic rewards are tangible things such as prizes, financial bonuses, and pay increases. Intrinsic rewards come from within a person and are less concrete, encompassing psychological feelings, a sense of achievement, praise, recognition, and success. This research, however, focuses on extrinsic rewards, including both direct and indirect payments. Swanepoel et al. (2014) say direct financial rewards include salary, overtime, commission, bonuses, profit sharing, gain sharing and share options, while indirect rewards include unemployment insurance, compensation if you are injured or become ill at work, pay for time off, pensions, life insurance, health care and other perks.

Seid (2019) says engagement increases when a culture of appreciation exists. However, being given something for doing something (extrinsic rewards) has been found to reduce engagement. Also, research has shown that the perceived fairness of rewards affects people's engagement. Materialism does not have a big effect on engagement. Herzberg (1954) claimed that not having enough money will frustrate and demotivate staff, but getting more money will not necessarily make them more motivated or happy. Rewards and punishments are two sides of the same thing. Because rewards can be as manipulative as punishments, they can feel controlling (Herzberg, 1954, 2005). A reward itself might be nice, but when managers link a bonus to doing a particular thing, they are controlling their employees, and that control will probably feel punitive in the long term. While everyone acknowledges the importance of culture, very little research has examined how the tension between prioritising the individual and the group (and how this is experienced in a real public-sector environment) affects the effectiveness of financial reward systems. This research aims to fill that gap by examining how financial rewards affect employee engagement, with individualism and collectivism as influences in a public-sector organisation.

Reward systems are among the most overlooked and increasingly important domains in the public sector of human resource management (HRM) literature. Contemporary public institutions are

transforming towards individualised, performance-related and technology-driven remuneration structures (Raath & Phillips, 2023), although implementation of modern rewards remains significantly more sluggish in governments and non-profits than in businesses (Branka & Marija, 2021). In contrast to the prevailing view that rewards, when implemented as part of a rewards scheme, boost productivity and reduce turnover in private organisations (Stoeckmann, 2010), transferability is less evident in the context of the rule-and protocol bound nature of public services (Hoole & Hotz, 2016; Sixpence et al., 2021). The broad spectrum of rewards falls broadly into intrinsically or extrinsically defined types; the latter encompassing pay, bonuses and benefits, whilst the former is represented through recognition and feelings of achievement (Aktar et al., 2012; Kiley, 2018; Nel et al., 2020; Tsede & Kutin, 2013; Werner, 2020). The direct and indirect financial aspects have also been distinctly defined (Swanepoel et al., 2014).

In relation to engagement, the reward system has received considerable theoretical backing from several overlapping constructs. Based on Herzberg's (1954, 2005) two-factor theory, which implies that insufficient payment acts as a dissatisfier while additional payment can rarely be assumed to drive increased motivation, rewards for behaviours can be construed as having an in-built coercive element. Self-Determination Theory provides some backing for this position by postulating that, amongst other things, engagement is contingent upon employees' capacity to perceive the autonomy to be oneself, competence and relatedness needs met in ways that cannot be undermined by controlling extrinsic incentives, similar to the conceptualisation of engagement by Kahn (1990) as conditions being "psychologically available for its expression, safe, and providing a felt sense of opportunity to express the self". Equity Theory (Adams, 1965) additionally emphasises an internal comparison where people weigh their rewards and those of reference others against each other and, as explored by Colquitt (2001), in comparison to distributive justice, procedural justice-the fairness of the processes underlying the distribution-proves to be the more complex and engagement-reducing aspect (WorldatWork, 2011; Langhneja, 2023). The fact that pay comparability (and not necessarily pay itself) can have a disengagement effect is well evidenced empirically by Cullen and Perez-Truglia (2021).

Another important branch of literature concerns the role of institutional and political processes in reward-engagement. Drawing from Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), it explains how organisations will be responsive to external political demands, rather than to formal rules and procedures, a trend that has been extensively explored concerning the South African municipality by Madumo (2023), where political demands often overshadowed decision-making through consultative bodies. Other empirically supported studies involving the reward system, municipalities, and engagement across the country have shown high degrees of favouritism, subjectivity and perceived

injustice and a negative impact on employee engagement (Mafini & Dlodlo, 2024; Ngulube & Mtshali, 2023; Sibiya, 2023), and this reflects earlier rewarding-productivity findings within the African municipal setting (Akuoko et al., 2014; Gbande, 2016).

Culture is frequently referred to as playing a mediating role for reward-engagement linkages, wherein the dimension of individualism-collectivism (Hofstede, 1980), and its refined version by Triandis and Gelfand (1998) in its horizontal and vertical variant forms respectively, have found support in arguments for the strengthening effect of collectivist orientation for employee rewards and commitment (Lee et al., 2023; Triguero-Sanchez et al., 2022). Indeed, further evidence based on Gelfand (2018) and Gelfand et al. (2022) demonstrates how tightness/ looseness of social rules influences how rule violations, like those related to rewards, are perceived, and how substantial variations exist across societies (House et al., 2004, in its GLOBE study).

Altogether, the above discussion highlights a plethora of determinants related to rewards in relation to employees' engagement, namely adequacy, the nature of the reward system, social dynamics within the organisation, psychological needs satisfaction and cultural orientation. There is limited research, however, focused on how reward distribution can actually be affected in specific South African public entities, as political processes manipulate their distribution and hence impact employees' orientation itself in an individual organisation. These influences present a qualitative case study on financial rewards, employee engagement and its related attributes within Nkangala District Municipality.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative, constructivist single-case design (Stake, 1995) to explore how employees of the Nkangala District Municipality (NDM) understand and experience financial rewards, and how these relate to organisational functioning and engagement (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Ten NDM employees ($n = 10$) with at least two years' tenure and direct experience of the reward system were purposively and conveniently sampled (Patton, 2015; Crouch & McKenzie, 2006); recruitment stopped once no new themes emerged after eight interviews. Participants spanned five departments and all levels of seniority (30% senior management, 40% middle management/supervisory, 30% non-management; 60% male, 40% female). Data were gathered through 42–78 minute, semi-structured, in-person interviews built around 20 open-ended questions across five thematic domains: reward adequacy, distributive/procedural fairness, organisational culture, political interference, and the reward engagement link informed by Equity Theory (Adams, 1965), Self-

Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Interviews were held in private following written informed consent, with confidentiality and voluntary participation assured throughout. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim ($\approx 147,000$ words), and returned to participants for member-checking. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis alongside the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), supported by Atlas.ti 9. Coding generated 312 initial codes, refined into 12 themes and five superordinate themes. Trustworthiness was established through independent double-coding of 20% of transcripts (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.81$), participant validation of interpretations, peer debriefing, and a reflexive research journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The analysis was guided by an integrated framework combining Equity Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Institutional Theory: institutional and political pressures on reward allocation are treated as shaping employees' perceptions of fairness, which in turn affect their sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, rather than as independent influences on engagement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Consolidating the Findings: Political Interference as the Root Mechanism

Of the twelve well-defined codes and five themes identified in Table 3, there are relatively few deeply held grievances which re-appear: differential compensation, "cronyism", opacity and insufficient consultation in policy-making, autocratic decision-making style, and alienation. All of these appear, in one or other form, somewhere within each section of the interview data. When framed as five equal and corresponding themes, there is a risk they will be perceived as five discoveries instead of five integral parts of one argument. Through constant comparative analysis, they converge into one upstream process and result in two downstream processes and finally one end outcome. This relationship is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Mapping the original superordinate themes onto a consolidated three-part causal model

Consolidated Theme	Original Theme(s) (codes; % participants)	Core Mechanism	Guiding Theory
1. Political Interference and Institutional Capture (root cause)	Favouritism, Political Interference and Allocation (74 codes; 90%)	Coercive isomorphism / policy-practice decoupling	Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983)
2. Procedural Injustice and Perceived Reward Inequity (mechanism)	Prevalent Inequality and Reward Inadequacy (68; 100%); Mismatch Between Responsibilities and Rewards (58; 90%); Opacity in Reward Governance and Procedural Unfairness (63; 100%)	Distributive and procedural inequity	Equity Theory (Adams, 1965); Colquitt (2001)
3. Voice Suppression, Thwarted Autonomy and Disengagement (outcome)	Cultural Vacuum and Disengagement (49; 80%)	Thwarted autonomy, competence and relatedness	SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000)

Below, each of these items-root causes, two mechanisms and the effects- will be discussed analytically. They will also shed some light on how individualism and collectivism work within this specific organisation.

Theme 1: Political Interference and Institutional Capture: The Root Mechanism

Political interference and favouritism, identified as the most frequently coded and most theoretically important issue in the dataset (74 codes, 90% of respondents). Specifically, "only favoured employees received performance bonuses and overtime," and not the "management that," said to "have extortionate salary" and "lower workers that are poor pay to no reward." It was reported that some "were paid for their overtime instantly without question", whereas others "were challenged about overtime, or paid at all". Under institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), this would constitute coercive isomorphism because reward distribution is driven more by external political pressure than by the declared Municipal

rule. The organisation had "no established reward system, rule, or procedure"; even though a "politically prescribed guide document" existed, it was "not correctly implemented [it] favours some staff than others" as the organisation suffered from policy-practice decoupling.

Institutional capture may be detected not only in procedural aspects but also in reward distribution mechanisms. As all decision-making was centralised within the mayor's office, the municipality head decided the final verdict, and employees had no input in how decisions that concerned them would be taken. A similar practice in other public services in South African localities was highlighted by Madumo (2023), arguing that the interests of politicians do come before the operation or consultation with the operational group in public institutions. In essence, not only has there been bias in the rewarding process, but there has also been a centralisation of decisions. Therefore, we can argue that issues such as centralisation of decision-making processes and bias in the allocation of rewards are not two separate issues but two faces of the same coin, when leadership, not HR, determines the voice and the entitlement of individual employees. We can therefore clearly distinguish that the basic causal factor from which all other issues, such as lack of equity, obscurity, absence of discourse and disaffection, emanate is dictated by this factor.

This root cause could justify the "contradictory paradox" of the described public organisation, which, based on its constitution, should be collectivist, but was instead showing individualist (even factional) tendencies. Indeed, this explains the dilemma when applied to individualist and collectivist organisational frameworks (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998); the political faction system implies individualistic tendencies by giving a collective orientation within a small clique of politically backed friends aiming towards the centre of power: 'Political favouritism means primarily vertical favouritism-favour toward leaders as controllers over resource allocation. The individual exhibits vertical collectivist tendencies through the process of exhibiting primary orientations toward the leaders and figures that are the focal point of leadership.

The rule-driven, collective resource allocation part of "public" is here conspicuously absent; this fact also clarifies why the study can say that the organisation is "neither individual nor collectivist." It does not lack organisational logic; it lacks a properly developed logical framework. Instead, the framework is provided selectively and abundantly to those "inside the club", so they feel privileged; for outsiders, nothing.

Theme 2: Procedural Injustice and Perceived Reward Inequity in the Distributive Mechanism

If political interference is understood as the prime mechanism, then the results of pay inequity [Disparity of Pay and Deficiency of Reward (68 codes, 100%), Work-Pay balance Issue (58 codes, 90%), Lack of Transparency in award determination/ unfair award determination processes (63 codes, 100%)] can only be regarded as three faces of the same injustice violation, instead of three distinct injustices. As explained by Equity Theory (Adams, 1965), individuals evaluate rewards based on their comparison with other rewards that the referents get. That is, individuals are involved in ratio comparison: In the present study, what the participants observed is not an unjustified comparison at the distributive, procedural or individual level, but an unjustified comparison at the triple level at the same time: At the distributive level, participants in their comparison saw some of their co-workers (people performing the same job in different municipalities compared to more pay); some managers ('super salaries' at 'disappointing salaries'); and those of effort required in their job ('their wage does not reflect the commitment their roles entail').

This research is in favour of the findings of Cullen and Perez-Truglia (2021) that delivering pay comparisons, not pay level itself, drives work disengagement. As for procedural justice, injustice manifests itself in the form of pay determining process, not its amount: ('The manager's appraisal of work ethic is subjective and unfair', and 'only managers can see rewards which are reasonable', this is regarded as key finding on the study of Colquitt (2001) establishing procedural justice is arguably the most conceptually challenging component of justice as it's the least clear); Fair Employee Pay will be uncertain unless there's a trusted awarded process (WorldatWork, 2011; Langhneja, 2023); and the whole story leads to Institutional Theory's proposition, which postulates, whenever rewarding has become the subject of political interference (implicit), a series of distribution and procedural injustice will arise consequently.

Theme 3: Voice Suppression, Thwarted Autonomy, and Disengagement: The Motivational Outcome

This final integrated theme draws directly on the study's central dependent variable - namely, how and under what circumstances financial rewards are ineffective in sustaining motivation within this organisation. According to SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), "autonomy, competence, and relatedness need to be satisfied so that motivation and engagement will flourish"; the provision of controlling extrinsics, in other words, may undermine motivation if it fails to support rather than undermine need-satisfaction. The interviews illustrate denial, rather than need undermining (e.g., insufficient support), of each of SDT's three basic psychological needs: the centrally and authoritatively structured decision-making

identified as inherent within the description of Theme 1 undercuts workers' autonomy. The performance appraisal system-the vehicle through which an adequate worker should be able to perceive the relationship between his or her work and a subsequent award-is revealed in interview participants' testimony to have been "inaccurate and biased"; an adequate performance appraisal has thereby failed, in SDT terms, to support work efficacy and has undermined workers' competence and workers' autonomy.

Lastly, workers' relatedness is directly undermined by the municipality that "is not seen to encourage its members to adopt the ideologies, concepts, and motives of the collective." Workers "have been discouraged from communicating their thoughts, beliefs and aims," and there "is a tendency to place greater emphasis on what management says." These distinct but all need-thwarting approaches are underpinned by the single causality of political infiltration of what SDT explains to be the vehicles through which support for the individual worker's autonomy, competence, and relatedness would conventionally occur: the transparent, participative systems. The model for need thwarting simultaneously reconfigures for this context, the ambiguous, value-less, culturally undefined "clear understanding of right and wrong," that came out of Theme 2, as a state of amotivation, caused by undermining work autonomy, competence and relatedness, since "meaningful," "safe," "available," and "inspiring" circumstances of employee engagement (Kahn 1990) have been negated by political influences evinced throughout Theme 1.

The theory here provides the organisational home for culture as a dependent rather than mediating phenomenon; positive sentiments about being a part of this 'organisation', from all interviewees, only seemed to occur in connection with extrinsic rewards derived from the 'system'; i.e., they were "glad to have a job in this economy," which can simply be cited as an instance of the amotivation effect, rather than as proof against. Being "glad to have a job" simply reflects the less autonomous external regulation based on compulsion due to lack of alternatives suggested by SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and is not analogous to engaged behaviour. Intellectually, the article's key contribution is its theorising of culture as something that springs out of organisational processes, as opposed to something that influences the reward engagement link.

CONCLUSION

This study identified how employees' performance is motivated by rewards and how individual/collective culture interacts with the mechanisms of reward and engagement processes. As shown through the three combined themes, it is not one issue from multiple concerns but politics that

enables all of them, as well as the "lack of culture" in the data identified may represent culture rather than a lack of one. It is a theoretical contribution of this study in this context that it asserts it is not culture as a steady mediator that rewards employee engagement, but politics inside the organisation that created that context. From an application point of view, all reward-related aspects related to size and structure are not successful and do not have anything to challenge reward delivery and voice delivery politics, while focusing solely on that.

Because Nkangala District Municipality was the source of information for this research, it is not obvious to what extent the results will be transferable to other public-sector employees. It is a Category C municipality in Mpumalanga Province which manages a range of municipalities under a single mayor-executive, and the area is more predominantly rural than metropolitan; also, this kind of administration has fewer staff than metropolitan ones, as their responsibility is directing various local municipalities rather than managing them directly to implement policies. Bearing structural peculiarities into account, it is more probable that the findings apply more to rural, district municipalities under such integrated governing structures than to metropolitan ones and national departments.

This study solely addressed financial rewards (rewards that emanate from external sources) and neglected the factors affecting employees' engagement, such as feeling appreciated, self-management or career development, which could potentially add valuable suggestions to this issue and offer directions to future research. Further research on this subject must embrace multiple research methods, many participants or cities and research on how non-financial rewards affect employee engagement, especially within multicultural organisations, with strong impact analysis on not merely their showing up but also productivity gains of the organisations.

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