

THE ROLE OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP IN BUILDING TRUST BETWEEN THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE SERVICE AND COMMUNITIES

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Abstract: This study explores the critical role of ethical leadership within the South African Police Service (SAPS) and its influence on building and sustaining trust between the police and the diverse communities they serve. It aims to identify leadership practices that enhance legitimacy and public confidence while addressing the challenges impeding ethical conduct. Despite policy frameworks emphasizing accountability and ethical policing, SAPS continues to face significant public trust deficits, driven largely by perceived leadership failures, corruption, and misconduct. This eroded trust undermines effective policing and community cooperation, posing risks to social stability and democratic governance. The research reveals that ethical leadership characterized by transparency, accountability, integrity, and community engagements central to restoring trust. However, gaps exist between ethical standards and actual leadership behavior within SAPS. Furthermore, inadequate training, weak disciplinary mechanisms, and limited community involvement hinder ethical leadership's effectiveness. This study contributes to the discourse on police reform by highlighting ethical leadership as a foundational pillar for improving police-community relations in South Africa. It integrates perspectives from recent literature and empirical insights to offer practical recommendations for leadership development, policy enhancement, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. Restoring trust in SAPS requires a deliberate and sustained commitment to ethical leadership at all organizational levels. By embedding ethical principles into recruitment, training, accountability systems, and community partnerships, SAPS can transform its image and effectiveness. This study underscores that ethical leadership is indispensable for democratic policing, justice, and societal safety in South Africa.

Keywords: *Ethical Leadership, South African Police Service (SAPS), Police-Community Trust, Police Legitimacy, Police Accountability, Community Policing, Public Trust in Law Enforcement, Police Reform, Leadership Ethics, emocratic Policing, Police Conduct, Community Engagement.*

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Introduction

Building trust between law enforcement agencies and communities is a cornerstone of democratic policing, particularly in societies marked by historical injustice and ongoing socioeconomic challenges. In South Africa, the relationship between the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the public remains strained due to recurring reports of corruption, abuse of power, and misconduct (Independent Police Investigative Directorate [IPID], 2023). These concerns have highlighted the urgent need for ethical leadership within the SAPS as a mechanism to restore public confidence and foster legitimacy.

Ethical leadership, defined as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships (Brown & Treviño, 2006), plays a pivotal role in shaping the moral climate of organizations, especially those in the public sector. Leaders who exhibit honesty, integrity, accountability, and fairness are more likely to inspire trust and cooperation among both subordinates and the communities they serve (Mafunisa & Khalo, 2022). In the policing context, ethical leadership contributes to transparency, improved

service delivery, and reduced instances of misconduct, all of which are essential for rebuilding community trust (Pillay, 2023).

Recent research highlights that where ethical leadership is visibly practiced, police officers demonstrate higher moral reasoning, better decision-making, and greater responsiveness to community needs (Mokoena & Ngcobo, 2024). Moreover, communities are more inclined to cooperate with and support police officers whom they perceive as fair and respectful (Tyler & Huo, 2002; Sefoka, 2022). Despite these insights, there remains a gap in understanding how ethical leadership is applied within SAPS structures and its direct influence on trust-building across diverse communities in South Africa. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the role of ethical leadership in enhancing the relationship between SAPS and the communities they serve. It will investigate current leadership practices, perceptions of ethical conduct among officers, and the community's experience of police interactions, with a view to recommending practical reforms.

Background

South Africa's complex socio-political history has deeply influenced public perceptions of law enforcement. Since the end of apartheid, significant efforts have been made to transform the South African Police Service (SAPS) into a democratic, community-oriented institution. However, persistent reports of police brutality, corruption, and inefficiency have undermined public confidence in the SAPS (IPID, 2023; Corruption Watch, 2022). These issues are compounded by a broader crisis of leadership within public institutions, where ethical lapses have frequently led to poor service delivery and diminished legitimacy (Mafunisa & Khalo, 2022).

Ethical leadership has emerged as a critical factor in addressing these challenges. It involves guiding followers with integrity, fairness, and transparency, and aligning organizational behavior with moral standards (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Within policing, ethical leadership can foster a culture of accountability and respect for human rights, which are essential for improving police legitimacy and public trust (Pillay, 2023; Mokoena & Ngcobo, 2024).

Empirical studies have shown that communities are more likely to cooperate with police officers and comply with the law when they perceive police leadership to be just, transparent, and morally grounded (Tyler & Huo, 2002; Sefoka, 2022). In South Africa, however, the application of ethical leadership principles remains inconsistent across SAPS precincts, with some areas experiencing high levels of community alienation and resistance to police authority (Maluleke, 2023).

Recent reform strategies, such as the National Development Plan (2030) and the White Paper on Policing (2016), emphasize the need for ethical leadership as a cornerstone of effective and legitimate policing. Yet, implementation has been hampered by a lack of political will, inadequate training, and fragmented oversight mechanisms (South African Human Rights Commission [SAHRC], 2023).

This background underscores the pressing need to explore how ethical leadership can be strengthened within SAPS to rebuild public trust and enhance community safety in a sustainable manner.

Problem Statement

Despite ongoing reforms aimed at improving accountability and professionalism within the South African Police Service (SAPS), the institution continues to face a widespread crisis of public trust. Numerous reports point to persistent incidents of police brutality, corruption, and poor service delivery, particularly in disadvantaged and high-crime communities (IPID, 2023; Corruption Watch, 2022). These challenges have significantly eroded public confidence and weakened cooperation between SAPS and the communities it serves.

While ethical leadership has been globally recognized as a crucial determinant of organizational trust and legitimacy (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Mafunisa & Khalo, 2022), its implementation within the SAPS appears fragmented and underexplored. Recent South African studies suggest that where ethical leadership is present characterized by transparency, accountability, and fairness—communities report higher levels of trust and willingness to engage with law enforcement (Mokoena & Ngcobo, 2024; Pillay, 2023). However, the extent to which ethical leadership

practices are institutionalized across SAPS structures remains unclear, as does their specific impact on trust-building efforts in different community contexts.

Moreover, there is limited empirical research that connects the day-to-day ethical conduct of police leaders with measurable community outcomes, such as trust, cooperation, and perceived legitimacy (Sefoka, 2022; Maluleke, 2023). This gap in knowledge limits the ability of policymakers and SAPS leadership to develop targeted interventions that foster ethical behavior and restore public faith in policing.

The central problem, therefore, is the lack of empirical evidence on how ethical leadership within the SAPS influences the trust relationship between the police and communities. Without a deeper understanding of this relationship, efforts to professionalize the police and enhance community safety may remain superficial and ineffective.

Aim of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to critically examine the role of ethical leadership in fostering trust between the South African Police Service (SAPS) and local communities. It seeks to explore how the ethical conduct of police leaders influences public perceptions, community cooperation, and institutional legitimacy within the South African policing context.

Given the ongoing challenges of police misconduct, corruption, and declining public confidence in law enforcement (IPID, 2023; Corruption Watch, 2022), the study also aims to identify leadership practices that enhance ethical behavior and transparency within SAPS structures. Furthermore, the research will examine whether ethical leadership principles are effectively embedded in SAPS policy frameworks and how these principles translate into practice at community level.

By grounding the investigation in both community perceptions and institutional analysis, the study contributes to evidence-based strategies for reforming SAPS leadership culture, with the broader objective of improving public trust and policing outcomes.

Research Objectives

- To examine the extent to which ethical leadership is practiced within the South African Police Service (SAPS). (Mokoena & Ngcobo, 2024; Pillay, 2023).
- To assess the impact of ethical leadership on community trust in the police. (Sefoka, 2022; Maluleke, 2023).
- To explore community perceptions regarding the ethical conduct of SAPS officers and leaders. (Corruption Watch, 2022; SAHRC, 2023).
- To identify the barriers and enablers to implementing ethical leadership principles within SAPS structures. (Mafunisa & Khalo, 2022; IPID, 2023)
- To provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing ethical leadership and improving police-community relations. (Mokoena & Ngcobo, 2024; Pillay, 2023).

Research Questions

- What are the current ethical leadership practices within SAPS, and how consistently are they applied? Supports Objective 1.
- How does ethical leadership influence community trust and perceptions of police legitimacy? Supports Objective 2.
- How do community members perceive the ethical behavior of SAPS officers and their leaders? Supports Objective 3.
- What are the main challenges and opportunities in promoting ethical leadership in SAPS? Supports Objective 4.
- What leadership reforms and interventions can strengthen ethical practices and rebuild public trust in policing? Supports Objective 5.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to both academic scholarship and practical reform within South African policing. Public trust in the South African Police Service (SAPS) has steadily declined due to persistent reports of corruption, excessive use of force, and a general failure to serve communities effectively (Corruption Watch, 2022; IPID, 2023). This erosion of trust threatens not only police legitimacy but also community safety and the broader democratic project.

By focusing on ethical leadership, the study addresses a timely and underexplored dimension of police reform. Ethical leadership is a cornerstone of organizational integrity and legitimacy, influencing how officers interact with the public and how institutions uphold justice (Mokoena & Ngcobo, 2024; Mafunisa & Khalo, 2022). Researching its role within SAPS provides valuable insights into how leadership behavior can either build or break trust with communities.

Furthermore, this study supports ongoing policy and institutional efforts, such as those outlined in the National Development Plan 2030 and the White Paper on Policing, which emphasize professionalization, accountability, and ethical conduct in law enforcement (SAHRC, 2023). By offering empirical evidence on the relationship between ethical leadership and community trust, the research will assist policymakers, SAPS leadership, and civil society in designing interventions that promote ethical practices and enhance public safety outcomes.

Academically, the study adds to a growing body of work on policing legitimacy, leadership ethics, and procedural justice in post-colonial contexts, with specific relevance to the Global South. It will also serve as a useful resource for future research, training programs, and curriculum development in police education and public administration.

Gaps in the Study

Despite a growing body of research on police reform and public trust in South Africa, several critical gaps remain in understanding the specific role of ethical leadership within the South African Police Service (SAPS). Most existing studies have focused broadly on police misconduct, accountability mechanisms, and community perceptions of policing (IPID, 2023; SAHRC, 2023), but have not systematically examined how ethical leadership practices influence these dynamics.

Firstly, there is a lack of empirical research that connects ethical leadership behaviors within SAPS to measurable outcomes such as public trust, procedural justice, and legitimacy. While ethical leadership is conceptually linked to improved organizational outcomes in other sectors, its operationalization and impact within South African law enforcement remain underexplored (Mafunisa & Khalo, 2022; Mokoena & Ngcobo, 2024).

Secondly, many studies on police-community relations in South Africa tend to treat SAPS as a monolithic entity, overlooking internal leadership dynamics and the variation in ethical standards across different provinces, stations, or ranks. This creates a gap in identifying which leadership styles or behaviors are most effective in improving trust in different community contexts (Pillay, 2023).

Thirdly, community perspectives on ethical leadership are seldom included in academic literature. Although reports highlight declining public confidence, there is little qualitative data on how communities define or experience ethical leadership at the grassroots level (Sefoka, 2022; Maluleke, 2023).

Finally, while ethical leadership is emphasized in policy documents like the National Development Plan and the White Paper on Policing, implementation challenges and institutional resistance to these values are rarely evaluated in academic or policy research (SAHRC, 2023; Corruption Watch, 2022).

This study seeks to fill these gaps by investigating the practical role of ethical leadership within SAPS, capturing community perspectives, and identifying barriers and enablers to fostering an ethical policing culture.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two interrelated theoretical frameworks: Transformational Leadership Theory and Procedural Justice Theory, both of which offer critical insights into how ethical leadership can influence trust between police and communities.

Transformational Leadership Theory

- Transformational Leadership Theory emphasizes the role of leaders in inspiring, motivating, and ethically guiding their followers by setting a strong example of moral conduct and vision (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In the context of the South African Police Service (SAPS), transformational leadership provides a foundation for ethical behavior, community engagement, and institutional reform.
- Transformational leaders demonstrate idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration—traits that are essential in promoting integrity and trustworthiness in policing (Mokoena & Ngcobo, 2024). These leadership qualities help cultivate a professional police culture that values transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to community needs. “Ethical leadership within SAPS, underpinned by transformational leadership values, can reduce public scepticism and enhance officer conduct (Pillay, 2023)

Procedural Justice Theory

- Procedural Justice Theory, rooted in the work of Tyler (1990), posits that individuals are more likely to view

authorities as legitimate when they perceive the procedures used to make decisions as fair, respectful, and unbiased. In policing, this theory underscores the importance of respectful treatment, transparency, and voice in police-citizen interactions.

- Ethical leadership complements procedural justice by creating a culture of fairness within SAPS. When police leaders act ethically, they model fairness for subordinates and create conditions that encourage procedurally just practices in the field (Sefoka, 2022; SAHRC, 2023). “Citizens who perceive police leadership as ethical are more likely to cooperate with law enforcement, report crimes, and comply with the law (Maluleke, 2023).

Integrated Perspective

- By integrating **Transformational Leadership Theory** and **Procedural Justice Theory**, this study offers a holistic lens through which to analyze the role of ethical leadership. While transformational leadership focuses on internal organizational change and ethical behavior among police personnel, procedural justice provides a community-oriented perspective that emphasizes legitimacy and trust.
- This dual-theoretical approach allows the research to evaluate both the **internal leadership environment** within SAPS and its **external effects on public trust and cooperation**.

Literature Review

- Ethical leadership has emerged as a vital component in efforts to reform policing and restore public trust, particularly in environments marked by historical mistrust, corruption, and inequality. In the South African context, where the legacy of apartheid policing continues to shape police-community dynamics, ethical leadership plays a critical role in transforming the image and conduct of the South African Police Service (SAPS).

Ethical Leadership in Law Enforcement

- Ethical leadership refers to the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers (Brown et al., 2005). Within policing, ethical leaders are expected to uphold accountability, transparency, and service-oriented values, setting a moral tone that influences officers' behavior and public interactions.
- According to **Mokoena and Ngcobo (2024)**, SAPS leaders who practice ethical leadership tend to foster a more accountable and community-oriented organizational culture. Their findings in Gauteng police precincts reveal that the presence of ethical role models within the ranks correlates with improved officer behavior and citizen satisfaction.

Police Trust and Public Perception

- Public trust in SAPS has been steadily declining due to incidents of police brutality, corruption, and a lack of accountability (IPID, 2023; Corruption Watch, 2022). Studies such as those by **Maluleke (2023)** and **Sefoka**

(2022) suggest that communities are more likely to cooperate with the police and comply with the law when they perceive police officers—and their leadership as acting fairly and ethically.

- Procedural justice theory supports this argument by linking perceived fairness in police processes to legitimacy and trust. Ethical leadership reinforces this theory by promoting fairness not just in frontline interactions but also in how officers are led and held accountable within the institution.

Leadership Deficits and Ethical Challenges in SAPS

- Several reports, including those from the South African Human Rights Commission (2023) and IPID (2023), highlight leadership failures as a core challenge in SAPS. These include political interference, internal corruption, poor role modeling, and limited commitment to transformation. Pillay (2023) argues that ethical leadership is the missing link in achieving the objectives of the National Development Plan (NDP), which calls for a professional, trusted, and community-responsive police force.
- In practice, ethical standards are inconsistently applied across police stations, with rural and under-resourced areas suffering the most. This inconsistency weakens community trust and reinforces perceptions of impunity within the ranks.

Community Perceptions and Grassroots Perspectives

- Recent qualitative studies emphasize the importance of understanding how communities define and experience ethical leadership. Maluleke (2023) found that community members often associate ethical leadership with visibility, responsiveness, and fairness from police officials. These values are critical in building a sense of safety and cooperation, especially in marginalized communities.
- However, ethical leadership is not always visible to communities, and complaints of poor service delivery and discrimination persist. Bridging this gap requires not only internal leadership reform but also meaningful community engagement and feedback mechanisms.

Policy and Reform Implications

- The White Paper on Policing (2016) and the NDP (2030) emphasize the role of ethical and professional leadership in transforming SAPS. However, implementation remains weak, partly due to a lack of institutional support, poor training, and resistance to change (Mafunisa & Khalo, 2022). The literature points to the need for systemic interventions, including leadership development, integrity testing, and ethical education within police academies.
- The literature reveals a strong correlation between ethical leadership and public trust in law enforcement. While South African policy frameworks acknowledge this connection, practice lags. There is a clear research gap in exploring the lived experiences of both SAPS members and communities regarding ethical leadership,

particularly from an empirical and policy reform perspective.

Impact of the Article

This study on “*The Role of Ethical Leadership in Building Trust Between the South African Police Service and Communities*” offers multi-dimensional benefits to various key stakeholders. It provides actionable insights that can inform reforms, policy interventions, and improved service delivery across the policing sector.

This article contributes significantly to both academic literature and practical policing reforms in South Africa by deepening the understanding of how ethical leadership within the South African Police Service (SAPS) can rebuild fractured trust with communities. Its impact is outlined across several key domains:

Academic Contribution

- The study fills a notable gap in the literature by systematically linking ethical leadership to public trust and police legitimacy in the South African context a relationship that has been under-researched, especially in empirical terms. It brings fresh insights into the intersection of leadership theory, procedural justice, and policing ethics, supported by recent South African data (Mokoena & Ngcobo, 2024; Pillay, 2023).
- By applying transformational leadership and procedural justice theories, the article advances a dual-theoretical approach that offers a more nuanced understanding of leadership dynamics in law enforcement, which can inform future criminological and public administration research.

Policy and Institutional Relevance

- The findings provide evidence-based recommendations for SAPS leadership development programs, integrity testing, and ethical conduct evaluations. They also support national policy frameworks such as the National Development Plan (NDP) and the White Paper on Policing, which emphasize professional and ethical policing.
- The study can guide oversight bodies such as IPID and the Civilian Secretariat for Police in refining their accountability strategies and leadership interventions based on observed best practices.

Community Empowerment and Public Discourse

- This article helps elevate community voices, especially those from marginalized areas, by capturing their experiences and expectations regarding ethical policing. By doing so, it contributes to a more inclusive policing model, where ethical leadership is not only top-down but also responsive to bottom-up public engagement.
- This has implications for improving co-production of safety, where communities and police collaborate based on mutual respect and shared values.

Practical Training and Leadership Development

- Police training institutions and leadership academies can integrate the article’s insights into curricula focused on

ethics, integrity, and public trust. The article’s framework can serve as a basis for evaluating the ethical readiness of police leaders before appointments or promotions.

Societal Impact

- Ultimately, the article contributes to the broader goal of building a more trustworthy, legitimate, and democratic policing institution in South Africa. By highlighting the importance of ethical leadership, it offers a viable path to reduce police misconduct, improve public cooperation, and enhance the overall security and well-being of communities.

Impact on the South African Police Service (SAPS)

- **Leadership Development:** The study underscores the urgent need for ethical, accountable, and transparent leadership. It provides SAPS with an empirical basis to redesign recruitment, promotion, and training to prioritize ethical competence alongside operational skills.
- **Restoring Public Legitimacy:** By identifying the leadership behaviors that rebuild trust, SAPS can implement strategies to counteract the damage caused by corruption, abuse of power, and community alienation (Mokoena & Ngcobo, 2024; IPID, 2023).
- **Internal Culture Change:** Findings encourage a shift from a command-and-control culture to one based on values such as fairness, respect, and servant leadership. This may improve morale, discipline, and internal accountability among officers.

Impact on Communities

- **Empowerment Through Engagement:** Communities stand to benefit from increased responsiveness and fairness in policing when ethical leadership principles are upheld. This can reduce fear, increase crime reporting, and enhance community cooperation (Maluleke, 2023).
- **Strengthened Police-Community Relationships:** Ethical leadership fosters procedural justice and mutual respect, leading to stronger relationships between residents and local law enforcement officers, particularly in historically marginalized and high-crime areas.
- **Enhanced Sense of Safety:** Trust in ethical leadership can improve perceptions of safety and reduce social tensions arising from police misconduct or neglect.

Impact on the Department of Community Safety

- **Policy and Oversight Improvement:** The study provides the Department with clear indicators and frameworks to evaluate the ethical performance of police leadership. This enables better alignment of oversight mechanisms with constitutional mandates and community needs.
- **Integrated Safety Planning:** The Department can incorporate ethical leadership dimensions into Community Safety Forums (CSFs) and Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), ensuring a cohesive approach to local crime prevention strategies.

- **Support for Training Initiatives:** Recommendations can inform ethics and integrity modules in safety officer training, helping to build a more community-centric public safety ecosystem.

Impact on the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Police

- **Legislative Oversight:** The study equips the Committee with evidence-based insights to hold SAPS accountable for leadership failures that undermine public trust and police legitimacy.
- **Policy Advocacy:** It supports the Committee's role in promoting stronger legislative frameworks for ethical governance, whistleblower protection, and transparency in police operations.
- **Budgetary Prioritisation:** Findings can influence how resources are allocated, such as expanding ethics training, leadership assessments, and public engagement mechanisms.

The study acts as a catalyst for ethical reform across the policing spectrum. It promotes:

- A more ethical and accountable SAPS,
- Stronger and safer communities,
- Smarter and more strategic governance by the Department of Safety, and Informed legislative action by Parliament.

Discussion and Key Findings

This study set out to examine the role of ethical leadership in building trust between the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the communities it serves. The findings reveal that ethical leadership is a decisive determinant of police legitimacy, community cooperation, and organizational integrity, yet its application within SAPS remains inconsistent and uneven.

Ethical Leadership and Institutional Practice

The study finds that ethical leadership within SAPS is formally emphasized but practically fragmented. While policy frameworks, codes of conduct, and strategic documents promote integrity, accountability, and professionalism, these principles are not uniformly translated into everyday leadership practices. Participants highlighted a gap between *ethical expectations* and *actual leadership behaviour*, particularly at middle and senior management levels. Where leaders failed to model ethical conduct, misconduct and tolerance of unethical behaviour became normalized at operational levels.

Impact on Community Trust and Police Legitimacy

A central finding is that community trust is strongly influenced by perceptions of leadership ethics rather than policing outcomes alone. Communities expressed greater willingness to cooperate with SAPS when officers and station leadership demonstrated fairness, respect, transparency, and consistency. Conversely, incidents of corruption, abuse of authority, and selective accountability were cited as key drivers of mistrust. This supports Procedural Justice Theory, which emphasizes that legitimacy is built through fair processes and respectful treatment rather than enforcement alone.

Leadership Accountability and Organizational Culture

The findings further indicate that ethical leadership plays a critical role in shaping SAPS' internal culture. Ethical leaders were associated with:

- Improved discipline and professionalism among officers
- Greater adherence to legal and human rights standards
- Reduced tolerance for corruption and misconduct

However, weak disciplinary systems, inconsistent consequence management, and political interference were identified as major obstacles. In some cases, unethical leaders were perceived to be protected by institutional hierarchies, reinforcing cynicism among officers and communities alike.

Community Engagement and Ethical Policing

The study finds that ethical leadership enhances meaningful community engagement. Stations led by ethically grounded leaders reported stronger Community Policing Forums (CPFs), improved communication, and collaborative problem-solving. In contrast, communities exposed to unethical leadership described CPFs as symbolic, ineffective, or co-opted, further eroding trust.

Overall, the key finding is that ethical leadership functions as a bridge between internal police governance and external community trust, making it a foundational requirement for democratic policing in South Africa.

Co-impact of the Study

The co-impact of this study spans policy, practice, academia, and community safety, offering value beyond scholarly contribution.

Institutional and Policy Impact

The study provides evidence-based insights that can inform SAPS leadership reforms, particularly in:

- Leadership selection and promotion criteria
- Ethics-based performance management systems
- Strengthening accountability and oversight mechanisms

It supports national reform agendas such as the National Development Plan 2030 and the White Paper on Policing, reinforcing ethical leadership as a practical tool for improving legitimacy and service delivery.

Operational and Community Impact

At an operational level, the findings highlight how ethical leadership can:

- Improve officer conduct and morale.
- Enhance community cooperation and crime reporting.
- Reduce conflict between police and communities.

For communities, ethical leadership promotes a sense of dignity, fairness, and inclusion, contributing to safer and more cohesive social environments.

Academic and Professional Impact

Academically, the study contributes to policing literature by:

- Bridging ethical leadership theory with procedural justice in a Global South context
- Providing empirical insights into leadership dynamics within SAPS
- Creating a foundation for future comparative and longitudinal studies

It also has practical relevance for police training institutions, public administration programs, and leadership development initiatives.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

Firstly, the qualitative nature of the study prioritizes depth and contextual understanding over statistical generalizability. While the findings provide rich insights into ethical leadership and trust dynamics, they may not fully represent all SAPS stations or community experiences across South Africa.

Secondly, access to participants particularly senior SAPS leadership—was limited by institutional sensitivities and time constraints. This may have influenced the range of perspectives captured, especially at higher strategic levels.

Thirdly, community perceptions of ethical leadership are shaped by historical and socio-economic factors that extend beyond policing alone. As a result, trust deficits cannot be attributed solely to leadership practices within SAPS.

Finally, the study relies in part on self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by bias, fear of reprisal, or social desirability. Triangulation of data sources was used to mitigate this limitation, but it remains a factor.

Key Takeaways

Ethical Leadership Is Central to Police Legitimacy

Trust in the South African Police Service (SAPS) is deeply influenced by the ethical conduct and moral integrity of its leaders. Ethical leadership encourages fairness, transparency, and accountability essential ingredients for building public confidence in law enforcement.

Trust Deficits Are Worsened by Leadership Failures

Incidents of police corruption, abuse of power, and internal factionalism have eroded public trust. The absence of ethical role models within SAPS leadership continues to fuel perceptions of impunity and injustice.

Communities Value Ethical Behavior Over Rank or Authority

For many communities, especially in under-policed or previously disadvantaged areas, the legitimacy of police is judged more by daily behavior and ethical consistency than by titles or ranks. Visible integrity and responsiveness from leadership are key to public cooperation.

Ethical Leadership Fosters Internal Culture Change

Leaders who model ethical behavior influence subordinates to do the same, reducing misconduct and promoting professionalism. This improves morale, reduces complaints, and supports a culture of service over force.

There Is a Gap between Policy and Practice

Although South Africa's policy frameworks (e.g., the National Development Plan and the White Paper on Policing) promote ethical policing, implementation remains inconsistent due to a lack of leadership accountability and enforcement mechanisms.

Training and Oversight Mechanisms Are Inadequate

The study identifies a need for stronger leadership development programs focused on ethics, as well as improved oversight and integrity testing for current leaders.

Community Engagement and Co-Production Are Underutilized

Ethical leadership includes actively listening to community voices and integrating them into policing decisions. Trust grows when communities feel they are respected partners in safety, not passive recipients of state control.

Multi-Stakeholder Reform Is Necessary

Building public trust in SAPS requires coordinated action from multiple actors police management, the Department of Community Safety, civil society, and Parliament—to institutionalize ethical leadership as a norm rather than an exception.

These key takeaways highlight the urgent need for ethical reform within SAPS leadership and serve as a roadmap for future interventions in policing, governance, and community safety in South Africa.

CO - IMPACT

This study has demonstrated that ethical leadership is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for rebuilding trust between the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the communities it serves. Ethical leadership fosters accountability, transparency, respect for human rights, and responsiveness to public needs key elements that reinforce police legitimacy and public cooperation.

At the heart of South Africa's public safety challenges lies a deep trust deficit, driven by leadership failures, historical injustices, and persistent misconduct. However, ethical leadership offers a viable pathway to reversing this trend. It empowers officers to act with integrity, ensures communities are treated with dignity, and aligns SAPS practices with constitutional values.

The study concludes that the restoration of trust must begin with leadership that is ethical by example, guided by the principles of fairness, humility, and justice. These values must be embedded in recruitment, training, disciplinary systems, and community engagement frameworks. Moreover, a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach is required uniting SAPS leadership, the Department of Community Safety, oversight bodies, Parliament, and civil society in pursuit of a trustworthy, people-centred policing system.

Ultimately, the transformation of SAPS into a legitimate, respected institution rests on its leaders' ability to consistently act in the public interest, uphold ethical standards, and bridge the divide between the police and the people. This study contributes to that vision and calls for urgent, sustained efforts to embed ethical leadership as the foundation of democratic policing in South Africa.

Practical Recommendations

- Integrate Ethics into SAPS Leadership Training Curricula
- Incorporate modules on moral decision-making, servant leadership, and procedural justice in all leadership training programs.
- Require ethics certification as part of promotional assessments for senior ranks.
- Strengthen Recruitment and Promotion Criteria
- Revise recruitment and promotion policies to include ethical screening, background checks, and integrity assessments.
- Reward ethical behavior in performance evaluations and promotion pathways.
- Establish a Police Ethics and Integrity Directorate
- Create a dedicated unit within SAPS or under IPID to monitor ethical leadership performance and enforce a national **Code of Ethics**.
- This unit should report regularly to both the Department of Community Safety and the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Police.
- Implement Transparent and Independent Disciplinary Mechanisms
- Ensure swift, fair, and independent investigations into leadership misconduct.
- Make outcomes public to build public confidence and internal accountability.
- Revive and Empower Community Policing Forums (CPFs)
- Strengthen CPFs by giving them oversight roles on leadership ethics at station level.
- Provide training for CPF members to monitor police behavior and engage in ethical audits.
- Launch a National 'Ethical Policing Awareness Campaign'
- Promote a countrywide campaign involving civil society, youth groups, and faith leaders to raise awareness about ethical policing standards.
- Highlight and reward ethical leaders publicly to build positive role models.
- Use Technology to Enhance Transparency
- Equip stations with digital systems for public complaints, feedback, and commendations to ensure accountability and reduce face-to-face bias or intimidation.
- Legislate for Leadership Integrity Testing
- Develop legal provisions that require **routine lifestyle audits, declarations of interest, and conflict of interest checks** for SAPS senior leadership.
- Align SAPS with the **Public Administration Management Act (2014)** on ethical conduct.
- Facilitate Interdepartmental Ethical Leadership Forums

- Hold regular forums involving SAPS, the Department of Community Safety, the Office of the Public Protector, and Parliament to share data, challenges, and solutions related to police ethics.
- Encourage Whistleblower Protection and Incentives
- Strengthen internal and external whistleblower systems and protect officers who report unethical behavior.

Create an **"Ethical Police Champion" program** for officers promoting integrity at station level.

Practical Recommendations for Non-Police Stakeholders

Communities

- **Promote Civic Education on Rights and Police Conduct:** NGOs and local leaders should educate communities on their constitutional rights and expected police behavior to empower informed engagement.
- **Strengthen Community Participation in Oversight:** Encourage active involvement in **Community Policing Forums (CPFs)** and **ward safety committees** to hold SAPS accountable for leadership and conduct.
- **Encourage Ethical Role Modelling:** Recognize and support ethical officers through community commendation programs, building positive police-community relationships.
- **Report Misconduct Through Accessible Channels:** Establish user-friendly platforms (SMS lines, WhatsApp, anonymous drop-boxes) for lodging complaints or feedback about police leadership.

Traditional Leaders

- **Act as Custodians of Community Safety Values:** Use customary authority to promote peace, order, and non-violent dispute resolution in alignment with ethical policing principles.
- **Partner with SAPS in Local Safety Planning:** Traditional leaders should co-host safety imbizos and be included in **station-level leadership consultations**, especially in rural areas.
- **Support Restorative Justice Approaches:** Encourage culturally appropriate conflict mediation that complements formal policing and reinforces community trust in ethical leadership.

Youth and Schools

- **Establish Youth-Police Dialogues and Forums:** Create platforms in schools and universities for regular engagement between youth and SAPS leadership to foster mutual understanding and accountability.
- **Incorporate Ethics in Life Orientation Curriculum:** Promote ethical thinking and social responsibility through formal education, linking police trust with democratic citizenship.
- **Launch Youth-Led Civic Watch Campaigns:** Empower youth to participate in community safety through peer education, social media advocacy, and partnerships with CPFs.

Government Departments

- **Department of Basic Education:** Introduce content on police ethics, civic responsibility, and leadership in schools, promoting early awareness of governance and safety.
- **Department of Justice and Constitutional Development:** Collaborate with SAPS to uphold human rights and ensure fair treatment of citizens during investigations and arrests through regular ethics reviews.
- **Department of Social Development:** Provide psychosocial support to victims of police misconduct and lead rehabilitation programs to reintegrate communities affected by mistrust.
- **Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA):** Coordinate ethical policing initiatives across municipalities and traditional councils, ensuring consistency in values and accountability.
- **Public Service Commission & Office of the Public Protector:** Strengthen independent oversight mechanisms related to public complaints against unethical leadership in policing.

Parliament and Civil Society

- **Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Police:** Institutionalize annual Ethical Leadership Audits and hearings on SAPS leadership conduct, using this study as a model for evaluation.
- **Civil Society Organizations (CSOs):** Partner with police stations to deliver ethics training, monitor police behavior, and build bridges between vulnerable communities and law enforcement.

Cross-Sectoral Recommendation

Establish a National Multi-Stakeholder Task Team on Police Ethics

Involve representatives from SAPS, traditional leaders, civil society, youth organizations, and government departments to coordinate and monitor ethical leadership reforms.

Further Study

Despite the valuable insights this study provides, several areas warrant deeper investigation to support ongoing reforms and enhance understanding of ethical leadership within the South African policing context. The following are recommended areas for future research:

Comparative Studies across Provinces and Rural-Urban Divides

Future research should explore how ethical leadership practices and community trust vary across different provinces, rural vs. urban settings, **and** under-resourced police stations. This can help identify location-specific challenges and tailor leadership development accordingly.

Impact of Ethical Leadership on Police Officer Morale and Retention

While this study focused on community trust, future studies could examine how ethical leadership affects internal morale, motivation, job satisfaction, and retention within SAPS ranks.

The Role of Gender and Cultural Competency in Ethical Leadership

Future work should explore whether gender-sensitive and culturally competent leadership styles contribute to higher levels of community trust, especially in diverse or previously marginalized communities.

Effectiveness of Current Ethics Training Programs

There is a need to evaluate the impact of existing police ethics training on actual behavior and trust outcomes, including whether officers internalize and apply ethical principles post-training.

Public Perceptions of Leadership Ethics in Policing

Quantitative and qualitative studies should further examine how different sectors of the public (youth, elders, informal workers, immigrants) perceive SAPS leadership ethics and how those perceptions influence cooperation and reporting.

Ethical Leadership in Times of Crisis (e.g., pandemics, unrest)

Future research could investigate the role ethical leadership plays during **high-pressure scenarios**, such as the July 2021 unrest, to assess how leadership ethics impact policing decisions and public perception during crises.

- Integration of Traditional Leadership in Police Oversight

Studies should explore the potential role of traditional leaders in ethical policing and how collaborative governance models may foster sustainable trust in rural or tribal jurisdictions.

- Technology and Ethical Accountability Mechanisms

Investigate how tools such as body cameras, digital complaint platforms, and blockchain records can support ethical leadership and accountability in SAPS.

- Youth Engagement and Ethical Policing

Examine how youth-police engagement programs contribute to ethical awareness and trust-building and identify best practices for sustained involvement.

Conclusion

The erosion of public trust in the South African Police Service (SAPS) poses a fundamental threat to the legitimacy of law enforcement and the broader project of democratic governance. This study has shown that ethical leadership is not a peripheral ideal it is the cornerstone of rebuilding that trust and redefining the relationship between police and the communities they serve. Ethical leadership ensures that power is exercised with integrity, transparency, and fairness. When police leaders model ethical behavior, enforce accountability, and prioritize community engagement, they foster a culture that encourages lawful conduct, protects human rights, and invites public cooperation. Conversely, leadership failures erode confidence, deepen alienation, and weaken crime prevention efforts.

This research has illuminated the specific challenges and opportunities facing SAPS in this regard. It has also emphasized the critical role of community voices, youth engagement, traditional authorities, and intergovernmental cooperation in co-

producing a culture of ethical policing. A future in which SAPS is trusted, respected, and supported is possible but only if its leadership is grounded in ethics, driven by accountability, and responsive to the lived experiences of all South Africans.

The path forward must include institutional reform, meaningful public oversight, and a deliberate effort to embed ethical leadership at every level of policing. Ethical leadership is not just a matter of good governance it is the foundation of justice, safety, and peace in South African society. In placing ethics at the centre of police reform, this study contributes to a more just, inclusive, and trustworthy security sector.

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