



# Age, Authority, and Resistance: Exploring Intergenerational Power Tensions Between Junior Staff and Young Supervisors in the South African Public Service

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## ABSTRACT

Within its administrative ranks, the South African public service has seen a growing generational shift, with younger professionals taking on supervisory responsibilities over more senior subordinates. This article examines the frequently disregarded power struggles brought on by age-based resistance in the public sector's hierarchical structure. Based on perceptions of seniority, life experience, and cultural values, the article explores how older junior employees contest or reject the authority of younger supervisors. It does this by drawing on conceptual analysis and secondary literature. In order to demonstrate how age functions as an informal power determinant that frequently supersedes official organizational roles, the study bases its analysis on Max Weber's concept of rational-legal authority, generational theory, and African relational norms like Ubuntu. According to research, younger supervisors usually face interpersonal conflict, challenges to their legitimacy, and passive non-compliance, all of which impair accountability and performance. In bureaucracies with unclear roles and enduring cultural norms of respect for elders, these conflicts are exacerbated. Clearer organizational policies on authority recognition, supervisor training in cross-generational communication, and re-socialization mechanisms that support merit-based leadership regardless of age are just a few of the institutional strategies promoted in the article to address these intergenerational conflicts. The paper concludes by urging more empirical studies on the power dynamics associated with age in Global South public administration contexts.

**Keywords:** Intergenerational tension, Public service, Organisational authority, Age-based resistance, South Africa

## 1. Introduction and Background

The public sector workforce in South Africa is changing in terms of generation, which has led to new supervisory dynamics that go against accepted authority norms. Young professionals are being appointed to supervisory positions more frequently as a result of institutional efforts to promote youth leadership under transformation policies and government-led initiatives like the Public Service Graduate Programme (2021). Particularly in administrative and frontline service departments, these appointments frequently result in younger people overseeing older, more seasoned subordinates (Dlamini & Morudu, 2023; Mthembu, 2022). Although this change signifies advancements in youth empowerment, employment equity, and capacity renewal, it also brings about intricate intergenerational conflicts within organizational power structures.

Firm cultural expectations regarding age-based seniority and informal hierarchy are frequently held by older junior staff members, many of whom have worked in support roles for decades. The ability of younger supervisors to enforce authority, carry out instructions, or handle discipline may be weakened by these expectations, which are based on African values like "hlonipha abadala" (respect for elders) (Ncube & Sithole, 2023). Young supervisors thus often face passive or active resistance that jeopardizes service delivery, teamwork, and performance. This resistance reflects larger institutional and cultural inconsistencies in the way authority is operationalized and legitimized in the public sector, and it is not just confined to interpersonal conflict (Mabasa & Moeti, 2021).

Age continues to be a crucial indicator of respect and legitimacy in many African societies, frequently taking precedence over official status or credentials (Nkosi & Matlala, 2020). As a result, role confusion, symbolic rejection, and emotional strain occur when younger people are assigned to supervise older coworkers. According to Tshabalala and Nyundu (2023), older subordinates may exhibit subtle yet intentional resistance through acts like verbal pushback during meetings, slow response to instructions, reluctance to cooperate, or strategic withdrawal from team engagements. In addition to undermining institutional cohesiveness, such behaviour creates an atmosphere in which authority is negotiable based on age rather than function and merit-based leadership is devalued.

The purpose of this article is to increase knowledge of the organizational and cultural aspects of power struggles between generations in the South African public sector. It specifically looks into how older subordinates deal with, question, and occasionally reject the authority of younger supervisors. A

theoretical and practical foundation for comprehending age-related power struggles in bureaucratic settings is provided by its exploration of the underlying sociocultural and institutional mechanisms that permit these behaviours.

This paper adds to the scholarly and policy discussion on workplace authority, respect, and leadership legitimacy by placing the problem in the larger framework of post-apartheid public service reforms, African communitarian values, and changing generational expectations. It also makes the case that ignoring these conflicts runs the risk of impeding institutional reform initiatives meant to revitalize the government and enhance service provision.

### Research Objectives

- To explore how age influences power relations between junior staff and young supervisors.
- To identify patterns and forms of resistance exhibited by older subordinates.
- To propose institutional strategies for addressing age-related managerial conflict.

### Research Question

What are the causes and consequences of intergenerational power tensions between older junior staff and younger supervisors in the South African public service?

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## 2. Literature Review

Studies that concentrate on formal organizational structures, especially those that address policy compliance, performance evaluation, and hierarchical leadership, have a significant influence on the conversation surrounding public sector authority (Reddy & Govender, 2021). These studies frequently ignore the impact of informal social hierarchies that coexist with formal bureaucratic systems, assuming that authority is respected once it is institutionally assigned. This presumption needs to be critically re-examined in the African context, where age hierarchies, respect culture, and communal norms have a significant impact on interpersonal relationships.

In the past, public administration literature has paid little attention to age-based conflicts in the workplace. When they are discussed, the emphasis is typically on technological adaptation or intergenerational cooperation between younger and older staff members rather than outright defiance of authority (Ntim & Essop, 2022). While ignoring the ways in which older junior employees may question the legitimacy of younger supervisors, particularly in highly bureaucratized systems like those in South Africa, these narratives usually portray older workers as having difficulty embracing innovation or digitalization.

According to organizational psychology, perceived deficiencies in competence, emotional intelligence, or legitimacy are frequently connected to resistance to leadership. However, the interpretation and acceptance of authority are also significantly influenced by cultural legitimacy, which is based on age, social standing, and life experience (Mabunda & Shongwe, 2023). In this sense, age turns into a cultural credential that occasionally takes precedence over managerial title or professional credentials. It is challenging for younger managers to exert control over older subordinates in African societies because leadership is typically linked to eldership and wisdom rather than formal education or appointment (Tshabalala & Nyundu, 2023).

Maseko and Molefe's (2021) study of Gauteng municipal administrations revealed that younger supervisors frequently faced subtle forms of insubordination from their older counterparts, such as disregarding directives, rerouting tasks, or using years of service as an excuse for noncompliance. These behaviours were indicative of underlying cultural discomfort with inverted age hierarchies rather than being categorized as misconduct. Their results challenge Weberian presumptions of rational-legal authority as a universal norm and are consistent with a larger African worldview in which age is strongly ingrained in ideas of leadership legitimacy.

Furthermore, the social values of respect, dignity, and mutual recognition in the workplace are emphasized by African relational frameworks, especially Ubuntu (Ncube & Sithole, 2023). Although these ideals might promote unity, they might also reinforce age-based deference, which impedes younger leaders' ability to manage. When these conflicts are not directly addressed by the institutional culture, power struggles frequently take place behind closed doors and manifest as poor team morale, role ambiguity, and performance stagnation.

While international studies provide insights into generational workplace stereotypes, often citing differences in communication styles, technology use, or values (Moyo, 2022), they typically lack the cultural specificity necessary to explain the South African case. What is missing in much of the global literature is an understanding of how informal norms of elder respect intersect with formal institutional authority, particularly in post-colonial African bureaucracies undergoing generational renewal.

The literature gap is therefore twofold: First, there is insufficient exploration of how younger supervisors are perceived and resisted by older junior staff in African bureaucratic settings. Second, there is a lack of research that combines organisational theory with African philosophical traditions to explain authority acceptance. This article aims to bridge that gap by synthesising contemporary insights and developing a conceptual framework grounded in African socio-administrative realities.

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## 3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in three theoretical lenses:

#### a) Weber's Theory of Rational-Legal Authority

According to Weber's model, authority in bureaucracies comes from assigned roles and legal requirements rather than from individual traits (Weber, 1978). The South African context, however, shows a recurring conflict between this model and cultural understandings of age-related respect.

#### b) Generational Theory (Mannheim, 1952)

This theory describes how various generations internalize different expectations, values, and beliefs. This leads to varying attitudes toward identity, communication, and authority in the workplace. Younger leadership may be perceived by more senior staff as inexperienced or culturally inappropriate.

#### c) African Communitarianism and Ubuntu

African philosophies place a strong emphasis on age-and wisdom-based hierarchy and respect for the community. If not culturally adjusted, the Ubuntu tenet "I am because we are" can delegitimize younger authority figures and structure social relationships (Ndlovu & Masuku, 2020).

Together, these theories provide a multidimensional lens to explore how formal authority is undermined by informal, age-based perceptions in public administration.

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## 4. Methodology

This article does not require ethical approval or direct human participation because it uses a conceptual research design based on secondary data analysis. It synthesizes expert reports, government policy documents, and peer-reviewed scholarly works released between 2018 and 2024.

### Data Sources:

- Academic databases (Google Scholar, JSTOR, SABINET)
- Government reports (e.g., Department of Public Service and Administration)
- Theoretical and conceptual texts on public management and African cultural studies

### Analytical Approach:

Thematic content analysis was used to identify recurring themes across literature concerning intergenerational tensions, age-based resistance, and leadership challenges. These were then mapped onto the theoretical framework outlined earlier.

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## 5. Results

Three recurrent themes emerged from the conceptual and secondary data analysis, characterizing the intergenerational power dynamics between younger supervisors and senior junior employees in the South African public sector. These themes show how institutional ambiguity, cultural values, and unwritten behavioural codes that govern workplace dynamics continuously undercut formal authority.

### 5.1 Legitimacy Challenges

The analysis's most notable theme is how older subordinates challenge the legitimacy of their younger superiors. Based on their perceived lack of life experience, emotional maturity, and professional longevity, older employees frequently doubt the credibility of younger leaders (Mabunda & Shongwe, 2023; Tshabalala & Nyundu, 2023). Subordinates frequently portray these supervisors as "bookish" or unconnected to the department's real-world operations, despite the fact that they may have formal rank and academic credentials. From rumours and side remarks to the rerouting of tasks through unofficial channels, this leads to informal narratives that subtly undermine their authority.

Age is valued as a more genuine indicator of authority than official designation in this larger informal power discourse, which includes these micro-resistances. Accordingly, legitimacy is now based on a culturally aware view of who has the authority to lead rather than the organizational structure, frequently favouring the older subordinate over the younger manager (Ncube & Sithole, 2023).

### 5.2 Passive Resistance

The prevalence of passive resistance among senior staff members is the second theme. In these situations, resistance takes more subtle forms, such as slow task completion, refusal to share important information, non-reaction to emails or instructions, and disengagement from group meetings, as opposed to overt insubordination, which would result in formal disciplinary procedures. These actions are purposeful enough to compromise managerial efficacy but subtle enough to escape criticism. According to the literature, these behaviours are caused by both emotional resentments stemming from a perceived disregard for age-based social hierarchies and cognitive dissonance, where subordinates find it difficult to reconcile institutional rules with their own cultural beliefs (Maseko & Molefe, 2021; Dlamini & Morudu, 2023). Instead of enforcing their authority through policy, younger managers are forced to constantly negotiate it through interpersonal appeasement as a result of this workplace culture.

### 5.3 Organisational Role Ambiguity

Lastly, it is revealed that these tensions are institutionally enabled by the theme of role ambiguity. Human resource policies do not provide clear guidance on how to assert authority without violating cultural sensitivities or being accused of disrespect or arrogance, according to many supervisors, especially in provincial and municipal departments (Reddy & Govender, 2021). Informal age-based authority steps in to fill the power vacuum created by this institutional silence, which weakens organizational discipline. Furthermore, young supervisors frequently lack the assistance they need to deal with challenging subordinates in settings where performance management systems are inadequate or applied inconsistently. Self-censorship, a departure from enforcement responsibilities, and a decline in institutional discipline and supervisory confidence are the outcomes of this.

### Synthesis of Results

These three themes, legitimacy issues, passive resistance, and role ambiguity, intersect to create a systemic issue where bureaucratic rationalism and cultural age norms collide. The results show that the authority of younger supervisors will continue to be structurally contested unless cultural dynamics are recognized and actively addressed through training and policy. Relationships between supervisors run the risk of becoming dysfunctional as a result, which could impair team productivity, lower morale, and cause service delivery to stagnate.

## 6. Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that workplace personality and performance management are not the only factors contributing to intergenerational conflict in the South African public sector. Instead, it has its roots in social norms, cultural expectations, and structural ambiguities in the state bureaucracy. This supports the increasing understanding in modern administrative research that effective leadership in historically embedded and socially complex institutions cannot be ensured by formal authority alone (Ncube & Sithole, 2023; Mabunda & Shongwe, 2023). The conflict stems from a contradiction between African socio-cultural logic, which distributes legitimacy based on factors like age, life experience, and perceived wisdom, and Weberian bureaucratic logic, which locates authority in formal role and rule-based systems (Maseko & Molefe, 2021). This misalignment explains why younger supervisors, even with their formal status and technical proficiency, find it difficult to exercise authority over older subordinates who believe that their age gives them the right to respect rather than training.

There are several important ramifications of this dynamic. First of all, it weakens organizational unity by fostering a culture in which authority is challenged and obedience is treated as a condition. According to Dlamini and Morudu (2023), young supervisors who have to constantly balance asserting their role with avoiding accusations of cultural disrespect experience emotional labour and identity strain. Such stress can lead to leadership fatigue, supervisor disengagement, and poor teamwork, all of which can impair the provision of public services. The issue is further exacerbated by institutional silence on the subject, which is demonstrated by the absence of explicit policies, organized support networks, or conflict resolution procedures. According to Tshabalala and Nyundu (2023), young leaders are frequently left to rely on interpersonal diplomacy rather than institutional support when establishing their authority. This encourages the growth of informal hierarchies while also undermining the enforcement of accountability systems.

This discussion is also in line with the findings of the broader African governance literature, which show that post-colonial public bureaucracies remain sites of cultural negotiation where modern administrative ideals and traditional norms collide (Ntim & Essop, 2022). Until structural reform and cultural integration are implemented, such intergenerational resistance will persist in impeding leadership development and transformation initiatives. Public institutions must create administratively sound yet culturally sensitive frameworks for leadership management if they are to advance. This includes:

- Structured induction and mentorship programmes that address generational differences and cultural norms explicitly.
- Intergenerational dialogue initiatives, where older employees are given space to share institutional knowledge while recognising formal authority.
- Training in cultural intelligence and emotional leadership to equip young supervisors with tools to navigate age-based power dynamics without compromising effectiveness.
- Organisational role clarity and policy codification that makes expectations around authority, reporting, and accountability explicit, regardless of age.

Ultimately, institutional reform in the South African public service must transcend formalistic models of power and incorporate context-specific social dynamics. Leadership legitimacy in such settings cannot be assumed, it must be continually cultivated through mutual respect, structural clarity, and cultural fluency.

## 7. Conclusion

The understudied but structurally important problem of intergenerational power conflicts in the South African public service has been examined in this article. A new supervisory reality has emerged as a result of the state's efforts to change its workforce through merit-based promotion and youth empowerment. In this reality, young professionals oversee older subordinates who frequently have more institutional experience but oppose role reversal due to cultural and generational norms.

The results imply that this conflict is not just procedural or administrative. It illustrates a cultural and symbolic tension between traditional African values of age-based respect and hierarchical legitimacy and formal bureaucratic authority. Younger supervisors frequently face resistance in the form of subtle, informal behaviours that avoid disciplinary action but seriously impair managerial effectiveness, organizational trust, and the cohesiveness of service delivery. Addressing these tensions will require more than procedural compliance or disciplinary enforcement. It calls for a deliberate institutional cultural shift, one that acknowledges the validity of age-based values but repositions them within a professional framework that affirms merit, capability, and role clarity. Such a shift must be supported by:

- Policy reform that explicitly outlines authority protocols irrespective of age.
- Leadership training that equips younger managers with cultural fluency, emotional intelligence, and conflict navigation tools.
- Intergenerational knowledge-sharing platforms, which value older workers' experience while reinforcing respect for formal supervisory roles.
- Organisational dialogue mechanisms, such as facilitated workshops or departmental reflection forums, where values and expectations can be surfaced and realigned.

This paper concludes by highlighting the necessity of additional empirical studies to support these theoretical conclusions. The lived realities of both younger supervisors and more senior subordinates could be uncovered through mixed-method studies that include focus groups, interviews, and organizational case studies. Such research could produce well-founded leadership development strategies and support the larger objective of restoring South Africa's public service to one that is responsive, inclusive, and professional.

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