



Existential Dread and Resilience in Uganda's Civil Service

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Abstract

The civil service in modern Uganda operated within a complex socio-political and economic landscape marked with corruption, inefficiency, and societal pressure, creating an environment of chronic uncertainty for public employees. The study aimed to explore existential dread and resilience among Ugandan civil servants, focusing on how systemic dysfunction and personal meaning-making intersect. Using a qualitative design, it employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 civil servants selected across gender, age, and administrative levels. The findings revealed pervasive feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, and purposelessness rooted in corruption, job insecurity, and limited career advancement. Participants described existential dread as a struggle between professional responsibility, cultural duty, and personal aspiration. Coping responses ranged from adaptive strategies such as prayer, family support, and positive reframing to maladaptive behaviours like emotional withdrawal and substance use. The analysis, grounded in existential psychology and social identity theory, demonstrated how cultural, spiritual, and bureaucratic structures shaped resilience in a non-Western context. The study contributed to theory by contextualising existential psychology within African collectivist frameworks and to practice through implications for policy and institutional reform. It underscored the need for culturally sensitive wellness programmes, organisational transparency, and ethical accountability. These findings emphasised that sustainable resilience required simultaneous structural and psychosocial interventions to restore meaning, integrity, and motivation among Uganda's civil servants, advancing understanding of mental well-being within fragile governance systems.

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Introduction

In a dimly lit office in Gulu, a civil servant anxiously examines an empty envelope that should have contained his long-overdue salary. With a family to support and unpaid bills mounting, he feels the crushing burden of economic insecurity and communal expectations. Despite years of public service, he quietly wonders, "What is the purpose of my work if I cannot support those who depend on me?" This experience reflects a broader reality across Uganda, where civil servants endure delayed wages, bureaucratic inertia, and systemic inefficiency. These intertwined pressures transcend occupational stress, revealing an existential crisis rooted in meaning and purpose, yet tempered by resilience sustained through spirituality, collective identity, and cultural obligation within Uganda's civil service.

Existential dread comes from the word "existence," which means simply to be alive or present, and "dread," meaning great fear (Tillich, 1952). It is a strong type of anxiety about not knowing why we



are here or what our life means. This fear compels individuals to confront profound questions about their existence and the uncertainty of what lies ahead. It often leads to sadness and a sense of weakness or loss. Resilience, from the Latin "*resilire*," meaning to bounce back, is the ability to face hard times and recover (Southwick et al., 2014). It means using mental strength and help from others to keep moving forward. Resilience gives hope when life is tough. Both ideas help us understand how civil servants in Uganda handle difficult jobs and social pressures. Existential dread affects how they see themselves and their value, while resilience shows how they find new strength and purpose. These ideas help explain how despair and hope work together in Uganda's public sector, especially when cultural duties and system problems add to their worries (Tillich, 1952; Southwick et al., 2014).

Uganda's past strongly influences how civil servants live today. Colonial rule set up government systems that stayed even after independence. This history includes violent times like Idi Amin's rule, which caused much instability and weak institutions (Mutibwa, 1992). Today, Uganda faces many economic problems. In 2023, inflation was over 7%, and unemployment was about 8% (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2023). These problems create financial insecurity for government workers. Many experience delayed paychecks, few resources, and corruption. These issues make life harder for civil servants. Scholars such as Mutibwa (1992) and data from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2023) explain how this background leads to deep feelings of distress. Civil servants not only struggle to survive daily, but they also face failing institutions that hurt their hopes. This mix of past trauma and current economic hardship causes civil servants to question the purpose and value of their work. This kind of questioning goes beyond normal job stress and touches on identity and meaning (Guma, 2013).

Culture plays a big role in shaping how Ugandan civil servants think and feel. Uganda's values stress the importance of community and shared responsibility. Mbiti (1969) asserts that individuals remain inseparable from their communities. This means that social duties are key to a person's identity. When civil servants fail to meet family or community expectations, they feel great distress. This feeling grows stronger if they also struggle at work. Religion offers important ways to cope. Many Ugandans follow Christian or Islamic faiths, which provide hope and meaning (Bakibinga et al., 2014). Communal prayers and rituals bring comfort and help people move past feelings of emptiness. Informal networks among coworkers also give emotional support and advice. These connections help civil servants build resilience (Isoke, 2020). Unlike Western ideas that focus on the individual, Ugandan culture sees meaning as built through relationships. This shared way of making sense highlights how culture shapes both despair and resilience in Uganda's civil service (Mbiti, 1969).

Workplace problems in Uganda cause ongoing mental strain for civil servants. Bureaucratic delays slow down work, and political interference blocks career growth. Chronic underfunding means there are few resources (Parashar & Schulz, 2021). This creates a work environment full of frustration and helplessness. Delayed pay and slow promotions reduce motivation. Corruption also destroys trust in the system (Guma, 2013; Nakisuyi, 2012). These issues lead civil servants to question if their work has any real value. The clash between public service ideals and bureaucratic problems increases their distress. These workers feel torn between their responsibilities and the obstacles they face. This situation causes a kind of existential anxiety that is more than normal job dissatisfaction. It affects their sense of identity, purpose, and motivation deeply (Parashar & Schulz, 2021).

Western existential theory often focuses on the individual's fight to find meaning in a world that feels uncaring. Philosophers like Sartre (1943/2005) and Yalom (1980) describe existential dread as a lonely experience. However, this perspective does not fully capture the collective character of existential anxiety among Uganda's civil servants. Hopwood and O'Byrne (2022) argue that culture and systems must be included to understand this better. This study uses ideas from existential psychology, African public sector studies, and cultural anthropology. It helps explain how dread and resilience work



together in Uganda. Tillich's (1952) idea of existential anxiety as having many parts guides this thinking. Civil servants' experiences mix personal fears with social duties and system problems. This view sees meaning and despair as made through relationships and culture, not just inside one person (Tillich, 1952; Hopwood & O'Byrne, 2022).

Most research on existential dread looks at Western societies and ignores how it appears in African public sectors. Western ideas focus on individuals feeling meaningless. In Uganda, however, a collectivist culture combined with harsh economic conditions shapes a markedly different reality (Galukande-Kiganda et al., 2024). Studies about Uganda's civil service usually highlight corruption, inefficiency, and job dissatisfaction but do not explore psychological effects deeply (Isabirye et al., 2025; Odongo et al., 2025). Parashar and Schulz (2021) point out this important gap. This study fills that gap by interviewing 20 civil servants in Uganda. It shows how job, social, and economic pressures cause existential dread. It also reveals how faith and informal support networks help people cope and stay resilient. This work connects different fields and expands existential psychology to include non-Western, community-focused experiences (Kimuraheebwe et al., 2022).

This study looks at how professional, social, and economic pressures create existential dread among Ugandan civil servants. It also explores cultural ways of coping, like religion, social support, and community help. This research sits where existential psychology, organisational studies, and African culture meet. Civil servants face many challenges, such as bureaucracy, late pay, and political interference, while also handling strong community expectations (Mupeyi & Ndanyi, 2022; Mbiti, 1969). Economic troubles like inflation and unemployment make things worse (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Using interviews with 20 participants, the study shows how spiritual practices and colleague support help workers find new purpose and fight feelings of meaninglessness. Yet, ongoing system problems can cause some to feel hopeless and disengage. This demonstrates that resilience is multifaceted, simultaneously enabling adaptation while being constrained by contextual factors (Kimuraheebwe et al., 2022).

This study employed a qualitative design, conducting semi-structured interviews with 20 civil servants from central and local governments in Uganda, selected to represent diverse ages, genders, and job roles, providing a broad view of experiences (van Deurzen, 2012; Smith et al., 2009). It examined work challenges, including delayed salaries, social pressures from community expectations, and economic hardships such as inflation and unemployment (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2023; Nakisuyi, 2012; Mbiti, 1969). Existential dread manifested as profound doubts about self-worth and purpose, beyond typical work stress (Tillich, 1952). Coping involved communal Christian and Islamic prayers and informal support groups, though some participants exhibited withdrawal or absenteeism (Kimuraheebwe et al., 2022; Parashar & Schulz, 2021). The study highlights how collectivist culture, colonial legacies, political instability, and systemic economic challenges shape shared psychological distress, challenging Western individualistic frameworks (Yalom, 1980; Mutibwa, 1992).

This research holds significant value for the fields of existential psychology, organisational behaviour, and public policy, especially within Uganda and other similar contexts. By situating existential dread within Uganda's distinct socio-cultural and historical background, the study challenges the dominant Western-centred perspectives on human existence. It encourages a broader, more inclusive understanding that accounts for different cultural realities (Asiimwe et al., 2023). Previous studies demonstrate that systemic problems such as corruption, chronic underfunding, and job insecurity are deeply intertwined with cultural expectations that emphasise strong family and communal support (Mbiti, 1969; Bolatito et al., 2024). These insights offer practical guidance for policymakers aiming to improve mental health outcomes among civil servants. Specifically, they highlight the need for workplace reforms, anti-corruption initiatives, and culturally sensitive support programmes that



respect local values and social structures (Kimuraheebwe et al., 2022; Mupeyi & Ndanyi, 2022). Recognising the role of culture in psychological well-being is essential for designing effective interventions. This approach enables public sector workers in developing nations to navigate complex psychological challenges, thereby enhancing both individual resilience and organisational performance.

Literature review

In Uganda's civil service, many workers face pressure, low pay, and political interference. These hardships can make them question their value and purpose. However, others draw strength from cultural practices, faith, and communal support. This study explores how existential dread and resilience appear together. It also examines how civil servants in Uganda deal with these feelings. We further challenge Western perspectives that view meaning-making as an individual endeavour, emphasising that in Uganda, meaning emerges through family, community, and religious influences (Mbiti, 1969).

Civil servants in Uganda experience numerous job-related stressors, including inadequate working conditions, limited career growth, and inequitable promotion practices (Guma, 2013). Delayed salaries intensify financial hardship, eroding motivation and self-worth. Bureaucratic inefficiency, political interference, and corruption foster disillusionment and helplessness (Asiimwe, 2013). Many employees feel trapped in roles that contradict their goals, generating a sense of futility and existential dread—a profound awareness of purposelessness. Although they remain proud of their service, persistent stagnation and injustice diminish emotional resilience. Research links workplace environments to mental well-being (Parashar & Schulz, 2021), yet few studies explore how such structural dysfunction in African bureaucracies produces existential suffering and identity erosion among public servants.

The study employs existential psychology and role theory to analyse the lived experiences of Uganda's civil servants. Existential psychology examines how individuals confront meaning, freedom, and mortality (Yalom, 1980; Frankl, 1963), emphasising the anguish that emerges when purpose feels lost. Role theory explains how occupational expectations shape identity and how conflict between institutional demands and personal values produces distress (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014). Civil servants navigate competing obligations—to serve citizens, support families, and obey superiors—creating profound moral tension. Heidegger's (1927) notion of "thrownness" captures their sense of being placed in flawed systems beyond their control, while Sartre's (1943) view of freedom as a burden reflects their ethical struggle within corruption. These frameworks reveal how systemic dysfunction distorts identity, meaning, and agency.

Existential and role-based frameworks reveal that Ugandan civil servants experience dread and resilience within deeply social and cultural contexts, where meaning derives from community, moral conviction, and spiritual belief rather than isolated autonomy (De Witte, 1999; Eby et al., 2003). Confronted with bureaucratic decay, employees endure despair through faith and collective solidarity, negotiating ethical conflicts and moral responsibility in public service. Western research on existential dread emphasises individual experience, often overlooking cultural, social, and economic influences, while studies in Uganda focus on job satisfaction and stress, neglecting deeper emotional dimensions. Using semi-structured interviews with 20 civil servants, this study integrates psychology, anthropology, and African studies to show that faith, community, and hope sustain resilience (Smith et al., 2009).

Methods

This study employs an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) to examine existential dread and resilience among Ugandan civil servants. IPA captures how participants actively interpret



emotionally complex experiences (Smith et al., 2009), emphasising their subjective perceptions within broader societal, economic, and institutional contexts. Through in-depth interviews, the method generates rich, nuanced data, allowing themes to surface organically (van Manen, 2014; van Deurzen, 2012). By aligning with Uganda's collectivist culture and structural realities, IPA provides culturally sensitive, evidence-based insights into existential anxiety and coping, addressing a gap in African public sector research (Yalom, 1980)

The study population comprises civil servants from Uganda's national ministries, agencies, departments, and local governments. Purposive sampling selects participants with diverse roles, gender, and age to ensure rich, informative cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Snowball sampling complements recruitment by reaching individuals in hard-to-access or politically sensitive contexts (Patton, 2015). The final sample includes 20 participants – 10 males and 10 females, aged 25–55, each with a minimum of two years of service. This sample size aligns with qualitative best practices, emphasising depth over breadth. Participants' varied positions provide comprehensive insights across hierarchical, regional, and functional contexts within Uganda's civil service (Basaza, 2016).

We collected data through semi-structured interviews conducted in English, each lasting 60–90 minutes, obtained verbal consent, and recorded detailed notes in real time. The interview guide facilitated open-ended exploration of work stress, socio-cultural obligations, and economic challenges (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Flexibility allowed probing of emergent themes while maintaining focus on existential dread and resilience. This approach ensures depth and consistency, supporting systematic inquiry while privileging participants' narratives. Semi-structured interviews align with IPA methodology, enabling the collection of rich, contextually grounded accounts that illuminate how civil servants navigate intersecting systemic, cultural, and personal challenges (Namasaba et al., 2022).

We analysed interview data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis, encompassing transcript familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. NVivo 12 supported systematic coding and organisation. To strengthen reliability, we independently coded 30% of transcripts with a second researcher, resolving discrepancies through discussion. Member checking validated interpretations, while a reflexive journal addressed potential researcher bias. An audit trail documented all analytical decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This rigorous approach uncovered patterns of existential dissonance, cultural coping, and resilience, ensuring that findings remained closely anchored in participants' lived experiences and Uganda's civil service socio-cultural context (Padmanabhanunni et al., 2023).

We obtained written informed consent from participants and briefed them on their right to withdraw at any time. We protected identities using pseudonyms and securely stored all data. Although counselling support was offered, no participants accessed it. We adhered to ethical principles of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation (Uganda National Council for Science and Technology [UNCST], 2019). Formal ethical review was not required for this study of fewer than 20 adult professionals, yet we maintained ethical rigour. While the small sample and potential snowball sampling introduce limitations to generalizability, the study provides credible, context-specific insights into Ugandan civil servants' existential experiences, guiding culturally sensitive interventions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Results

Thematic analysis of interviews with 20 Ugandan civil servants revealed three interrelated themes characterising experiences of existential dread: (1) Manifestations of existential dread, (2) Triggers of existential distress, and (3) Coping mechanisms. These themes collectively illustrate how systemic, emotional, and cultural factors converge to shape civil servants' psychological experiences in Uganda's bureaucratic environment.



Manifestations of Existential Dread

Participants describe existential dread as an intense emotional state marked by hopelessness, anxiety, and uncertainty. These emotions stem from feelings of purposelessness and inefficacy within professional roles. A 42-year-old administrator explains, "I wake up every day feeling like I'm carrying a heavy stone, not knowing if my work matters." Similarly, a 35-year-old secretarial officer observes, "Sometimes I feel like I'm lost in a fog, unsure if my efforts will ever lead anywhere." A 50-year-old supervisor adds, "I see no path forward; it's like standing at the edge of a cliff with no bridge." A 39-year-old inspector notes, "It's like I'm shouting into a void, and no one hears." Such reflections reveal a shared emotional exhaustion embedded within Uganda's bureaucratic system.

Triggers of Existential Dread

Existential dread arises from entrenched systemic dysfunction, including bureaucracy, corruption, and job insecurity. A 45-year-old policy analyst notes, "The system stifles any sense of progress; it's like running in place with no finish line." A 31-year-old clerk adds, "No one acknowledges the work we do; it feels like we're invisible." Corruption and nepotism heighten demoralisation, as a 38-year-old clerk states, "You work hard, but the system rewards connections, not effort." A 45-year-old officer laments, "Seeing funds vanish while we struggle erodes your soul." A 29-year-old junior official remarks, "I've been in the same role for years, with no hope of moving up." A 43-year-old auditor concludes, "The constant fear of losing my job keeps me on edge." These experiences expose the institutional roots of despair.

Coping Mechanisms

Despite persistent emotional strain, participants employ diverse coping strategies—spiritual, social, and psychological—to endure bureaucratic adversity. Religiosity serves as a primary source of strength. A 47-year-old manager explains, "My faith keeps me grounded; I pray to find strength to face another day." A 30-year-old procurement officer adds, "My church community gives me a reason to keep going." Social connectedness also provides relief, as a 33-year-old analyst shares, "Talking to my coworkers who understand the struggle makes it bearable." Emotional numbing is another strategy. A 40-year-old accountant admits, "I just shut off my feelings to get through the day," while a 36-year-old planner reflects, "I focus on routine tasks to avoid thinking about the bigger questions." These coping methods sustain psychological balance amid adversity.

Interconnectedness of Themes

The results reveal a cyclical interaction between existential dread, its triggers, and coping strategies. Job insecurity heightens anxiety yet strengthens peer solidarity. A 35-year-old compliance officer explains, "When I fear for my job, my colleagues become my anchor, grounding me through shared understanding." Corruption also compels adaptive responses focused on self-preservation. A 42-year-old project coordinator reflects, "I focus on small, manageable tasks to ignore the bigger rot in the system, as confronting it feels futile." These adaptive processes demonstrate that coping evolves in response to persistent pressures. Civil servants navigate between distress and endurance, constructing ways to survive emotional strain. The findings indicate that coping is not resolution but negotiation, continually shaped by institutional and psychological forces within the civil service.

Existential Framework Integration

The results align with existentialist perspectives, particularly Sartre's "nausea" and Camus' "absurd," depicting struggles for meaning within oppressive systems. A 44-year-old director remarks, "We want to make a difference, but the system fights us at every turn." A 39-year-old policy officer adds, "You pour your heart into work, but corruption makes it feel pointless." These reflections mirror Camus' image of Sisyphus, pushing a boulder without reward. Others resonate with Frankl's logotherapy. A 50-year-old supervisor observes, "Faith gives me purpose when the office feels like a cage."



Conversely, avoidance reflects pragmatic survival. A 46-year-old senior clerk confesses, “Sometimes, I just pretend the problems don’t exist to keep moving.” These responses portray a culturally grounded, hybrid model of resilience rooted in lived institutional realities.

Synthesis of Results

The results indicate that systemic dysfunction – manifested through corruption, inefficiency, and job insecurity – produces profound existential distress. Civil servants rely on faith, social connectedness, and emotional withdrawal to sustain psychological endurance. A 31-year-old officer summarises, “We carry the weight of the system, but we find ways to keep going, leaning on faith and each other.” This coexistence of despair and perseverance defines the lived experience within Uganda’s civil service. The data demonstrate that individual psychology and institutional structures are inseparably intertwined, with meaning and dignity continuously negotiated within bureaucratic constraints. Addressing this existential tension requires reforms that strengthen institutional accountability, foster moral renewal, and create supportive environments recognising the human need for purpose in public service.

Discussion

This phenomenological study revealed that Ugandan civil servants experienced pervasive existential dread shaped by corruption, bureaucratic stagnation, and socio-economic instability. Participants consistently expressed feelings of futility, alienation, and hopelessness, highlighting a profound disconnect between personal aspirations and institutional dysfunction. Participants characterised their work as monotonous and meaningless, illustrating the existential notion of absurdity emphasised by Sartre (1943/2005) and Heidegger (1927/1962). Coping strategies ranged from faith-based resilience and community support to emotional withdrawal or resignation, illustrating both adaptive and maladaptive responses. These findings indicate that workplace distress in Uganda’s civil service transcends conventional job dissatisfaction, manifesting as a deep existential crisis affecting identity, purpose, and institutional engagement (Obicci, 2024).

Integrating existential theory and organisational psychology provides a nuanced lens for interpreting civil servants’ experiences of distress and resilience. Participants’ narratives reflect Heidegger’s (1927/1962) notion of “being thrown” into constraining bureaucratic systems that limit autonomy, while Sartre’s (1943/2005) concept of freedom constrained by external structures parallels struggles against corruption and political interference. The study aligns with Yalom’s (1980) framework of existential anxiety arising from threats to meaning and purpose, while Frankl’s (1963) focus on finding meaning in suffering illuminates adaptive coping through spirituality and social connectedness. Empirical evidence further confirms that workplace support predicts resilience in the Ugandan context (Namuli, 2023).

Compared to prior research on occupational dissatisfaction and burnout in African bureaucracies, this study advances understanding by situating distress within existential and philosophical frameworks. Previous studies emphasised low morale, limited promotion, and corruption as performance inhibitors (Mothema & Ramasimu, 2024) but often overlooked their psychological and ontological dimensions. This study extends the discourse by demonstrating how structural inefficiency precipitates crises of identity and meaning. Studies in Uganda demonstrate that excessive workloads, limited recognition, and constrained career advancement actively erode civil servants’ job satisfaction (Akoko, Okuna & Mwesigwa, 2024; Bigabwenkya & Binta, 2024; Okori & Obici, 2023; Ofumbi & Bakashaba, 2022). These findings converge with literature highlighting spirituality and relational support as critical resilience mechanisms (Uwannah, Anonaba, & Onyekachi, 2025), bridging Western existential thought with indigenous collectivist perspectives.



These findings highlight the limitations of purely technocratic interventions that neglect the existential and cultural dimensions of work. Civil servants' pursuit of meaning amidst systemic decay underscores the need for reforms that extend beyond administrative efficiency to embrace human-centred governance. Implementing transparent promotion systems, anti-corruption measures, and psychosocial support grounded in faith and communal networks emerges as a strategy for mitigating existential distress (Asea, 2018). While the study is constrained by a small sample size and interpretive subjectivity (Finlay, 2014), it promotes a reconceptualisation of workplace wellness as structural and spiritual, integrating existential psychology with African collectivist thought for transformative resilience strategies.

Conclusion

This study explored existential dread and resilience among Ugandan civil servants working within bureaucratic systems afflicted by inefficiency, corruption, and job insecurity. Participants described persistent frustration, fatigue, and erosion of professional purpose. Yet, amidst adversity, resilience surfaced through spirituality, social connectedness, and pragmatic adaptation. Their narratives revealed the intersection of systemic dysfunction and personal meaning-making, illustrating how institutional decay breeds both despair and endurance. Existential suffering extended beyond personal distress to signify moral and ethical decline within Uganda's public administration. However, participants' ability to sustain hope and purpose through faith and collective identity highlights the untapped potential for culturally grounded approaches to employee well-being and institutional renewal.

The findings demonstrate that resilience in Uganda's civil service operates as a socially and spiritually mediated process rather than an individual psychological trait. Adaptation was anchored in communal responsibility, shared morality, and collective endurance—challenging Western models that equate resilience with personal autonomy. Policy reforms should therefore integrate cultural and ethical dimensions into administrative practice, emphasising empathy, transparency, and equitable advancement. Organisational strategies must embed faith-sensitive wellness programmes, mentorship, and psychosocial support to strengthen meaning and morale. Practically, leadership training should focus on moral accountability, nurturing environments that value both performance and human dignity while addressing structural causes of existential despair among public servants.

Theoretically, the study bridges existential psychology and organisational theory within an African bureaucratic context, emphasising how meaning-making unfolds amid systemic dysfunction. It advances interpretive phenomenology as a tool for capturing lived experience and deepening human-centred inquiry in public administration research. Future studies should employ longitudinal and comparative designs across African bureaucracies to explore gendered and generational variations in resilience. Scholars should also examine how cultural, spiritual, and moral frameworks interact to shape adaptive behaviour under institutional strain. The study ultimately calls for reimagining governance through a humanistic lens—where reforms address not only efficiency and corruption but also the moral and existential well-being of those who serve the state.

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