

Promoting Ethical Discipline Among Administrative Staff in Ghanaian Universities

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ABSTRACT : Ethical discipline among administrative staff is vital for the integrity, effectiveness, and public credibility of universities. In Ghana, pressures from expanding enrolments, constrained resources, and evolving governance expectations make it essential to embed ethical standards across administrative functions (finance, procurement, human resources, student services, registry). This paper reviews concepts, empirical, and theoretical dimensions of ethical discipline. It synthesizes existing academic literature on what ethical discipline is and its significance to organizations such as universities, examines theories that are critical to explaining ethical behavior in organizations, and provides a review of available empirical studies on administrative ethics in the global context. The review study further identified key gaps justifying the need for further research and presents a set of actionable recommendations.

KEYWORDS - Administrative misconduct, ethical discipline, ethical climate, ethical leadership, organizational culture

I. INTRODUCTION

Universities are generally regarded as normative organizations whose legitimacy is not based solely on academic excellence, but also on fostering moral consciousness, civic responsibility, ethical leadership, integrity, and professionalism among their staff (Emenike & Ogolo, 2025; Gottardello & Karabag, 2022). There has been a lot of scholarly focus on the ethical conduct of faculty and students in the university setting; however, administrative staff members who perform the administrative duties in the university (finance, human resources, student services, facilities, procurement, records management, and other vital administrative roles) are equally important in achieving institutional credibility and operational success and need scholarly attention. Their responsibilities and activities determine the effectiveness of service delivery, institutional trust, and the ethical climate experienced by both staff and students.

Administrative misconduct is a non-criminal act that violates laws, rules, or regulations, typically resulting in disciplinary action against employees. Administrative misconduct refers to a broad spectrum of behaviors that can involve gross mismanagement, abuse of authority, or breach of the ethical standards in the course of administrative responsibilities (Meshak & Meshak, 2024; Rajan, 2023). Administrative misconduct, such as breaches of rules, conflict of interest, negligence, corruption, and violation of confidentiality, may undermine organizational performance, waste scarce resources, and erode the institutional values that universities aim to maintain (Akpór-Robaro et al., 2024; Gregory & Macaulay, 2023).

Ethical discipline can be conceived as a convergence of two mutually reinforcing components: (a), the formal regulatory scheme where codes of compliance, disciplinary actions, and sanctions are integrated and (b) the informal ethic climate whereby leadership behavior, common practices, and routines are included (Adetunji & Alers, 2022; Hasan, 2025; Hyatt & Gruenglas, 2023; Simpson & Evens, 2024). Even though organizations have formal codes, which define anticipated norms and stipulate repercussions to infractions, organizational behavior studies highlight that such tools can be effective at promoting organizational conduct only when they are supported by a powerful leadership structure and an encouraging climate of ethics (Gundo, 2022; Kumar & Ramraj, 2025). Ethical norms are more easily internalized by the employees when the leaders themselves demonstrate integrity, with clear expectations, and the implementation of the disciplinary systems is fair (Zheng et al., 2022). It is evident that open and fair working conditions increase the motivation of employees and minimize deviant behavior (Fashogbon et al., 2025). Formal accountability mechanisms, such as codes of ethics, staff handbooks, anti-corruption provisions, and research misconduct procedures, have been adopted by many institutions of higher learning around the globe to secure accountability and guard the integrity of the institution

(Mattar, 2022; Robertson, cited in Smyth et al., 2024). The formal accountability mechanisms usually include whistle-blower rights, investigation policy, and sanction policy that are aimed at enforcing justice and improving social trust (Ansori, 2025; Odhiambo, 2022).

Recent research in the field of organizational psychology and administration of higher education highlights disciplinary regulation as one of the factors that leads to better punctuality, reduced absenteeism, and better performance by the staff, provided that it is applied in a way perceived as fair, consistent, and transparent (e.g., Asuquo & Olagunju, 2025; Nyarkoh et al., 2023). However, several of these same studies warn against disciplinary rules that are purely grounded in punitive policies. When strictly enforced with no proper consideration of organizational justice, staff welfare, and psychosocial working conditions, then the result can be disengagement, stress, direct resistance, and retaliation for deviant behavior (Obalade & Mtembu, 2023).

Despite the centrality of administrative work to institutional functioning, the literature on ethics in higher education remains disproportionately focused on faculty and student academic integrity. Few studies single out administrative staff as a distinct group with special ethical issues associated with procurement choices, finances, student record management, gatekeeping, and discretionary authority (e.g., Hermawan et al., 2022; Kumar & Limbachiya, 2023). Studies on administrative ethics analysis highlight the immediate impact of misbehavior on operations, including financial damages, reduced service provision, and poor accountability controls, and its indirect cultural impact on trust, fairness, and morale within organizations (Hossain et al., 2024; Ngarama, 2023; Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2022). There is an emergent, but slowly growing literature that suggests that administrative staff require specific intervention approaches acknowledging the diverse ethical problems that arise depending on the nature of their job, organizational culture, and the amount of discretion involved in their work (e.g., Andersson & Ekelund, 2022; Hyatt & Gruenglas, 2023).

These literature gaps provide an obvious justification for the study of the issue of promoting ethical discipline among administrative staff in universities. Three limitations can be singled out. To start with, a significant portion of existing literature lumps together the staff into a single category, and it is hard to detach the ethical risks and duties of the administrative positions. Second, empirical analyses of disciplinary systems in universities, such as the implementation of the codes, how the staff perceive them, and how the process of their implementation operates in practice, are not always consistent and are usually confined to single-case studies of institutions. Third, the relations between disciplinary enforcement and the welfare of the staff are underexplored. Even though punishment can discourage wrongdoing, studies show that if a culture is too coercive, it can ruin the feeling of trust, cause workplace tension, and disrupt an attempt to establish a long-term ethical culture (Chemonges, 2024).

II. METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a review-based research design, particularly a narrative synthesis method, to explore the promotion of ethical discipline among administrative staff in higher education. The study aims to combine various theoretical and empirical studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of ethical discipline, its significance to institutions, ethical behavior in organizations, and administrative ethics among staff.

The literature review involved extensive searching in various academic databases (Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, and ScienceDirect) and searches in university archives. Journals in the field of ethics, organizational behavior, and higher education were given priority. Inclusion criteria were applied to ensure relevance and quality of sources. Only studies that focused on ethical discipline, ethical climate, leadership, organizational justice, or administrative misconduct in higher education (and those that studied administrative staff or offered insights that were relevant to them) were included. Publications written in English from 2005 to 2025 were considered. Studies published before 2005 were considered only if they presented a foundational theory. Also, studies involving either students or academic staff were avoided unless they offered considerable context in relation to the ethics of administration. Opinions that were not peer-reviewed and inaccessible publications were also avoided.

Data mining was carried out systematically, and data were extracted in the form of author(s), year, country, study design, sample, theoretical framework, key findings, and implications. A narrative synthesis method was applied to the extracted data to detect recurrent themes and patterns of studies. The review study analyzed several studies from different countries and institutional contexts to highlight the similarities and context-specific issues that affect ethical behavior.

Several measures were used to guarantee the study's reliability and rigor, some of which included the search of multiple databases and repositories to reduce selection bias. The selection was done clearly and transparently using inclusion and exclusion criteria. The study's conclusions were confirmed through the cross-validation of findings obtained from multiple sources. The sources were limited to peer-reviewed and high-quality sources to increase credibility.

In this study, ethical issues were of grave concern to the researchers. All the sources cited were accurately carried out and acknowledged to ensure intellectual honesty. Data extraction and synthesis were openly done to eliminate distortion. Only studies that had previously been ethically-approved or peer-reviewed

and validated were included. This ethical approach offered a strict and ethically sound guideline to this review study on ethical discipline among administrative staff in universities. This technique guaranteed a blend of theoretical knowledge, empirical data, and proposed/suggested viewpoints for comprehending the way ethical behavior can be reinforced and sustained in the practice of university administration. The methodology has led to making the findings reliable, reproducible, and informative both for the research and practical implications towards enhancing institutional integrity.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Administrative staff (those who manage finance, procurement, student records, human resource, and facilities, among other enabling services) exert routine discretionary authority that shapes access, fairness, and accountability of resources. The consequences of unethical administrative actors are both operational (financial loss, failure of service delivery) and symbolic (loss of trust, weakened morale). Ethical discipline in the university administrative systems has gained more academic interest over the years, especially since higher education institutions are facing heightened scrutiny from governments, regulatory bodies, students, and the general public. A university cannot offer academic services (financial accountability, reliable records keeping, and uphold public trust) without ensuring the integrity of its administrative structure. However, while academic integrity among students and faculty has been widely researched, administrative ethics is still relatively underexplored. This section reviews the concept, theoretical, and empirical literature relevant to the study of ethical discipline among administrative staff in universities.

3.1 Concept Review

3.1.1 Ethical Discipline

Literature on organizational behavior and applied ethics tends to conceptualize ethical discipline as the continued adherence to do what is morally sound and professionally appropriate, as well as rules inherent in institutions that govern behavior at workplaces (Treviño et al., 2024). Ethical discipline goes beyond mere rule-following to internalization of ethical values that shape judgement, behavior, and decision-making in situations where external monitoring or enforcement might be limited. In this respect, ethical discipline is a behavioral and psychological inclination towards doing what is right, fair, and professionally responsible, as opposed to what is just permissible and convenient (Chaddha & Agrawal, 2023; Di Carlo, 2022; Farnicka, 2022).

In the context of higher educational institutions, ethical discipline takes on a special form of significance because the university as an institution of higher education assumes the normative role of the custodian of knowledge, social resources, and reputations of society (Smolentseva, 2023). The administrative staff at the university is in a position where they engage regularly with the students, faculty, regulators, and outside stakeholders. Hence, the integrity of their decisions has direct implications for accessibility, equity, and public confidence in the institution. Ethical discipline encompasses a wide array of expectations, including fairness in resource allocation or services, transparency in administrative processes, confidentiality in the management of student and personnel data, neutrality and impartiality in service provision, and avoidance of behaviors such as fraud, favoritism, bribery, or abuse of administrative power (Ataman & Nejat, 2024; Kayyali, 2025).

Ferrero et al. (2024) and Zahari et al. (2022) maintained that the concept of ethical discipline and organizational integrity are inseparable. These scholars contend that ethical discipline is a consistency between the values publicly outlined by higher education institutions and the behaviors and practices demonstrated by their members daily. Integrity is, therefore, not merely a moral ideal but is a structural situation that indicates how values are enacted in practices, decisions, and routines (Zahari et al., 2022). Ethical discipline is evident when institutional values and staff behavior aligns with each other in terms of predictable, responsible, and principled behavior (Treviño et al., 2024). Conversely, ethical discipline is undermined when there is misalignment, that is, when organizations claim to be of high ethical standards, but condone or fail to address misbehavior or misconduct (Chemonges, 2024). This encourages cynicism, moral disengagement, and deviance among staff.

Studies on organizational ethics perceive ethical discipline to be multidimensional (formal and informal dimensions) (Reddick et al., 2025; Roy et al., 2024). Formal dimensions include written codes of conduct, administrative procedures, standard operating policies, monitoring and reporting systems, and unethical behavior sanctions (Simpson & Evens, 2024). These involve regulatory guidelines, rules, and standards relating to how and what the expectations of molding behavior are. Nevertheless, scholars relentlessly warn that regulatory standards and rules alone cannot ensure the effectiveness of how behavior is shaped (e.g., Armstrong & Stedman, 2024). Formal rules and regulations can only become effective when they are reinforced by observable enforcement procedures, fairness, and adequate organizational capacity.

Informal aspects, including leadership, ethical climate, shared norms, modelling, and how employees perceive fairness and justice, complement formal structures (Fein et al., 2023). Informal aspects can be more efficient because it shows how things “actually work” in the organizational setup. For example, when employees

notice that leadership demonstrates fairness, transparency, and honesty in their practices, ethical discipline tends to be sustained through social learning (Blanco-Gonzalez et al., 2020). In contrast, when leadership disregards unethical behavior and selectively applies the rules, workers may perceive their actions as implicit approval to contravene moral codes. Hence, the effectiveness of ethical discipline is fundamental to the drive of informal and formal cultural indicators.

Furthermore, Treviño et al. (2024) maintain that ethical discipline is recognized both at the individual level and organizational level. At the individual level, it includes ethical judgment, moral awareness, and professional identity. At the organizational level, it comprises culture, human resource practices, leadership, and governance structures. The two levels of perspectives propose that ethical behavior in higher education institutions is not merely a corollary of the morality of a person; instead, it is an outcome of an intricate interaction between a person's inward and outward disposition and the environment of the organization that reinforces or weakens ethical behavior. These subtleties are particularly critical in the administration of universities, as the work of administrative staff is often discretionary and the trade-offs are consistently ethical. Unethical reconciliation, corruption, manipulating information, or favoritism are embedded in decisions relating to processing admission, providing financial aid, examination management, procurement practices, or personnel administration. Without robust ethical discipline supported by transparent procedures, leadership commitment, and an ethical organizational climate, the staff can or may succumb to pressure or temptations, which undermine fairness or transparency (Gundo, 2022; Kumar & Ramraj, 2025).

Organizational members not only interpret ethical standards based on formal directives but also through daily interactions (Arar & Saiti, 2022). Leaders who clearly communicate ethical expectations, reinforce ethical behaviors, and consistently penalize violators contribute to an effective ethical climate and greater ethical discipline (Majka, 2024; Skiba, 2024). Similarly, employees will likely demonstrate disciplined ethical behavior when they perceive that the rules are fairly applied and there are organizational support systems put in place to protect the whistle-blowers or guide them to make ethical decisions (Abdulkareem et al., 2025; Tufan et al., 2023).

3.1.2 Ethical Responsibilities of Administrative Staff

Ethical responsibility of administrative staff in universities has gained academic interest as higher education institutions are under increased pressure or demand for accountability, transparency, and good governance. Administrative staff hold key roles in the organizational framework of universities and often serve as the operational backbone that enables teaching, research, and student support systems to operate effectively (Aithal & Maiya, 2023). Their work spans several functional areas, including admissions, examinations, records management, finance, procurement, human resources, and student services, each of which has high levels of ethical expectations and associated risks.

3.1.3 Ethical Burden of Discretion

Administrative staff in universities hold positions that give them a high degree of discretionary power, frequently acting as gatekeepers over processes that are central to the functions of the institution (Nagornykh, 2024). It is a discretion, which cuts across admissions, procurement, financial management, human resources, and student services, and the decision-making process can have a big influence on the rights, experiences, and well-being of students and faculty (Kumar & Limbachiya, 2023; Tull et al., 2023). On the one hand, discretion does give the opportunity to make decisions based on the reactions and the situation where they are to be applied; however, it also imposes some ethical loads; therefore, it is imperative to make decisions in a fair, consistent, and transparent way. Several scholars point to the fact that this discretionary space puts the administrative personnel under complicated ethical pressures. Universities are normative organizations that are instantaneously engaged in educational, research, and social missions; consequently, staff members find themselves in conflicting missions. To illustrate, the administrative employees can feel forced to accelerate the operations towards deadlines, appease several stakeholders with conflicting interests, or utilize scarce resources effectively (Basiru et al., 2023). These are situational pressures that pose ethical dilemmas where the appropriate course of action might be unclear, or institutional guidelines would not offer clear guidance (Trevino & Nelson, 2017). According to the literature on organizational ethics, an environment with ambiguity, resource-constraints, and high discretion increases the chances of ethical dilemma or disagreement and moral strain among employees (Daradkeh, 2023). Unless the administrative staff has the appropriate institutional support, the ethical responsibility can become overwhelming. Empirical studies reveal that the formal interventions, such as broad codes of conduct, standard operating procedures, and penalties against misconduct, are not enough, though required to regulate ethical conduct (Hulkkonen, 2024). Informal mechanisms, including ethical leadership, open communication, mentoring, and favorable organizational climate, are also crucial as they assist employees to internalize the norms and resolve ethical dilemmas (Armstrong & Stedman, 2024; Fein et al., 2023). Without such support, the staff can find it attractive to exercise discretionary practices that are more expedient and

favorable to themselves, and may result in violation of the rules, unfair treatment of stakeholders, or subtle deviance.

Moreover, the psychological aspect of ethical discretion is gaining prominence in research in organizations. Staff working under an ambiguous mandate can find themselves in a state of cognitive dissonance, role conflict, or moral distress as the expectation imposed by the institution disagrees with reality on the ground (Entringer, 2025; Shah & Lacaze, 2025). For instance, administrative staff may find themselves caught between efficiency and integrity when they are pressured to get the procurement process completed within a strict time frame in line with the anti-corruption regulations. These stressors may be both a personal and an institutional consequence, affecting staff well-being, job satisfaction, commitment, and the overall ethical climate of the university (Borrelli et al., 2023; Yiming et al., 2024).

3.1.7 Promoting Ethical Discipline in Higher Education

a. Ethical Leadership as a Driver of Discipline

A growing body of research recognizes leadership as a key determinant of ethical behavior in universities. It has been identified that ethical leadership, which is described as the expression of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships as well as the promotion of such conduct to subordinates through communication, reinforcing, and decision making, have been found to influence the organizational ethical climate and minimize workplace deviance (Abbas et al., 2024; Abu-Bakar & Connaughton, 2022; Ayoko, 2022; Shiundu, 2024). Leaders in higher education can promote ethical discipline through modelling transparency, fairness, integrity, and accountability in their own actions and behaviors, signaling to administrative staff and faculty that ethical conduct is desired and rewarded. According to Brigue and Orlu (2023), Kim and Lee (2024), and Ughulu (2024), ethical leadership strengthens organizational integrity, ensuring that the stated values align with actual practices, which is a critical condition necessary for fostering an institutional culture of discipline.

A number of empirical studies have pointed out the effectiveness of ethical leadership in university settings. For example, research by Dampson (2022) found that the positive association between ethical leadership (fairness, integrity, good communication, and staff support) and work deviance is high in Ghana in administrative offices in the public sector. Supportively, other institutions of higher learning have proven that leaders who support their employees, provide them with clear ethical guidelines, and take decisive action when ethical guidelines are breached create an environment where employees comply with ethical guidelines (Kyambade & Namatovu, 2025). This increases the necessity to incorporate leadership development programs in the strategies for promoting ethical discipline within the universities

b. Formal Policies and Governance Mechanisms

While ethical leadership is highly significant, researchers agree that it should be reinforced by official, robust, and resilient policy frameworks. Institutional rules, codes of conduct, research-misconduct protocols, and disciplinary procedures provide a guide on how to define the expected behavior, as well as sanction violations (Irvita & Asriani, 2025; Roy et al., 2024; Treviño et al., 2024; Treviño & Nelson, 2017). These formal instruments establish baseline standards for administrative and academic staff, create transparency in decision-making, and protect whistle-blowers. However, it is established in research that formal codes alone are insufficient. Implementation gaps, such as a lack of transparency, slow investigations, and inconsistent enforcement, may decrease credibility and create an impression of unfairness (Roy et al., 2024; Treviño et al., 2024). Thus, the success of policies depends not only on their content but also on how they are operationalized. Comparative studies suggest that disciplinary systems are more effective when they are complemented with clear procedural rules with mechanisms for monitoring compliance, reporting issues, and giving a timely resolution (Nandan-Prasad, 2024; Riaan & Mmakwena, 2024; Roy et al., 2024).

c. Ethical Climate and Organizational Culture

Ethical discipline is entrenched in organizational culture. Victor and Cullen (1988), as cited in Philippou (2023), typology of ethical climates (caring, law and code, rules-based, instrumental, and independence) can be used to explain the influence of institutional norms on staff behavior. A “caring” climate, where organizational policies prioritize fairness, stakeholders’ welfare, and interpersonal respect, has been associated with lower rates of workplace deviance and high level of ethical compliance (Jin et al, 2022; Kumar & Ramraj, 2025; Nworgu & Amadi, 2023). Conversely, climates that are considered to be instrumental or profit-oriented may undermine adherence to ethical codes, even when there are formal policies. Researchers recommend developing an ethical climate through socialization, frequent transmission of values, rewards for moral conduct, and enforcement of norms using rewards and sanctions (Ertas, 2025; Treviño & Nelson, 2017). This involves incorporating ethics education into staff induction programs, providing continuous professional development programs on ethical standards, and ensuring that every member understands the moral and operational implications of misconduct.

d. Training and Capacity-Building

Ethical discipline can be facilitated through training and education within organizations. Ethics training has preventative and developmental functions. They may assist in clarifying expectations, establishing staff consciousness of the policies, and instilling them with strategies to address complicated dilemmas (Taj, 2023). Studies have shown that ethical thinking and decision making is better promoted by the use of training initiatives that involve the use of the scenario-based learning method, role-playing, and discussion of actual institutional dilemmas rather than didactic training methods (Sartzetaki & Dimitriou, 2025). Workshops for administrative staff in universities must be designed based on administrative functions, emphasizing frequently encountered ethical dilemmas in aspects such as procurement, admissions, finance, and student services. By placing ethical training and education into a work-life context, institutions increase their chances of formal codes and policies being internalized and applied regularly.

e. Monitoring, Reporting, and Accountability Mechanisms

Ethical discipline is supported by means of monitoring, transparent reporting, and accountability. The channels where the violations can be identified and the staff can be held responsible include hotlines, anonymous reporting channels, audit committees, and periodical performance reviews (Efunniyi et al., 2024). Most importantly, these mechanisms must be regarded as non-discriminating, fair, and responsive; otherwise, they may demotivate reporting or create a sense of cynicism. It is evident from these studies that in organizations with a blend of monitoring systems, ethical leadership, and favorable organizational climates, it is less cumbersome to deal with the occurrence of misbehavior and compliance among staff (Ansong et al., 2025; Majka, 2024; Sookdawoor & Grobler, 2022).

f. Integrating Welfare and Discipline

The interaction between the application of rules and the welfare of staff is a predominant theme in extant literature. Applying punitive measures might avert misbehavior for a short period of time. However, it may culminate in non-compliance, stress creation, or distance in circumstances where employees see punitive measures as discriminatory and subjective (Bugdol & Puciato, 2023; Nyarkoh et al., 2023; Simpson & Evens, 2024). Effective promotion of ethical discipline requires a dual approach (firm standards and predictable sanctions) coupled with support options including ethical coaching, mentoring, workload management, and opportunities for grievance resolution. The long-term strategy of this holistic approach can assist in developing sustainable ethical behavior while maintaining staff morale and organizational commitment.

3.2 Theoretical Review

Understanding ethical discipline in universities involves interaction with organizational, ethics, and public-sector management theories. Three significant theoretical lenses give insights into how and why administrative staff act ethically or unethically.

3.2.1 Social Learning Theory and Its Relevance for Ethical Discipline in Higher Education

The Social Learning Theory (SLT) was initially developed by Albert Bandura in 1977, and it gives the foundational basis of how people learn and internalize behavioral norms within social and organizational environments. According to Bandura (1977), learning does not only take place through direct experience or reinforcement but also significantly through observation of others' actions, the consequences of those actions, and the social modelling of behaviors which are considered to be appropriate or rewarded. In essence, individuals consistently observe their environment, selectively attend to behaviors, and evaluate outcomes before integrating observed patterns into their own behavioral repertoire. SLT has been extensively used in an organizational context to elucidate ethical conduct and bad behavior. Employees do not receive rules or formal policies passively, but instead, they construct social cues, leadership behaviors, and organizational reactions to ethical dilemmas. Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) extend the theory to ethical leadership, stating that leaders are the main role models for ethical behavior. Ethical leadership is exemplified by the leaders who are upright, just, and responsible, able to articulate expectations, and offer positive and negative reinforcement for ethical and unethical behavior, respectively. In this regard, leaders' influence on members of the organization is not only through formal directives but also through socializing ethical norms and or exhibiting moral conduct.

In a higher education setting, administrative staff occupy positions with a considerable amount of discretion in terms of the critical processes, such as admissions, finance, procurement, student records, and human resources. These positions make the roles of administrative staff very crucial to institutional integrity and efficiency. According to SLT, there are high chances that administrative staff will imitate behavioral models that the supervisors and senior administrators portray. For instance, when department heads consistently model fairness in decision-making, uphold transparency, and treat staff equitably, the subordinates can see the above behaviors of their department heads and thus are more likely to replicate them in their interactions with other

professionals (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020; Hassan, Wright, & Yukl, 2014). On the other hand, unethical, irregular, or obscure actions by supervisors or leaders may legitimize bad behavior and erode ethics among administrative units.

Empirical evidence supports the applicability of SLT to ethical discipline in universities. Dampson's (2022) study revealed that ethical leadership was associated with reduced work deviance among administrative staff in Ghanaian public-sector offices. The study highlights the importance of modelling and reinforcement in shaping staff behavior. Similarly, Brown and Treviño (2006) note that the observability of ethical behaviors, e.g., compliance with policies, transparent communication, and continuity, will make learning through observation more reinforcing; it is the organizational norms that are appreciated and desired. This concurs with the supposition of STL that reinforcement and vicarious learning are fundamental to the adoption of behavior. SLT also describes procedures for translating into practice formal codes of conduct and organizational practices. Universities may design comprehensive ethical codes, protocols of reporting, and sanctions; however, these mechanisms will become inefficient unless the staff see that the leaders themselves exemplify the values as postulated in university statutes. Taking cognizance of how leaders respond to ethical issues can provide the administrative staff with proven techniques for implementing ethical principles, either by constantly applying regulatory standards, rewarding integrity, or sanctioning misconduct. Significantly, ethical discipline emerges not merely from written rules but from socially internalized practices reinforced by plausible models within the institution (Treviño & Nelson, 2017; Kaptein, 2011).

Furthermore, SLT emphasizes the significance of support and feedback in preserving ethical discipline. Positive reinforcement, including acknowledging ethical decision-making, adherence to rules, and publicly recognizing integrity, increases the probability of internalizing observed behavior. Conversely, condoning immoral behavior, justifying objectionable behavior, or rewarding expedient behavior instead of upholding organizational morals creates negative role modelling, thus causing behavioral drift and loss of organizational morality (Brown et al., 2005; Palanski & Yammarino, 2007).

Implementing SLT as a model of instilling ethical discipline in administrative staff has a number of feasible benefits to institutions of higher learning. First, it prefigures the importance of leadership in the process of organizational culture and staff behavior. Universities can capitalize on this insight by investing in ethical leadership development, mentoring and succession planning so that leaders can be role models of the desired behaviors at all times. Second, it puts emphasis on the interaction between formal policies and social learning: codes of conduct should be embedded within a social environment where ethical conducts are modelled, reinforced, and rewarded. Third, STL highlights the position of transparent and feedback instruments that enable staff to effortlessly see the impact of ethical and unethical activity, and facilitate moral learning (Kaptein, 2011; Kaptein, 2023; Treviño & Nelson, 2017).

3.2.2 Organizational Justice Theory and Ethical Discipline in Higher Education

The Organizational Justice Theory (OJT) offers a critical perspective for understanding how the perception of fairness within an institution shapes staff attitudes, decision-making, and ethical behavior. Colquitt et al. (2013) define organizational justice as the extent to which employees perceive workplace processes, outcomes, and interpersonal relationships to be fair. The theory has three distinct dimensions. These are distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice. Distributive justice explains the perception of fairness regarding the determination and the outcome of workloads, salaries and promotions; procedural justice relates to the perceived fairness of the process of decision-making; and interactional justice describes the benchmark for treatment and communication during implementation. Together, these dimensions establish if workers imbibe organizational values, respect ethical standards, and behave in socially acceptable or unacceptable manner (Colquitt et al., 2013).

Administrative staff working in higher education institutions encounter challenges that require their discretion to be ethical or unethical. This is critical because in carrying out their duties, the administrative staff access sensitive information, use discretionary authority, and control administrative activities (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020; Hassan, Wright, & Yukl, 2014).

The organizational justice theory offers an explanatory framework for why administrative staff comply with ethical norms or, conversely, engage in misconduct. For Instance, where employees feel there is uniformity and transparency in implementing promotion rules, disciplinary measures, assigning workloads, and resolving grievances, there are higher chances that employees internalise the ethical standards and make responsible decisions. The clarity of the processes, their impartiality, and responsiveness may indicate to staff members that the organization values fairness and ethical behaviors, which encourage organizational commitment and create a strong sense of ethical discipline (Colquitt et al., 2013; Cropanzano et al., 2022).

On the contrary, the perception of injustice may adversely affect ethical conduct. It has been empirically demonstrated that when employees experience a sense of bias, favouritism, or inconsistency in the rule enforcement procedure, they would experience higher tendencies of committing counter-productive work behaviors, including fraud, absenteeism, rule-bending, or resource misallocation (Sajuyigbe et al., 2025;

Veetikazhi et al., 2022). In higher education institutions and their environment, such actions may have widespread consequences on operational efficiency, student service, research and institutional credibility. For example, an administrative official who observes selective treatment in procurement and/or promotions may give good reasons for unscrupulous dealings in their daily activities. The reason being that they may see misconduct as a reasonable response to a system plagued with discrimination and favouritism (Kaptein, 2011). Essentially, using organizational justice theory in higher education institutions entails paying attention to policy design, implementation, and leadership styles. Higher education institutions should guarantee that workload distribution, resource allocation, grievance management, and disciplinary procedures are unambiguous, clear, comprehensible, and carefully utilized.

3.2.3 Ethical Climate Theory and Ethical Discipline in Higher Education

Ethical Climate Theory (ECT) was originally expounded by Victor and Cullen (1988). This theory postulates a conceptual model for interpreting how common ethical standards, suppositions, and values in an organization impact employee behavior. The theory contends that the ethical climate of an organization elicits varied perceptions among employees. These perceptions comprise “what is ethically right behavior” and “how ethical issues ought to be managed” in the daily operations of institutions. These perceptions provide prescriptive standards shaping individuals' decision-making and collective organizational culture (Victor & Cullen, 1988).

Victor and Cullen (1988) classify ethical climates into four discrete categories characterised by different behavioral propositions. The “Caring climate” addresses the welfare of others and the wider community nurturing socially acceptable behavior and adherence to ethical standards. The “Rules-based climate” emphasizes conformity to formal policies, codes, and procedures, which are helpful in decision-making. “Independence-based climates” are concerned with individual moral judgement and individual accountability and aim to stimulate employees to behave in accordance with the internalized ethical principles. Contrastingly, “instrumental climates”, which put more emphasis on self-interest, organizational gain or efficiency rather than ethical considerations have always been linked to increased levels of deviance and unethical behavior (Victor & Cullen, 1988; Cullen et al., 1993).

The application of Ethical Climate Theory in universities also highlights the interplay between organizational norms and leadership behavior. Leaders play a central role in ethical climate and, by their behaviors, communication, and reinforcement initiatives, they influence how employees define acceptable and rewarded behavior (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Dampson, 2022). In cases where leaders act as role models in making ethical decisions, rewarding integrity, and keeping administrative staff in fair treatment, administrative staff will tend to internalize or practice these norms, creating a culture of ethical discipline. On the contrary, leadership that compromises adherence to ethical standards, tolerates shortcuts, inconsistency, or self-serving behaviors may unwittingly contribute to instrumental climates that undermine compliance with ethical standards (Kaptein, 2011).

In practice, the development of a favorable ethical climate in universities will be necessary at every level. Formal governance systems, including codes of conduct, disciplinary procedures, and reporting systems, must be supplemented by visible ethical leadership, staff involvement in policy-making and continuous ethics training. Developing an ethical culture, such as caring and rules, also requires the ability to appreciate and reward ethical behavior, offer clear directives to resolve dilemmas, and the establishment of mechanisms that enable employees to address ethical issues without intimidation (Asnakew, 2025; Treviño & Nelson, 2017).

3.3 Empirical Review

Empirical studies on ethical discipline in the tertiary education sector have focused on the influence of leadership, organizational climate, policy frameworks, and staff behavior shaping ethical conduct. While a significant portion of the literature traditionally focused on students and academic staff (e.g., McCabe, Butterfield, & Treviño, 2012; Miller et al., 2017), there is a growing trend of studies that also consider the role of administrative staff, whose responsibilities include discretionary authority and access to sensitive information, positioning them as the main actors in maintaining institutional integrity (e.g., Bertelli & Falletti, 2025; Meshak & Meshak, 2024; Rajan, 2023).

The issue of leadership is always mentioned as a key factor of ethical behavior among administrative staff. Research on public sector administrative staff in the Cape Coast Metropolis, Ghana, by Dampson (2022) revealed that ethical leadership, which is marked by fairness, integrity, clear communication, and supportive guidance, had a significant predictive result on the lower levels of work deviance. Similarly, Akyeampong (2023) revealed that organizational ethical behavior had a positive influence on perception of organizational climate and institutional reputation in a Ghanaian university, suggesting that ethical conduct of staff contributes to operational integrity and overall credibility of the institution. These findings are consistent with Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which states that employees model their behavior on observed leadership

practices, and supports the idea that visible ethical leadership can promote internalization of organizational norms among administrative staff.

Several studies also emphasize the influence of ethical climate on staff behavior. Obalade and Arogundade (2019) examined employees in Nigerian universities and observed that a strong ethical climate characterized by adherence to rules, fairness, and driven concerns for others is associated with minimal deviant behavior. Conversely, instrumental climates, which prioritize organizational gain or self-interest, are associated with increased levels of misconduct. These findings support Ethical Climate Theory, which assumes that shared normative expectations in an organization influence ethical reasoning and decision-making (Oluwole & Ishola, 2019; Victor & Cullen, 1988). A recent comparative study in universities in Pakistan, China, and Saudi Arabia also indicated that ethical climate does affect ethical leadership through collective moral efficacy, with team cohesion serving as a moderating factor (Din et al., 2015). This emphasizes how organizational culture and peer interactions help in fostering ethical conduct in higher education settings.

There is an established connection in literature between organizational justice and ethical discipline among university staff. Studies in Ghana and other African contexts revealed that when administrative staff perceive procedures, resource allocation, promotion, and disciplinary measures as fair tends to increase compliance with ethical norms, whilst an opinion of bias, or lack of consistency, tends to stimulate deviant behavior (Colquitt et al., 2013; Dampson, 2022). The results highlight the relationship between official policies, fairness, and employee perceptions in influencing day-to-day ethical decision-making.

Moreover, a significant number of studies have revealed that administrative staff play a pivotal role in operationalizing institutional policies and protecting ethical standards. Hassan, Wright, and Yukl (2014) described administrative staff as “ethics mediators”, who may help in translating institutional policies into the everyday experiences of faculty and students. Ethical failure at this level, including fraud, favoritism, or poor management of student records, may have a negative effect, undermining service delivery, institutional credibility, and trust with stakeholders. In contrast, employees who behave in accordance with ethical standards strengthen organizational integrity and increase the capacity of the institution to meet its academic and social mission.

3.4 Gaps Identified in the Literature

A keen analysis of the available literature on ethical discipline in higher education indicates some major gaps, which limit theoretical development and practical interventions. The gaps highlight areas necessary for the future, especially in the context of administrative staff in universities.

3.4.1 Limited Research on Administrative Staff as a Distinct Group

Most studies on academic integrity and ethical behavior in higher education have traditionally focused on students and faculty. While such studies offer a great insight into teaching, learning, and scholarly conduct, they largely overlook administrative staff who perform the most crucial operational tasks, such as finance, human resources, student services, and procuring and managing records in the institution. The administrative positions are usually associated with a high degree of discretion and access to sensitive information and decision-making authority, which directly influence the institution's integrity. The scarcity of research that directly focuses on the ethical behavior of administrative staff limits our understanding of the peculiarities of challenges and ethical risks associated with these positions. This is a significant knowledge gap because any incident of misconduct at the administrative level may have cascading consequences on institutional credibility, resource management, and service delivery.

3.4.2 Lack of Empirical Evaluation of Policy Implementation

Most universities, including those in Ghana and Africa, have established formal policies, codes of conduct, and disciplinary systems to inform the ethical behavior of staff. Notwithstanding, there is limited empirical evidence evaluating how these policies are operationalized in practice. Numerous studies describe the presence of codes and rules, yet fail to discuss whether they are properly enacted and effectively implemented or understood by employees. This is a critical gap since formal policies are not enough to provide ethical discipline; their success depends on compliance and transparency, as well as alignment with the organizational culture. In the absence of empirical assessment of implementation, there is the risk that universities will create a system of paper-based ethics, where rules exist in principle but fail to influence daily behavior.

3.4.3 Weak Integration of Organizational Behavior Theories in Higher Education Ethics Research

Organizational behavior and management literature provides robust theoretical frameworks on ethical behavior, including Social Learning Theory, Organizational Justice Theory, and Ethical Climate Theory, but its application to university administrative contexts is limited. Few studies explicitly apply these theories to explain the influence of leadership, organizational justice, ethical climate, and socialisation mechanisms on the behavior of administrative staff. This theoretical gap limits the development of evidence-based interventions to support

ethical discipline. Integrating organizational behavior theories into research can construct a systematic framework for predicting, explaining, and managing ethical behavior in higher education and bridging the gap between principles and practical administrative practices.

3.4.4 Insufficient Context-Specific Studies in Ghana

Extant literature worldwide provides wide-ranging empirical evidence on ethical behavior and governance of higher education institutions. However, there is a dearth of literature relating to Ghana-specific research. Data regarding how administrative staff in Ghanaian higher education institutions perceive ethical discipline, policy implementation, leadership behavior, organizational support, and the overall climate at work is limited. Decisions regarding ethical discipline in the universities can be influenced by social norms within the local environment in which the university is situated. In addition, governance quality, resource constraints socio-political aspects may affect ethical decision-making. This, hence, implies that generalization of findings in other regions may not fully reflect the facts in administrative ethics in Ghana. It is important to address this research gap by coming out with relevant context specific approaches that are based on empirical evidence, and are critical in promoting ethical discipline.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The review of existing literature on ethical discipline among administrative staff in higher education institutions revealed the importance of sustaining institutional integrity, operational efficiency, and the trust of stakeholders. Developing ethical discipline involves an intricate interplay between formal and informal factors. These factors include codes of conduct, disciplinary procedures, policy regulations, perception of fairness and support by staff, leadership behavior, and organizational climate. The administrative staff has discretionary authority, and also perform gate-keeping functions. In addition, they play a central role in translating the policies of the institution into practice, and exhibit ethical behavior within the university environment.

Theoretical perspectives including Social Learning Theory, Organizational Justice Theory, and Ethical Climate Theory provide useful avenues through which ethical discipline can be explained and promoted. The introduction of ethical leadership as an example of staff behavior is highlighted by the Social Learning Theory. The SL Theory highlights the importance of ethical leadership as a framework for staff behavior, demonstrating that leaders' actions and communication directly affect the internalization of ethical norms. Organizational Justice Theory also emphasizes that procedural, distributive, and interactional fairness are key perceptions to encouraging adherence to ethical norms, whereas Ethical Climate Theory highlights the importance of shared institutional norms in determining ethical rationale and decision-making.

Empirical studies consistently revealed that promoting ethical discipline is contingent on a combination of supportive leadership, transparent and consistent policies and implementations, an ethical climate such as caring and rules-based, and sufficient organizational support for staff. Research in Ghanaian universities and other institutions of higher learning has shown that ethical leadership and the use of fair and transparent processes significantly decrease workplace deviance and institutional credibility. Positively, organizational climates that imitate fairness, accountability, and care about the stakeholders strengthen adherence to ethical standards, whereas instrumental or self-interest-driven climates increase the probability of misconduct.

Overall, the review study concludes that the issue of promoting ethical discipline amongst administrative staff is not only about formal regulations and punishment. Instead, it needs an integrated approach that entails articulate policies, ethical leadership, organizational justice, employee training, and positive institutional culture. Universities can build a culture where administrative staff internalize and systematically apply ethical norms to enhance institutional governance, improve service delivery, and retain the trust of the public by synchronizing leadership practices, ethical climate, and policy structures.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the literature review and inferences of this study, it is possible to come up with some practical and strategic suggestions to help build ethical discipline among administrative staff in higher education institutions:

i. Strengthen Ethical Leadership

Universities ought to prioritize the development of ethical leadership at all levels of administration. Leaders and supervisors are expected to exemplify or model ethical behavior, communicate high standards, and reinforce ethical conduct through rewarding recognition. The skills of acting as role models can be developed through leadership development programs, focusing on ethics, integrity, and transparent decision-making. Administrative staff in higher education institutions can be equipped with these skills to serve as role models.

ii. Enhance Organizational Justice and Fairness

It is important that higher education institutions ensure consistent, fair, and an unambiguous deployment of policies such as resource allocation, staff promotion, and application of punitive measures. Staff perception of procedural, distributive, and interactional fairness may have direct influence on their respect for ethical

standards. To reduce employee perception of bias and nurture trust building, it is important to establish robust communication channels and frank grievance mechanisms.

iii. Develop and Maintain a Supportive Ethical Climate

Universities must build an organizational culture that nurtures accountability, justice, and concerns for stakeholders. Regular workshops, and institutional messages that aim at promoting the value of ethical conduct may be used to reinforce the ethical climate of these institutions. It is crucial to ensure that the instrumental climate, which is largely focused on self-interest and/or organizational profitability is eliminated. This climate is basically associated with regular misconduct.

iv. Enhance Policy Implementation and Enforcement

Although, codes of conduct and disciplinary measures are important, their efficacy lies in unambiguous communication, availability, and consistent implementation. Universities need to streamline reporting and adjudication processes so as to conduct investigations into misconduct promptly and impose appropriate penalties. The study also recommends that universities should arrange and motivate administrative staff to attend induction training, continue ethics education, and workshops based on scenarios, which can further improve the knowledge and internalisation of ethical norms.

v. Strengthen Organizational Support of Administrative Staff

The administrative staff ought to be respected, supported, and valued in their work. The institutions ought to make sure that they have sufficient resources, workloads that are manageable, and ethical behavior. Positive climate promotes de-stress and minimizes burnout, which helps the staff to make ethical choices even in complicated or highly demanding situations.

vi. Monitor and Evaluate Ethical Practices

Universities should establish mechanisms to regularly monitor and assess the efficiency of ethical policies, leadership programs or initiatives, and perception of organizational justice and climate among staff members. Surveys, audits, and reviews can also be conducted by universities and other higher education institutions to have in-depth knowledge in areas that require improvement, and also enable the process of ethical promotion to be constantly refined.

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