Through critical eyes of the public: Factors influencing professionalism in the detective service in the Gauteng Province

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to determine what general detective attributes are considered professional in the South African Police Service (SAPS) based on public assessments. This study followed a quantitative research approach and utilized a non-probability, purposive, or judgmental sampling technique. The findings confirmed that good attributes such as acting with integrity, in line with the values and ethical standards of the SAPS, expand on earlier studies that suggested informal contact raises public opinion of the police. It could be that those predisposed to be more favorable are likelier to initiate informal contact with officers. In any event, it seems likely that promoting informal social contact may favorably influence public opinion. The SAPS may want to evaluate how they encourage or discourage informal contact with residents. It would seem then, from the findings of this study, that if more general detectives would portray greater attributes when interacting with the public, there would be more legitimacy, less victimization, less fear of crime, lower perceived levels of violent crime, a lower perceived disorder in one’s neighborhood, and higher neighborhood cohesion and control.

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Introduction

The citizen expects police officers to have the wisdom of Solomon, the courage of David, the strength of Samson, the patience of Job, the leadership of Moses, the kindness of the Good Samaritan, the strategic training of Alexander, the faith of Daniel, the diplomacy of Lincoln, the tolerance of the Carpenter of Nazareth, and finally, an intimate knowledge of every branch of the natural, biological, and social sciences. If he had all these, he might be a good policeman! (Volmer, cited in Bain, 1939).

The above quotation by Volmer, as cited by Bain (1939), provides the attributes expected from the police, and more so, general detectives, in South Africa and elsewhere. Expectations among the public regarding the police are quite varied and demanding. The average criminal investigator will, throughout his or her career, be called upon to demonstrate some or all the skills listed above by Vollmer. It is thus critical that detective academies and law enforcement agencies provide adequate training so that police officers and general detectives can perform their roles at such levels of expectation. Thus, criminal investigation plays an important part in informing political and public confidence in the police service. Rarely are the successes of criminal investigations celebrated in politics or in the media. At the same time, perceived failure can result in scathing criticism. Despite high levels of success for the most serious offenses (e.g., homicide), the police have struggled to investigate other crimes (e.g., sexual offenses, hate crimes) and have attracted criticism (Tong & O’Neill, 2019). High-profile failures have attracted critical appraisal from the public regarding the processing of cases and incarceration of, e.g., Thabo Bester, Oscar Pistorius, and Senzo Meyiwa.
At the same time, it has been acknowledged that challenges in the detection of reported cases have become more complex with societal changes (increased mobility, creation of the internet, mobile technology), the development of science and technology in policing (e.g., deoxyribonucleic acid [DNA] databases), and more legislation and procedures, increasing the demands on modern-day detectives. In the last two decades, the South African Police Service (SAPS) has seen a great deal of advancement and innovation in criminal investigations, starting with the standardization and automation of the fingerprint identification system (AFIS) of case documentation and processing and improvements in forensics and investigation technologies to identify suspects more accurately and quickly (Mofokeng, 2018). Crime scene technicians (CSTs) as well as analysts have also become an important part of investigations, assisting with searching for individuals, gathering clues, and generating patterns of similarities between cases (Mofokeng & Aphane, 2022). However, understanding what causes trends in case clearances in police agencies is important, not only because a significant amount of police resources is spent on investigations. Investigations have symbolic and operational significance in both law enforcement circles and society (Mofokeng & Aphane, 2022).

The aim of this study is to explore public opinions regarding factors influencing professionalism in the detective service. Insights from this study are likely to extend the base for understanding from the public perspective, which is necessary for SAPS detective commanders, investigation officers, and policymakers to take measures that enhance the professionalism of the detective service.

The problem existing currently within the SAPS, especially within the Detective Service, is the perceived poor quality of police investigations, no response or delays in response to calls for help by the victims of crime, and a lack of professionalism by the officers regarding how they conduct themselves on-duty as well as off-duty. The literature suggests that the factors causing this perceived poor quality are poor salary structure, poor educational backgrounds of police officers, and the use of vehicles, as well as logistical issues thus affecting service delivery (Mofokeng, 2022, 2020; Motspe, 2019). However, little is known about public perceptions of what constitutes professionalism within the detective service. The citizen's evaluation of the SAPS is of increasing concern to a society that is faced with rising crime and violence. Low public evaluation of the police, especially the Detective Service, not only affects police attitudes and values but also affects citizen cooperation with police in the law enforcement process. A citizen who is hostile to the police is less willing to report suspicious persons, to testify, or to provide intelligence-led policing. It is argued that the SAPS as an institution, which is long overdue for rebranding, should be transformed to restore a better public image. This is because of the negative reports that have been highlighted in relation to the lack of service delivery.

This study examines police professionalism in the SAPS, specifically focusing on the Detective Service, focusing on what factors affect the professionalism within the Detective Service, and based on the findings emanating from this study, what measures should be implemented to enhance the effectiveness of police officers.

**Literature Review**

**Theoretical and Conceptual Background**

**Professionalism within the Detective Service**

Research indicates that professionalism is the aim, conduct or qualities that characterise a vocation that requires advanced training in some liberal art or science. It is characterised by service to others, assessment of the client’s needs, practice as well as ethical conduct (Brooke, 2011; Chakerian, 1974). Responsibility, on the other hand, is defined as assuming accountability for an action, task or a decision (Glomseth, Gott & Petter, 2011). A social science definitional view of the concept of profession, in general usage, refers to a skilled line of work, one that yields a full-time calling, an occupation. Few would deny that policing, especially criminal investigation, as an occupation, shares this general definition. However, the concept of professionalism in the Detective Service, or the manner, methods, and spirit in which the profession (criminal investigator) is practiced, is at the heart of this research study. This research makes various assumptions regarding the role of professionalism in the Detective Service. It is assumed that professionalism can be defined, measured, and achieved within the Detective Service based on public opinion for the purpose of this study. Thirdly, it is assumed that general detectives, in their interaction with the public, play a proactive role in attaining their level of professionalism on an individual, departmental, and institutional basis. Finally, it is assumed that in achieving professionalism, as benchmarked against national standards in areas such as formal education, training, performance, high standards of recruitment and selection and accreditation, that the Detective Service can be more effective, to be more responsive to the needs of the public.

Overall, a descriptive profile was developed that guided the responses of respondents to indicate their level of agreement whether the proposed model can be a best fit to describe attributes necessary to profile general detectives as professionals in their day-to-day activities. It would appear obvious at first glance that any law enforcement agency like the SAPS has a legitimate claim to professional status. Brown (2000) warns that although organisational change towards professionalism improves the organisation, it tends to have a minimal effect on the line officer. In fact, the situation as far as the SAPS is concerned is far from ideal. Research indicates that most senior officers within the SAPS believe that there is an overall lack of discipline, and that the so-called demilitarisation of the SAPS is responsible for this poor service delivery (Schwartz, Schurink & Stanz, 2007).

Operations management is a fundamental building block for total service delivery in organisations today. A significance of the study is that it would restore a better public image. This research would provide evidence to the SAPS to determine progress towards specific defined organisational objectives. The study is also an important way for the police service to learn. Learning in the sense
that they would evaluate corporate performance and identify what works for them and what does not. This makes it easier for the service to be able to learn lessons about its poor operations. Another reason why the study is relevant is that it identified possible solutions for improvements on their service delivery. Around 2010, Snyman attempted to explore interpretations of the concept with station-based officials in the Gauteng Province, South Africa (Snyman, 2010). The participants Snyman (2010, pp. 16-39) interviewed referred to seven characteristics of a ‘professional way of being,’ which they believed made them professionals. These were: (1) having a clear sense of purpose; (2) a passion for their work; (3) a willingness to go beyond the call of duty; (4) the ability to manage oneself and others well; (5) the ability to think ahead in order to timeously put systems in place; (6) teamwork; and (7) having a holistic and balanced outlook on themselves and the environment in which they functioned. The officials also identified a core value system and ‘way of being professional’, as central to professionalism in the SAPS, though this may simply be conceptual tautology.

However, Snyman’s sample consists of only nine officials. While little can be said of such a small sample, the data still holds value. Nevertheless, the attitudes expressed suggest similar personality traits and outlooks (Reiner, 2010, pp. 115-137). As such, similar data might have emerged by asking very different questions, such as ‘What are the key traits of a good police officer?’ If so, the answers Snyman elicited are likely ingrained in police organisational culture rather than referring to specific notions of professionalism. Snyman’s participants did not offer any learnable occupation specific expertise, or structural determinants in their descriptions of police professionalism. Rather their descriptions related almost exclusively to what might be called personal outlooks and personality traits, presumably inherent prior to joining the SAPS. It is likely that this common-sense type of interpretation of ‘professionalism’ overlaps in many instances with the way police management employs the concept in everyday discourse. If this is true, professionalism must largely be brought about through recruitment and partially through training, something which would take many years in an organisation as large as the SAPS with approximately over 170 000 personnel. Claims and discussions around police professionalisation are not new (Hallenberg, 2016; Holdaway, 2017). Policing has historically been a craft-based occupation where learning occurs through training and on the job experience. At times of sustained police criticisms and calls for improvement at various times in police history, often calls for improvements and police professionalisation’s are made (Hallenberg, 2016; Holdaway, 2017).

Tertiary / Higher Qualification

Tertiary/ higher qualifications according to Erasmus, Loedolff and Nel (2009, p. 70) refers to a diploma, bachelors, honours, master’s, and doctoral degrees. Vermeulen as cited by Kotzé (2016, p. 1) posits that in order for public institutions to become world class they need to provide quality services to the inhabitants, identify talent and raise the bar in general. Additionally, there has to be some form of benchmarking, as well as the identification of best practices in public and private organisations nationally and internationally, in order to meet and exceed existing standards. Several studies have been done over the last few years on the impact of higher education on police work and habits (Holdaway, 2017; Kleinig, 2001). Despite these studies the argument remains of what is more important, to equip a police officer with street smarts or book smarts?

Kleinig (2001) points to a profession as having provision of public service, a code of ethics, specialist knowledge and expertise, higher education, autonomy and discretionary authority and self-regulation. In the UK, the College of Policing, introduced in 2013, the principles of evidence-based policing and has introduced a code of ethics. The College introduced the Police Education Qualification Framework (PEQF) providing pathways for accreditation for trainee police officers through apprenticeships, policing degrees and conversion programmes (for graduates with non-policing degrees). There are also plans for accredited programmes for managers and specialist officers. Holdaway (2017) argues that professionalisation has had different meanings at different times and that there is a wide sociological literature to be considered to provide a comprehensive and critical analysis of professionalisation, particularly in a policing context.

Public Perception Matters

It is the view of the authors, public perceptions of the Detective Service professionalism is filtered through various factors such as but not limited to residents’ formal and informal contacts with general detectives and prior experience as victims of crime or a witness to a crime. Furthermore, how the print and electronic media has portrayed the performance of the general investigators, especially how the Detective Service responded to high profile cases, which received extensive publication, the measure of officer demeanour as perceived by the media or the public, whether general investigators were respectful, seemed to know what they were doing for instance, the manner in which the crime scene was managed, interactions with the victims, where they perceived to be trustworthy based on the perception of corruptive practices, fair, or helpful and how concerned they acted.

These factors might contribute to an individual’s perception of whether general investigators are portrayed as professionals in their work. The approval of officers and the way they do their job when residents’ perceived problems with disorder or violent crime in their neighbourhood or reported being fearful thus, shape how they might have responded to statements directed to them in this study. Thus, the level of social cohesion and informal social control present in a neighbourhood also influenced residents’ assessments of the Detective Service. These characteristics describe the public’s sense of mutual trust and responsibility. If these essential factors are ignored by management, members of a Detective Service will lose support from the public and thus, lack legitimacy. There will also be a lack of pride and professionalism among the Detective Service, lowering of personal standards and a lack of interest in the job by members themselves. The public might also be discouraged from reporting the corrupt behaviour of the general detectives.
The same could be said about the SAPS, especially the Detective Service. Lowering of personal standards and lack of interest in the job will eventually result in withdrawal of cases, not adhering to timeframes, not following up on cases or witnesses not appearing and missing police dockets, which have a negative effect on solving cases. These issues thus holistically affect the performance of the criminal justice system (CJS).

As a result, a lack of effective administration and officer professionalism will quickly lead to the rise of corruptive practices that would later become an incurable disease for the SAPS. Low clearance rates in communities, already suffering from high rates of crime, could reflect, or contribute to, the lack of trust, confidence, cooperation, or support and support for law enforcement in those communities (Carter, 2013; Mofokeng, 2022, 2018; Mofokeng & Apane, 2022; Mofokeng & De Vries, 2016). Fortunately, improving the speed with which police resolve cases is something that both law enforcement and citizens value. Understanding why rates are both low and do not seem to change over time (or perhaps get worse) and whether this situation can be improved, are critical in delivering high-quality police services to communities. Given the importance of improving our understanding of investigative clearance, this study aims to understand better what skill sets contribute to improved performance amongst individual detectives. Investigations and clearance of crime incidents through arrest are the defining mainstays of the South African policing and occur not just in investigative units, but also across patrol and specialised units. Citizens and politicians judge the police mainly by their ability to solve cases and high-profile cases often make the news. One only needs to attend a portfolio committee on police in parliament briefings or managerial meetings, both at local stations or cluster levels, to see that cluster commanders are frequently concerned about the status of unsolved cases. In surveys of police executives, improving investigations was consistently identified as a research priority (International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP], 2008). Despite these recent advances and despite the resources allocated to investigations, the resolution or clearance of crime in South Africa is arguably low (Mofokeng, 2022, 2020, 2012; Mofokeng & de Vries, 2012; Motsepe, 2019).

Training, development, and mentoring

Despite an increased focus upon proactive policing in recent years, criminal investigation is still perhaps the most important task of any law enforcement agency, including the SAPS. Criminal investigators or detectives are entrusted with a serious and onerous role. The investigation detectives’ conduct is relied on to identify and convict those guilty of carrying out the most serious of crimes. There is little research available on detective work (Mofokeng, 2022, 2020, 2012). The literature indicates that the informal and formal building of detectives’ reputations rests based on successful cases and detection rates, which serve as motivation for detectives to achieve results (Gould, Carrano, Leo & Young, 2013; Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993). The practice of effective detective has been shrouded in mystery, although the RAND study criticised detectives for their inability to solve crime unless the public provided information of a suspect or lead (Greenwood, Chaiken & Petersilia, 1977; Greenwood, Hops & Walker, 1977a, 1977b; Motsepe, 2020).

Criminal investigation is a multi-faceted, problem-solving challenge. Arriving at the scene of a crime, an officer is often required to rapidly make critical decisions, sometimes involving life or death, based on limited information in a dynamic environment of active and still evolving events. After a criminal event is over, the investigator is expected to preserve the crime scene, collect the evidence, and devise an investigative plan that will lead to the forming of reasonable grounds to identify and arrest the person or persons responsible for the crime (Mofokeng, 2018; Mofokeng & Apane, 2022). To meet these challenges, police investigators, through training, mentorship, and experience, learn investigative processes to develop investigative plans and prioritise responses (Mofokeng, 2020). The effectiveness and quality of criminal investigation can be evaluated by the degree to which these objectives are met and the resources spent on meeting them, in terms of time, funds and personnel (Mofokeng, 2022; Mofokeng & Apane, 2022; Mofokeng & Mathosa, 2019; Motsepe, 2019).

Motsepe (2019, p. 3) posits that “Therefore, the training and development of general detectives is paramount to improve investigative capacity. It would be necessary to train general detectives in terms of data analysis, civil and criminal law in relation to fraud, investigative practice, human behaviour, interviewing techniques, the law of evidence, and procedures related to evidence collection and review. These skills would be scaffolded on literacy and numeracy skills, communication skills, skills related to the effective use of technology, and a basic understanding of accounting and business.” Bayley (1998) reaffirms these views by arguing that the detective approach to investigation is routinely ‘suspect-centred’. These views clearly identify detective work as a process that relies upon the public identification of offenders rather than the intuitive insight of detectives. Poor investigation may result in dangerous offenders remaining free to commit more harm and even the false conviction of the innocent (Gross, Jacoby, Matheson, Montgomery & Patil, 2005).

Also important is the way detectives go about their work. Their responsiveness to victims, who are often the most vulnerable members of our society, is important (Jordan, 2008, 2012). Further, investigations into high profile cases often attract intense public interest and scrutiny, which means that how detectives conduct themselves is likely to impact on public perceptions of police as a whole (Innes, 2007; Innes & Broookman, 2013). For these reasons it is essential that the core competencies, consisting of skills and personal characteristics that combine to make a detective effective are identified. Identifying these factors has profound implications for how the detective role is conceptualised and the recruitment, training and management of detectives. Despite the recognised importance of detective work, to date, few empirical studies have examined the less tangible skills, abilities and other characteristics that differentiate between those detectives who perform the role effectively and those who do not. This study attempted to address this
gap by exploring the views of the public in Region 3, namely Centurion and Pretoria Central policing areas. Moreover, this study certainly strengthens the existing body of knowledge by providing some empirically tested insight into the detective environment or context. This study’s results can provide improved information for the policy developers and administrators about the core attributes needed for the general detectives within the SAPS.

Research and Methodology

Materials and methods

To collect data, the authors visited the two policing areas in the Southern Gauteng region. The initial distribution of the questionnaire was earmarked for each policing area for the weeks of 8 January to 3 March 2020. It was practical for the researcher to explain the research in person to each public member who chose to participate in the study, as she chose both weekdays as well as weekends to offer respondents more time to respond and complete the questionnaire. The contact number of the researcher was provided on each informed consent information leaflet in case the respondents had further queries. The respondents were given the questionnaire to complete in private and individually. They were requested to hand the questionnaire back to the researcher after completion. Questionnaire may be self-administered or administered by a researcher. They may also be administered individually or in a group and routinely contain a series of items/questions that reflect the aim and objectives of the study (Ponto, 2015, p. 170). A self-administered questionnaire is a set of questions that are presented to the respondent that is either paper-based or in electronic format, which they must complete (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015, p. 160; Ponto, 2015, p. 170).

The data gathering instrument for the present study was a paper-based and hand-delivered self-administered structured questionnaire. The basic objective of a questionnaire is to obtain both opinions and facts about a particular phenomenon. The questionnaire is given to individuals who are informed about the specific phenomenon being studied. Questionnaires generally collect data that can be broadly categorised into three groups, namely attributes, which include demographic information such as age, gender and marital status; behaviour, which includes questions that ask what, when and how often; and opinions, beliefs, or attitudes, which aim to observe a respondent’s point of view (Davies & Francis, 2018, p. 98). In the present study, the community members who had encounters with the detectives in the previous 12 months were clearly the most qualified individuals to provide information about the professionalism in the Detective Service as they experienced the behaviour and performance of the detectives during the performance of their duties. The researcher opted for structured, paper-based, self-administered questionnaires, because it allowed respondents to complete them within their own time. Response rates can be potentially raised or lowered with the use of hand-delivered paper-based questionnaires. A raised response rate may be due to respondents not being pressured to complete the questionnaire at a time that is inconvenient to them; therefore, they may be more likely to participate. On the other hand, lowered response rates may be attributed to respondents losing the questionnaire or forgetting about it, as they receive it to complete in their own time (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2011, p. 188; Leedy & Ormrod, 2015, p. 160).

The researchers endeavoured to improve a low response rate through going away from the respondents and came back 30 minutes later as a follow-up to check if they need to ask any questions or need clarity. The above discussion alludes to the fact that careful construction of the questionnaire is of great importance when a researcher opts to use structured self-administered questionnaires (Coetzee, 2017, p. 88). A single false step may result in the researcher being unable to interpret the data. Prior to analysis, the data collected in the study were coded and computerised. The coding was necessary as the programme that was used to analyse the data required it to be presented in numerical form (De Vos et al., 2011, p. 253). Possible answers in the research questionnaire were assigned numerical codes, an example of which is “yes” being coded as “1” and “no” coded as “2”. Each questionnaire had empty blocks on the right-hand side of each page, within which the researcher wrote down the selected answers in their coded forms. The codes were then entered into Microsoft Excel. Data entry errors were detected and removed, through the researcher entering the codes of each questionnaire twice in order to ensure that no entries were incorrect. The codes from Excel were subsequently imported into a programme used for data analysis, namely the Statistical Package for Social Sciences programme (SPSS) (IBM Corp, 2017).

The most popularly used statistical package for the social sciences, the SPSS, uses statistical formulae to carry out computations (Bhattacherjee, 2012, pp. 120; Greasley, 2008, p. 20). Statistical analysis of the data followed. Missing data, whereby respondents skipped certain questions, were taken into account while analysing the final data.

The research was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC) of Tshwane University of Technology (TUT). All respondents signed an informed consent form, and anonymity and confidentiality of data were ensured. Informed consent in this study entailed the provision of an information leaflet and consent slip to all potential respondents, which detailed the title, origin, research purpose, procedures, as well as risks and benefits for respondents who were willing to take part in the study. In addition, they were notified about the dissemination of the research results and that their data would be stored securely in a safe at the Department of Safety and Security Management, TUT for a minimum period of 15 years. The data storage was tied to the fact that the research was ethically approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities, TUT. The fact that participating in the study was exclusively the public members’ choice was emphasised, as well as the right of all respondents to withdraw from the study at any time. Respondents must be allowed to end their involvement in a study at any time, even if they have provided informed consent (Akaranga & Makau, 2016, p. 2). The respondents were not required to provide notice about their withdrawal, nor an explanation for it and there were no penalties for withdrawing. Blank questionnaires submitted back to the researcher or left on
the ground signified such withdrawals. Therefore, the process of informed consent is an exercise of autonomy on the part of potential respondents, whereby the person choosing to take part in the research has done so without being coerced, manipulated, or persuaded in any way (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015, p. 121).

**Respondents’ assessments**

Adherence to the highest standards and fundamentals of professionalism is essential to the profession of Detective Service. Detective professionalism has many meanings but no definitive model of professionalism in the Detective Service has been established. Historically, the idea of policing as a profession has emerged slowly (Mofokeng, 2018). The Detective professional model, as proposed in this research, seeks to define a working model of professionalism in the Detective Service. It is proposed that detective work, especially general detective, is a ‘true profession,’ similar to the professions of medicine, law and education. Advocates of any professional model of policing argue that general detectives are experts through training, certification, education and experience and thus should be viewed as professionals in every sense of the term. In selecting the criteria for this developmental model of professionalism, a content analysis of the literature was conducted in order to define key elements of professionalism in policing (Mofokeng, 2018).

The development of this descriptive profile resulted in the conceptualisation of a professional model utilising nine criteria, or attributes, namely high standards of recruitment and selection (civil service), formal education (university) requirements, formal training (police academy) and state certification, state-mandated (annual) specialised training and recertification, detective service empowered to trace and arrest perpetrators resulting in convictions, armed police officers (firearms), formal policies (departmental) for operations and function, intelligence-led policing emanating from community policing (commitment and service) and accreditation. There is a need that similar study should be extended in the SAPS where the views of active members both within the operational and investigative units, including specialised units to participate and findings of such, are solicited. The responses of respondents are, therefore, discussed below. Statement 1: Detective Service is a profession It is encouraging that most of the respondents agreed that Detective Service is a profession (85.29%; n=58). Statement 2: Detective Service is a semi-profession More than 63% (n=29) of the respondents agreed to the statement that those detectives lacking some dimension(s) of the proposed professional model.

Out of the nine attributes of the proposed model of Detective Service, acting with integrity, in line with the values as well as ethical standards of the SAPS, was mentioned most (16.07%) to be necessary to be considered “professional” in Detective Service. Most respondents did not mention any of the attributes (23.51%). Out of the nine attributes of the proposed model of Detective Service, both formal education (college or university) requirements and obtaining an accreditation from a professional body were mentioned most (15.38%) as not to be necessary to be considered “professional” in the Detective Service. More than a quarter of the respondents did not mention any of the attributes (40.38%). Statement 3: Ideal type professionalism. The majority of the respondents (77.78%; n=28) reported that in viewing the concept of the proposed professional model of Detective Service as shown in Table 1 below, as a specific measure of professionalism, the model can be viewed as “ideal type” for detectives’ professionalism in the SAPS.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 High standards of recruitment within the detective service</td>
<td>6 (9.68%)</td>
<td>4 (6.45%)</td>
<td>3 (4.84%)</td>
<td>1 (1.61%)</td>
<td>4 (6.45%)</td>
<td>2 (3.23%)</td>
<td>3 (4.84%)</td>
<td>8 (12.90%)</td>
<td>31 (50.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Formal education (college or university) requirements</td>
<td>7 (11.29%)</td>
<td>4 (6.45%)</td>
<td>5 (8.06%)</td>
<td>5 (8.06%)</td>
<td>8 (12.90%)</td>
<td>2 (3.23%)</td>
<td>4 (6.45%)</td>
<td>4 (6.45%)</td>
<td>23 (37.10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Formal training (police academy) and professional body certification</td>
<td>1 (1.64%)</td>
<td>2 (3.28%)</td>
<td>4 (6.56%)</td>
<td>2 (3.28%)</td>
<td>4 (6.56%)</td>
<td>2 (3.28%)</td>
<td>4 (6.56%)</td>
<td>11 (18.03%)</td>
<td>31 (50.82%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Acts with integrity, in line with the values as well as ethical standards of the police service</td>
<td>3 (4.92%)</td>
<td>3 (4.92%)</td>
<td>3 (4.92%)</td>
<td>3 (4.92%)</td>
<td>3 (4.92%)</td>
<td>7 (11.48%)</td>
<td>11 (18.03%)</td>
<td>25 (40.98%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Takes ownership for resolving problems, demonstrating courage and resilience</td>
<td>2 (3.23%)</td>
<td>1 (1.61%)</td>
<td>1 (1.61%)</td>
<td>4 (6.45%)</td>
<td>2 (3.23%)</td>
<td>6 (9.68%)</td>
<td>8 (12.90%)</td>
<td>11 (17.74%)</td>
<td>27 (43.55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Acts on own initiative to address challenges, showing a strong work ethic and demonstrating extra effort when required</td>
<td>1 (1.61%)</td>
<td>1 (1.61%)</td>
<td>4 (6.45%)</td>
<td>1 (1.61%)</td>
<td>6 (9.68%)</td>
<td>3 (4.84%)</td>
<td>5 (8.06%)</td>
<td>13 (20.97%)</td>
<td>28 (45.16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Upholds professional standards, acting honestly and ethically and challenges unprofessional conduct or discriminatory behaviour</td>
<td>3 (4.84%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>4 (6.45%)</td>
<td>3 (4.84%)</td>
<td>3 (4.84%)</td>
<td>3 (4.84%)</td>
<td>8 (12.90%)</td>
<td>7 (11.29%)</td>
<td>31 (50.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Asks for and acts on feedback, learning from experience and developing own professional skills and knowledge</td>
<td>2 (3.28%)</td>
<td>1 (1.64%)</td>
<td>3 (4.92%)</td>
<td>3 (4.92%)</td>
<td>3 (4.92%)</td>
<td>6 (9.84%)</td>
<td>7 (11.48%)</td>
<td>9 (14.75%)</td>
<td>27 (44.26%)</td>
</tr>
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<td>9 Obtain an accreditation from a professional body</td>
<td>8 (13.11%)</td>
<td>4 (6.56%)</td>
<td>2 (3.28%)</td>
<td>3 (4.92%)</td>
<td>5 (8.20%)</td>
<td>4 (6.56%)</td>
<td>4 (6.56%)</td>
<td>10 (16.39%)</td>
<td>21 (34.43%)</td>
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Source: Researchers’ own illustration
In Table 1 above, half of the respondents reported that high standards of recruitment within the Detective Service and upholding professional standards, acting honestly and ethically and challenging unprofessional conduct or discriminatory behaviour were the most important attributes in relation to professionalism in the Detective Service. More than a quarter of the respondents reported that acting with integrity, in line with the values as well as ethical standards of the SAPS (40.98%), taking ownership for resolving problems, demonstrating courage and resilience (43.55%), acting on own initiative to address challenges, showing a strong work ethic and demonstrating extra effort when required (45.16%) and asking for and acting on feedback, learning from experience and developing own professional skills and knowledge (44.26%) were the most important attributes/criteria. In the public sector, the SAPS Detective Service remains among the more complex units in the criminal justice system. General detectives themselves hold considerable authority over their clientele, the people and the institutions/entities they serve and reflect varied and complex occupational functions. The predominant school of thought of modern day policing is that the more professional a law enforcement agency, the more effective it will be in the performance of its major duties and functions – the “police mission”, in other words, order maintenance, law enforcement and community service (Mofokeng, 2019). True professionalism in the Detective Service is viewed as a recognised indicator and predictor of criminal investigator’s’ effectiveness in this study.

Discussions

Public perceptions of the Detective Service are important for determining whether someone sees the detectives in a positive or negative light. Over the past several decades, many studies elsewhere, have been conducted on different aspects of citizen perceptions of the police to determine what makes up these perceptions and opinions on the police, looking at biological and socioeconomic factors civilians can have for themselves, and how the police officers themselves might influence these opinions (Wenz & Schlimmen, 2012, p. 35). Studies have been conducted that have found that particular perceptions play an important role in how citizens see the police, such as perceptions that a person is being treated fairly by the police (Wenz & Schlimmen, 2012, p. 35), the perception that one can trust the police (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003), the perception that the police are concerned about community problems (Goldsmith, 2005, p. 443; Simpson, 2021, p. 170), and the perception that the police are respectful of citizens (Tyler & Waksler, 2004, p. 254). These perceptions have been found to be influenced by what the police do when they directly interact with citizens, yet these perceptions can also be influenced by demographic factors of the citizens themselves. The main demographic variables that have been shown to have noticeable effects on perceptions of the police have been the race of a civilian (Lai & Zhao, 2010, p. 686; Weitzer & Tuch, 2005, p. 398), household income level (MacDonald & Stokes, 2006, p. 360), level of education (Chu, Song & Dombrink, 2005, p. 103; Reisig & Parks, 2006, p. 608) and employment status (MacDonald & Stokes, 2006, p. 361; Wu, 2014, p. 135). Crime rates have also been known to affect perceptions of the police as well (Schafer et al., 2003, p. 444; Wu et al., 2009, p. 127).

For this study, the findings yielded some interesting and unexpected results. The difficulty of ‘operationalising’ the concept of professionalism to conceptualise and develop a ‘working model’ within the Detective Service based on the public opinion setting, was challenging. Any process of obtaining public opinion based on the under-researched field of the detectives, with an attempt towards operationalisation involves defining and developing a fuzzy concept to shape such a concept into a form that is measurable. How one conceptualises detective or crime investigating officer’s professionalism is a mammoth task. Is it measurable? How does one know it when one sees it? Is it definable in a law enforcement setting? Professionalism, as this study results indicated, means various things to various people, especially among community members. Due to decades of increasing crime rates, longstanding tensions between police and the public continue to frustrate the formation of cooperative relationships necessary for the function of the police and the provision of public safety. In response, policy makers continue to promote community-oriented policing (COP) and its emphasis on positive, nonenforcement contact with the public as an effective strategy for enhancing public trust and police legitimacy.

The opinions by the public in this study, is important to inform the policy makers regarding how far, has the conduct of Detective Service has improved or deteriorated. The public or community members possessed their own varied interpretations of the nine attributes (criteria) of professionalism. They agreed to disagree on some of these terms, as well as the rank ordering of the various criteria. These concepts were defined through their personal world views, the various experiences they possessed individually. The intent of the operationalisation of the concept (professionalism) was to measure the various attributes (criteria) as developed to propose a viable model of professionalism in the Detective Service. Operationalisation is only part of the empirical research process. Whether the ‘Professional Model of Detective Service’ can be considered an ideal type (model) in the field of criminal investigation, whether is it an acceptable measurement of professionalism in the Detective Service, as per respondents responses, or from the perspectives of this sample of respondents, whether education matters, whether formal training and specialised training provide a better qualified, more disciplined and committed general detective, remains a matter of a bigger study, especially in the Detective Service, to yield more information to inform policy and practice. The attributes and their relationship to the concept of professionalism, are important.

The process of moving from the idea of the nine developed attributes in the measurement of the concept of professionalism, as responded to by the sample population, is operationalisation. The criterion of ‘accreditation’ was found by the sample group to be at the bottom of the list as it relates to professionalism. It is unclear as to why this sample rated this attribute as such. Nationally, most organisations, agencies, programs and colleges and universities, actively seek such recognition for both qualification and
benchmarking purposes, the best of the best. Accreditation is a progressive and traditional way of assisting various agencies evaluate and improve their overall performance. Historically and currently, the push for law enforcement agencies to garner such an accolade as accreditation has been second to no other initiative. Such recognition brings, typically, governmental and community support. It also brings peer recognition. The agency is rewarded by certification of competency and credibility and such an initiative indicates improvement upon delivery of services, administration, and overall operations. When such tools are lacking, such as the detection rate, conviction and the use of force, if necessary, is this professional in every sense of the term? The commitment to service and protection is necessarily delimited, which bespeaks of failure to perform one’s job as detective to uphold, to protect and to serve (Mofokeng, 2018). Hence, the low rankings of the attributes were surprising, particularly given the occupational status of the various respondents and their level of qualifications, which informed their assessments.

The respondents did not necessarily feel that such attributes were not necessary in the performance of Detective Service duties and functions; but rather, were not a valid and necessary measurement of professionalism. Perhaps any future study could explore this assumption further, within the Detective Service, for both the general detectives and visible policing members to provide more insight to future research, in order to inform policy or practice. Further examples of expectations regarding specialised and professional services, include doctors, lawyers, car dealers, beauticians, teachers and so forth. The researcher’s assumptions, as well as the literature review results, indicated the respondents would ‘most probably’ agree that the attributes of formal training, specialised training, high standards, education and formal policies would rank up near the top of respondent preferences regarding professionalism in the Detective Service (Motsepe, 2020). Police academy training and certification for general detectives are required in the SAPS (Aphane & Mofokeng, 2021).

The basic education requirement for Detective Service is changing nationally, as formal qualifications are some of the requirements the SAPS has been pushing for new recruits. For new cohorts of police officers in the SAPS, there is a need for a great deal of ‘specialised knowledge’ to improve critical thinking skills as well as other attributes (Mofokeng, 2022, 2019, 2015; Motsepe, 2019). The general detectives must adhere to established standards of conduct and ethics as set by the profession. A profession is any organisation characterised by a special body of knowledge acquired through extensive education and training. Such guidelines hold that profession accountable to one another and society as well. For policing to continue to evolve it is necessary to emphasize professionalism and professionalisation within the occupation of criminal investigation. As with any survey research, there is no assurance that the data truly reflects the attitudes and beliefs of the public who completed the questionnaires. Survey research is always subject to legitimate queries regarding validity and reliability. This study was high on validity, but low on reliability.

The questions can be posited, ‘Did the research instrumentation measure the phenomenon it was intended to measure? Was it an accurate measure of this phenomenon?’ The issue of consistency of measurement is of concern; using the same instrumentation, would a similar study with different respondents yield the same results? The current results cannot be inferred or generalised to the general population. Every attempt was made to develop a survey instrument (questionnaire) that might obtain the data necessary to directly address the research problem. In this project, every attempt was made to provide a methodology that would yield reliable and valid responses, hence quality data. The study was viewed as a research opportunity. The language used in the survey instrument was geared to the target population, public opinion residing in Region 3. Structured questions in the form of a questionnaire, accompanied by a proposed model, were provided to the respondents and were preferred in the data collection process in hopes of gaining greater detail from members of the public and furthermore, to permit respondents to respond to set questionnaires in explaining those various views regarding the questionnaire items. According to this sample population and via this study, Detective Service professionalism has been defined. Respondents agreed that the exploratory model, as developed and proposed, is a viable model and acceptable for gauging professionalism in the Detective Service.

Limitations and Future Directions

Before discussing the implications of the findings further, it is important to note the limitations of the present study. This study was conducted in Region 3 among community members and excluded the active Detective Service members. One of the limitations of this study was the lower response rate to the surveys and the canvassing. Therefore, the findings of this study, cannot be generalised due to the small size of respondents and location. The omission of certain levels in different demographic variables like race variable in the analysis for this study also reduced the meaningful and insightful analysis had this variable been included, though this did not give any useful data related to testing of the hypotheses, it was an appropriate action to get a better understanding of the interaction between known demographic groups. Another limitation of this study was that it was a cross-sectional study and does not capture any change over time that the different demographic groups might have had in their perceptions of interactions with the Detective Service.

Management Implications and Recommendations

As mentioned earlier, the results of this study indicate that significant factors such as crime rates and shape citizens’ perceptions of their interactions with Detective Service, with these factors being the focus of any policies to help increase perceptions of the police. One of the initiatives that the Detective Service can implement is to have their officers be more responsive to community concerns by providing accurate feedback regarding the outcome or developments of cases, act ethically, as this perception had the overall lowest scores for the four outcome variables analysed in this study as depicted in Figure 1: Criteria not necessary to be considered “professional” in Detective Service.
The Detective Service can also try to interact with citizens more outside of the contexts of investigating illegal activity, whether through informal community meetings or community policing programmes. Alternatively, the Detective Service could try to be more transparent about its practices and policies, which this study hypothesise would increase perceptions of trustworthiness, legitimacy and compliance in the minds of citizens. Procedural justice policies could be implemented or increased in the Region 3 to increase perceptions of fairness, respectfulness and trustworthiness when their police officers interact with citizens. Thus, findings of this study can assist with the development of evidence-based policy and practice for the selection and development of detectives.

Recruiting those who already have the correct skills and characteristics is the simplest way to ensure detectives have those requisite characteristics required to do the job effectively. Communication skills are fundamental but difficult to learn. Interpersonal communication skills, motivation and thoroughness may provide useful selection criteria. Psychological testing for characteristics that are more stable and personality-related may also assist. For example, conscientiousness on the proposed model for personality is likely to indicate a tendency for thoroughness. Training programmes for detectives should include both knowledge acquisition and skill development. McGurk, Platton and Gibson (1994) previously criticised the over-emphasis of legal knowledge in police training programmes at the expense of other training needs. However, this study suggests that knowledge of the law is a core requirement that needs to be addressed alongside knowledge of investigative methods. Developing investigative knowledge is likely to incorporate learning about the tasks detectives conduct (e.g. interviewing, crime scene examination) and how those tasks are conducted effectively through the application of the characteristics identified in this study, such as, but not limited to, effective communication, thoroughness and management. This knowledge is the foundation for skill development and is likely to include underlying principles and processes involved.

Conclusions

The findings of this study indicated the respondents’ perceived attributes that shaped individual detectives perceptions as professionals. The responses were informed by how the respondents interacted with the detectives and how the general detectives performed their duties. Though the proposed professional model of detective service has been defined, proposed, and accepted by these respondents, it does not reflect the views of the larger public. This same conceptual model now needs further testing by the SAPS members and experts within CJS. Various methodological shortcomings became evident throughout this research process. Some strengths of this study included a thorough literature review, content analysis of that literature, and problem formulation. It is recommended that any further study of professionalism in detective service refine that which is to be examined in relation to current and past inquiries, including this study, and thus prevent reinventing the wheel. However, various alternative research designs and data gathering strategies might be more appropriate for exploratory survey research such as this type of study. Although this project experienced a low response rate, another problem encountered was the slowness of the response rate and the necessity for continual follow-up with some of the respondents. Several respondents in the sampling frame misinterpreted some of the questions and instructions for questions, thus creating issues with data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Good questionnaire construction is paramount in ensuring one will obtain the desired data in the manner it is needed, before the fact and not after. The language used in the construction of the questions in any survey should be clear and concise and not subject to varying interpretations by the respondents. It is recommended that any similar study, such as this, employ similar methods of data gathering (questionnaires and surveys), as the data can provide a richer and more detailed, in-depth response for analysis.

It was encouraging that most of the respondents agreed that detective service is a profession (85.29%; n = 58). More than 63% (n = 29) of the respondents agreed with the statement that those detectives lacking some dimension(s) of the proposed professional model...
should be described as ‘semi-professional’. Out of the nine attributes of the proposed model of detective service, acting with integrity, in line with the values and ethical standards of the SAPS, was mentioned most (16.07%) to be necessary to be considered ‘professional’ in detective service. Some of the respondents did not mention any of the attributes (23.51%). Most of the respondents (77.78%; n = 28) reported that, in viewing the concept of the proposed professional model of detective service as shown in Table 4.1 as a specific measure of professionalism, the model can be viewed as an “ideal type” for detectives’ professionalism in the SAPS. Half of the respondents reported that high standards of recruitment within the Detective Service, upholding professional standards, acting honestly and ethically, and challenging unprofessional conduct or discriminatory behavior were the most important attributes in relation to professionalism in the Detective Service. More than a quarter of the respondents reported that acting with integrity, in line with the values as well as ethical standards of the SAPS (40.98%), taking ownership for resolving problems, demonstrating courage and resilience (43.55%), acting on their own initiative to address challenges, showing a strong work ethic and demonstrating extra effort when required (45.16%), asking for and acting on feedback, learning from experience, and developing their own professional skills and knowledge (44.26%) were the most important attributes and criteria.

The findings confirm good attributes such as acting with integrity, in line with the values and ethical standards of the SAPS, and expand on earlier studies that suggested informal contact raises public opinion of the police. It could be that those predisposed to be more favorable are likelier to initiate informal contact with officers. In any event, it seems likely that promoting informal social contact may favorably influence public opinion. The SAPS may want to evaluate the ways that they encourage or discourage informal contact with residents. Police-community partnerships are more effective when they incorporate greater informal contact with residents. Although the past literature relies heavily on demographic characteristics to explain public opinion (Parent & Parent, 2018), this study found that the most important factors influencing favorable opinions of the police were greater informal contact with the Detective Service, which shaped how the public considered the proposed model as ideal and how those with lesser attributes were considered to be semi-professionals. It would seem then, from the findings of this study, that if more general detectives would portray greater attributes when interacting with the public, there would be more legitimacy, less victimization, less fear of crime, lower perceived levels of violent crime, lower perceived disorder in one’s neighborhood, and higher neighborhood cohesion and control. Race and gender were not included in this study, and future research may consider whether these factors are significant in determining public opinion of Detective Service level of professionalism. As highlighted above, residents’ trust based on the level of professionalism in the detective service cannot be determined and could be influenced by race and ethnicity. Police and others often perceive the media as having a significant effect on the public’s opinion of police performance (Motespe, 2020). Motespe (2020, p. 167) posits that “Since the transformation of the police started in 1994, the SAPS has been struggling to foster a professional image as a policing agency in the media spaces. Its apartheid predecessor, the South African Police (SAP), had little legitimacy in the eyes of the media because of its often-violent enforcement of discriminatory laws. Although the SAPS did not have to integrate these burdens into a democratic society, inevitably some of the civilian disdain for the SAP has survived into the new era.” According to this study’s findings, the media coverage of the Senzo Meyiwa case did not appear to be a source of negative opinion for the SAPS. Instead of relying on the media for their opinions, respondents appeared to react primarily to their own experiences and expectations in forming opinions of their local police.

In conclusion of this study, it is imperative to review and reflect on the nature of professionalism in the SAPS and then how it should reflect in other units, such as the Detective Service, as proposed by the conceptual model developed in this study. Perhaps the most revered work published on ‘professionalism’, was by Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons (1954), who developed a sociological model or theory on professionalism. Many of his earlier concepts and assessments of occupational roles are pertinent to the field of policing as proposed herein. According to Parson’s precepts, what is professionalism as it relates to an occupation? First, it is an occupation, a full-time job, in which an individual performs certain functions that are valued in society. The individual is both “trained” and “educated” in the profession (Nolin, 2008). That training qualifies the individual for the practice of the profession. Such a person is a “technical expert” in the field and has a mastery of the skills required to perform the demands of the job. The occupational role is one of importance in society. The agent seeks the “best” and most efficient way of carrying out the tasks of the job. The role exercises authority. Technical competence is one of the major defining characteristics of professional status. Authority is limited to a set and defined sphere (job role) for specificity of function. That agent is an “authority” only in that chosen field. The authority of the office is limited to the powers of the office.

The central focus of the professional role is the technical competence of that role. Professionals are dedicated to the “service” of fellow men, not to self-serving interests. The agent will seek both personal recognition and achievement in the function of the occupation. The occupational structure involves a complex interrelationship in the environment it is located in and serves, as well as within the overall social structure. Finally, professionalism demands regulation by designated universal standards. The operationalization of professionalism in the Detective Service in this study mirrors many of the precepts of Parson’s operationalization of professionalism in occupations. Detective service is an organized profession characterized by a body of specialized knowledge, education, and training. In place is a well-established set of standards, functions, and ethical guidelines. Members of the profession (detective service) are held accountable. Investigating officers are technical experts in their chosen field. It is not just a job, but a position of importance in society. The general detective exercises authority in job tasks. Authority is limited and defined, as well as controlled by established standards. The police mission is to: enforce and support the laws of the society in which the police are a part; investigate crimes and apprehend criminals; prevent crime; and provide the community with enforcement...
related services to protect and serve. Overall, the police exist to reduce crime and disorder. Such an occupational structure and job function necessarily involve a complex, yet interrelated, as well as cooperative working environment.

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All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.


Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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References


