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Research article

Impulsive Behavior and Petty Corruption in Higher Education: A Psychologically Informed Prevention Model

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Abstract

Petty corruption remains a persistent issue in higher education administrative services, yet its behavioral foundations are not well understood. This qualitative case study aims to explore how impulsive behavior is manifested in administrative service processes and how it relates to minor procedural deviations in everyday interactions, with a primary focus on identifying behavioral patterns, situational triggers, and contextual conditions, and a secondary aim of deriving preliminary insights for a psychologically informed prevention approach. Data were gathered through twenty-one working days of participatory observation, fifteen semi-structured interviews, a focus group discussion, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach involving iterative coding, constant comparison, and triangulation across data sources to identify patterns of impulsive behavior and procedural deviation. Impulsivity was not measured but interpreted qualitatively using the Barratt Impulsiveness Scale (BIS-11) as a conceptual framework, encompassing motor, cognitive, and non-planning dimensions. The findings suggest patterns that may be interpreted as conceptually aligned with motor, cognitive, and non-planning tendencies, reflected in rapid procedural actions, emotionally driven shortcuts, and inconsistent workflow patterns. These behaviors were shaped by service pressure, emotional strain, relational expectations, and permissive cultural norms. The study provides a nuanced understanding of impulsivity as a proximal psychological mechanism influencing administrative decision making. A psychologically informed prevention model is proposed, emphasizing emotional regulation training, integrity-oriented cultural reinforcement, and process-focused supervision as pathways to strengthening integrity and reducing petty corruption in university administrative settings. The findings offer theoretical implications for extending impulsivity and emotion-regulation frameworks into organizational settings, and practical implications for designing targeted interventions to improve administrative integrity in higher education.

Keywords: impulsive behavior; petty corruption; BIS-11; administrative decision making; psychologically informed prevention model

1. Introduction

Petty corruption in university administration often appears through subtle, routine actions like bypassing procedures, favouritism, and informal exchanges. Despite being common, the psychological drivers behind these behaviours are not well understood. Universities are expected to promote transparency, accountability, and ethics, yet forms of procedural deviation such as favoritism, manipulation, non-accountable decisions, and accepting small tokens continue to appear daily. These behaviors are often context-dependent, occurring under pressure, emotional stress, and social expectations. Psychologically, such conditions relate to impulsive behavior, where actions are quick and less thought out, indicating that minor deviations may be spontaneous rather than deliberate misconduct (Bohlens, 2025; Kaptein, 2023; Oleksiyenko, 2022). In 2023, Indonesian Corruption Watch (ICW) reported 30 corruption cases in the education sector, showing that educational institutions remain vulnerable despite reforms (Indonesian Corruption Watch, 2024). At Universitas Negeri Manado (UNIMA), which operates under a Public Service Agency model, increased administrative flexibility can heighten risks if oversight, institutional culture, and self-regulation are not strong enough.

Initial observations at a public university in Indonesia revealed behavioral patterns showing susceptibility to petty deviations. These include quick administrative decisions during busy times, the cultural practice of giving small gifts to speed up services, personal use of institutional resources, and ongoing concerns about fairness and procedural consistency. Although these actions seem minor, normalizing them can create an environment where deviant behaviors become routine in administrative practice (Hortal & Pérez Martínez, 2024; Jugl et al., 2024; Weißmüller & Zuber, 2023). Previous research on anticorruption efforts has mainly concentrated on structural reforms, compliance systems, and governance mechanisms aimed at strengthening control (Boufounou et al., 2024; Mugellini et al., 2021). While emphasizing regulatory enforcement and oversight, these studies offer limited insight into the micro-level psychological processes behind

everyday decisions by administrative staff. Notably, there has been little focus on how spontaneous, context-driven actions arise under pressure from limited time, emotional stress, and social expectations (Leib et al., 2021; Sosnowski & Brosnan, 2023). In this context, impulsivity is still underexplored as a possible link between situational pressures and minor procedural deviations. Recent Indigenous-based studies (Soleha Hamka et al., 2015; Yuwono, 2021), support the idea that impulsive behavior can be shaped by cultural and contextual factors, highlighting the importance of examining impulsivity within Indonesia's organizational and cultural environment, where relational norms and collectivist values influence behavior.

Recent research in psychology shows that unethical behaviors often stem not just from rational decision-making but also from emotional responses, limited self-control, and personality traits like impulsiveness (Lauriola & Weller, 2018; Tamara, 2024; Xie et al., 2025). Impulsivity is commonly measured with the Barratt Impulsiveness Scale (BIS-11), which identifies three facets: motor impulsivity (acting quickly without thinking), cognitive impulsivity (struggling to focus and heightened emotional reactions), and non-planning impulsivity (not considering future outcomes). These categories help explain how administrative staff might react to pressures from service demands, interpersonal relationships, and emotional triggers in real time. In public service settings, where employees face workload spikes, complex interactions, and urgent requests, impulsivity can lead to choosing speed or harmony over adherence to procedures (Kessler & Sabel, 2021; Sharma et al., 2025; Tummers et al., 2015).

In addition to individual psychological traits, broader structural and cultural elements influence the development of petty corruption. Factors such as weak organizational oversight, unclear procedural boundaries, and a culture that tolerates minor breaches can encourage impulsive behavior and make such actions seem acceptable (Chakrabarti & Chatterjea, 2020; Obschonka et al., 2023; Van Rooij & Fine, 2018). Research also indicates that the ethical climate, norms around integrity, and clarity of procedures are crucial in shaping whether employees respond to situational pressures with consistent compliance or spontaneous misconduct (De Simone et al., 2016; Siahaan et al., 2023; Ye et al., 2021).

Although there is increasing interest in behavioral approaches to corruption, few studies have explored how impulsive tendencies appear in university administrative settings, particularly within Indonesia's higher education. Most research centers on leadership, organizational culture, or systemic governance (Alowais & Suliman, 2025; Kressmann & Mueller-Seeger, 2025), leaving the micro-level behavioral mechanisms less examined. Additionally, many anti-corruption frameworks prioritize procedural rules and overlook the emotional and cognitive factors that shape frontline administrative actions (de Almeida et al., 2024; Gould et al., 2022; Onyango, 2021; Weißmüller & Zuber, 2023). This gap highlights the need for research linking impulsivity, administrative practices, and culturally rooted minor deviance.

This study aims to fill this gap by examining how impulsive behavior manifests in university administrative settings and its connection to minor deviations during everyday service interactions. The main goal is to identify the forms, triggers, and contextual factors that influence impulsive actions among administrative staff. Additionally, the study seeks to develop an initial, context-specific prevention strategy based on empirical data. It specifically explores how factors like time pressure, emotional responses, relational expectations, and cultural norms interact with impulsive tendencies in administrative decision-making. Guided by three research questions: (1) What types of impulsive behavior occur in university administrative processes? (2) What situational and contextual factors contribute to these behaviors and their relation to small procedural lapses? (3) What early insights can help create a psychologically informed prevention approach?

This study advances organizational psychology by offering a detailed understanding of impulsivity as a key psychological factor influencing administrative decision-making. Practically, it guides the development of behavioral and organizational strategies aimed at fostering integrity, improving emotional regulation, and ensuring compliance with procedural standards in higher education settings (Harvey et al., 2024). By combining psychological insights with structural governance methods, the research provides a thorough, context-aware basis for preventing petty corruption within university administrative environments.

2. Research Methods

This study used a qualitative case study design to investigate how impulsive behavior manifests among administrative staff and its possible connection to petty corruption during daily service

interactions at Universitas Negeri Manado. The qualitative approach was chosen because it enables a detailed examination of behavioral processes, situational triggers, and contextual factors as they naturally occur within a specific institutional setting. This approach supports the goal of understanding impulsivity not just as an individual psychological trait, but as a dynamic behavior shaped by organizational routines, emotional pressures, and cultural expectations. The key variables analyzed were impulsive behavior, indicators of petty corruption, and organizational pressures; each was clearly defined before data collection to guide analysis.

Participants in this study included administrative staff from both academic and non-academic units within the university. They represented a variety of roles such as academic administration, student services, faculty offices, and financial management. The sample comprised both frontline clerical workers and senior administrators with different degrees of responsibility in service delivery. The group also varied in gender and educational background, providing a wide range of perspectives on administrative practices and decision-making. To qualify, participants needed at least five years of experience, regular involvement in administrative services for students or faculty, knowledge of procedural and policy frameworks, and voluntary consent. The five-year minimum was chosen because longer experience was believed to offer better insights into organizational norms, procedural variations, and behavioral patterns, ensuring participants had stable, reflective views of administrative routines. Newer employees, in contrast, might still be adapting.

Recruitment involved consulting unit heads to identify eligible individuals, approaching them individually, and inviting them to participate in interviews or observation sessions. Although access was initially facilitated through unit heads, this method might introduce authority or gatekeeper bias, as supervisors could influence participant selection. To reduce this risk, participants were approached independently, and participation was voluntary. The researcher emphasized confidentiality and assured participants that no information would be shared with supervisors, encouraging honest and open responses. The final sample included fifteen interviewees from different service units, eight participants in a Focus Group Discussion (FGD), and several staff members involved indirectly through participatory observation. The sample size was adequate since thematic saturation was achieved when no new meaningful codes or themes emerged. Saturation was first observed after the twelfth interview, when additional interviews did not reveal new patterns. This was supported by consistent data across sources, including FGD discussions and observations, which confirmed the stability and recurrence of themes. Saturation was indicated by the repetition of similar behaviors, convergence of findings across methods, and no new insights during coding, aligning with established qualitative criteria for saturation in thematic analysis.

The protocols for interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were tailored to meet the research goals, concentrating on participants' experiences with administrative decision-making, perceived impulsivity, situational pressures, and minor procedural deviations. Open-ended questions facilitated exploration of behavioral trends, emotional reactions, and contextual factors, encouraging participants to elaborate on their experiences. The FGD aimed to uncover shared norms, collective interpretations, and common practices within different administrative units. During participatory observation, the researcher took on an observer-as-participant role, limiting direct interactions to primarily observe natural behaviors and service procedures. This method enabled capturing real-time decision-making and contextual interactions without significantly impacting participant actions. Document analysis employed a purposive sampling approach, focusing on materials pertinent to administrative procedures and governance, such as Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), service guidelines, organizational policies, and complaint records. These documents helped contextualize observed behaviors and were incorporated into the thematic analysis by comparing formal procedural standards with patterns observed in interviews and fieldwork.

Participatory observation took place over twenty-one working days, during which the researcher closely watched real-time decision-making, staff interactions with service users, emotional reactions to workload stress, and whether procedures aligned with or diverged from Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). This stage resulted in fifty-seven pages of detailed field notes. Semistructured interviews were held with fifteen participants, each lasting between fifty and ninety minutes, focusing on their experiences with administrative burdens, emotional challenges, impulsive tendencies, organizational pressures, and minor procedural deviations. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Additionally, a focus group discussion with eight participants was conducted to explore shared norms, relational expectations, cultural views of minor deviations, and organizational challenges. Document analysis included reviewing SOPs, ethics guidelines, organizational structures, service logbooks, and complaint archives, helping the researcher compare formal policies with actual practices and identify inconsistencies.

Throughout the research, the researcher's positionality was clearly acknowledged. The researcher had some insider knowledge of administrative processes from previous interactions within the university, which provided valuable context and facilitated participant access. However, this familiarity also posed a risk of bias in observation and interpretation. To address this, the researcher practiced reflexivity by keeping a journal to record personal assumptions and emotional responses during data collection. These notes were reviewed during coding to mitigate the influence of biases. The study also employed data triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing to enhance neutrality, ensuring findings reflected participants' experiences. Regular discussions with two experienced colleagues in qualitative research helped review codes, themes, and initial interpretations. Through ongoing feedback and critical reflection, differences in interpretation were addressed and refined, strengthening the study's rigor.

Strategies to establish credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability were implemented following qualitative research standards. Credibility was enhanced by method triangulation, combining observations, interviews, focus group discussions, and document reviews. Member checking enabled participants to confirm the accuracy of initial thematic interpretations. Dependability was ensured by keeping an audit trail that recorded observation logs, interview guides, analytic memos, and coding processes. Transferability was improved through detailed descriptions of the setting, participant traits, administrative routines, and cultural norms, helping readers determine the relevance of findings in other contexts. Confirmability was achieved via reflexive journaling, triangulation of data sources, and transparent documentation of the analysis process.

Data analysis employed a thematic approach involving repeated, systematic procedures. All interview transcripts, field notes, and FGD materials were read multiple times to familiarize with the dataset. Initial coding was inductive, analyzing line-by-line to identify meaningful statements, behaviors, and emotional or situational triggers directly from the data. During this process, codes were created without using predefined theoretical categories, allowing patterns to naturally emerge from participants' accounts and observations. These initial codes were then compared across sources and grouped into broader categories based on similarities and recurring patterns. Transitioning from codes to categories involved constant comparison, clustering similar codes into conceptual groups that represented behavioral tendencies, contextual factors, and procedural deviations. These categories were refined repeatedly and synthesized into higher-level themes that reflected the fundamental processes in the data.

Although the coding process was mainly inductive, theoretical perspectives on impulsivity—such as those aligned with the BIS-11 dimensions—were introduced later as guiding concepts to aid interpretation and bolster theoretical coherence. This study explicitly connects these BIS-11 dimensions to observable behavioral deviations in administrative settings. Motor impulsivity is associated with procedural shortcuts, where individuals acting quickly might skip verification steps or miss required documentation. Cognitive impulsivity reflects emotionally driven shortcuts, where service decisions are hastened to reduce tension or avoid conflict during high-pressure situations. Non-planning impulsivity involves inconsistent workflow patterns, with spontaneous task switching or disorganized prioritization leading to irregular procedural compliance. These links offer a theoretically grounded insight into how impulsive tendencies manifest behaviorally in university administrative contexts (Fenneman et al., 2022; Lombardo et al., 2023). Triangulation through interviews, observations, FGD discussions, and document analysis provided comprehensive insights, while ongoing comparison reinforced the alignment between evidence and themes. These steps improved the transparency and rigor of the analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

This study produced a comprehensive set of findings based on twenty-one days of participatory observation, fifteen in-depth semi-structured interviews, a Focus Group Discussion with eight participants, and an analysis of institutional documents. Data saturation was reached after about the twelfth interview, as no new meaningful codes or behavioral patterns appeared during coding. Later interviews only provided repetitive responses and did not contribute additional categories or themes. Saturation was also confirmed by the stability of thematic structures and consistent findings across interviews, FGDs, and observations. These signs indicate that the patterns of impulsive behavior and minor procedural deviations were adequately captured. The results are organized into three main themes: impulsive behavior patterns, indicators of minor procedural deviations, and organizational factors influencing these behaviors. These themes were derived inductively from the analysis of interviews, observations, discussions, and documents. The insights

are further summarized in the Discussion to support a psychologically informed prevention approach.

3.1.1 Patterns of Impulsive Behavior

The main theme emphasizes recurring patterns of rapid, disorganized, and emotionally driven decision-making across different administrative units. These patterns were inductively identified from data through frequent observations and participant descriptions. While initially recognized for their empirical characteristics, they were later understood as aspects associated with impulsive behavior. Variations in these patterns were observed among units such as the Academic Bureau, Faculty Administration Offices, Student Services, and the Finance Unit.

Motor Impulsivity

Employees often made quick, simplified decisions when handling administrative documents without full checks, especially during busy hours. Several processed documents in seconds, only skimmed the first page, or approved requests based on students' verbal statements. Observational notes recorded instances like "The staff member only checked the student ID number and stamped without opening the course list page" and "Staff member A signed 17 documents without reviewing the full file." Further insights from interviews revealed that, as one employee stated, "When it gets crowded, I just sign everything first. I check the details later" (Informant 3). Another mentioned, "Sometimes I only look at the first page; there's no time to check the rest" (Informant 11). These behaviors were particularly common in high-demand units such as the Academic Bureau and Student Affairs, where queues often exceeded twenty to thirty students. Though these actions reflect rapid decision-making with little deliberation, they may also be influenced by structural factors like workload, time limits, and organizational expectations. In this study, such patterns are viewed as behaviors akin to motor impulsivity, while recognizing they can also result from situational and organizational pressures.

Cognitive Impulsivity

Cognitive impulsivity involved decisions made under emotional pressure. Employees tended to speed up service delivery when dealing with complaints, tense interactions, or crowded settings. Field notes documented moments of heightened emotional arousal, such as raised voices or signs of panic, followed by quick procedural shortcuts. Several participants shared similar experiences: "When many people come at once, I get anxious. So, I rush through everything" (Informant 1); "When I get emotional, I make quick decisions without thinking" (Informant 9); and "If students speak loudly, I get tense too. I usually speed things up to get it over with" (Informant 14). This cognitive impulsivity was observed across all units but was most common at front-facing service desks like Student Affairs and Academic Administration.

Non-Planning Impulsivity

Non-planning impulsivity manifested through disorganized workflows, irregular task sequences, and spontaneous multitasking. Observations revealed staff frequently handled the nearest document, shifted tasks due to sudden requests, or dropped tasks mid-way to address new arrivals. For example, notes recorded: "Staff member D was typing a letter, suddenly stopped to serve a student, then switched again to answer the phone." Interview responses supported these observations: "I often forget which task should come first. Many people arrive at the same time" (Informant 7); "I haven't finished the previous task when a lecturer asks for something else" (Informant 10); "I just follow the flow. It's impossible to plan when people come unpredictably" (Informant 5). This form of impulsivity was especially prevalent in Faculty Administration Offices, where workflow complexity and multitasking demands were the highest.

Interpersonally Driven Impulsivity

Interpersonally driven impulsivity was evident when employees expedited services for individuals with whom they had personal, social, or hierarchical connections. Preferences often favored senior staff, lecturers, or specific students. Field notes recorded instances such as "The staff member processed the senior employee's documents more quickly despite a long queue" and "A student entered without waiting, carrying a WhatsApp message from their academic supervisor." Participants in interviews also openly acknowledged this behavior: "If a senior asks, they must be served first. That's normal here" (Informant 4); "Students under certain lecturers tend to get faster service" (Informant 8); "Sometimes I feel sorry for certain students, so I help them first" (Informant 12). This form of impulsivity was most common in Student Services and faculty-level administration. A summary of indicators for each type of impulsivity is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Indicators of Impulsivity in Administrative Settings

Type of Impulsivity	Behavioral Indicators (Observed)	Supporting Evidence (Interviews / FGD)	Unit Variation
Motor Impulsivity	• Processing documents in just seconds • Skimming only the first page • Approving submissions without full verification • Rapid actions during long service queues	"When it gets crowded, I just sign everything first. I check details later." (Informant 3) "Sometimes I only look at the first page; there is no time to check the rest." (Informant 11) Observation: Staff signed 17 documents without opening the full file.	Most common in Academic Bureau and Student Affairs, where service volume is highest
Cognitive Impulsivity	• Decisions made under emotional pressure • Accelerating service to reduce tension • Panic reactions in crowded rooms • Shortened interaction time	"When many people come at once, I get anxious and rush everything." (Informant 1) "When I get emotional, I make quick decisions without thinking." (Informant 9) "If a student raises their voice, I become tense too." (Informant 14)	Most frequent in front-facing units dealing with complaints and crowds
Non-Planning Impulsivity	• Unstructured workflow • Switching tasks unpredictably • Handling whichever document is closest • Lack of clear prioritization	"I often forget which task comes first." (Informant 7) "I just follow the flow; it is impossible to plan when people come unexpectedly." (Informant 5) Observation: Staff shifted from typing → serving student → answering phone.	Highly prevalent in Faculty Administration Offices due to multitasking demands
Interpersonally Driven Impulsivity	• Prioritizing individuals with personal ties • Allowing queue jumping for certain lecturers or students • Responding immediately to private requests	"If a senior asks, they must be served first." (Informant 4) "Students supervised by certain lecturers always get faster service." (Informant 8) Field note: Student skipped the queue with a WhatsApp message from supervisor.	Most prevalent in Student Services and Faculty-level offices influenced by relational norms

3.1.2 Forms of Minor Procedural Deviations and Their Potential Ethical Implications

The second theme highlights a range of minor procedural deviations observed in administrative contexts. These include actions like skipping procedural steps, granting preferential treatment, informally using institutional resources, and accepting small tokens. While some may view these as signs of petty corruption, they could also represent maladministration, culturally ingrained norms, or informal coping strategies in high-pressure service settings. Instead of labeling these behaviors outright as corruption, this study considers them as context-dependent practices, with their ethical significance varying based on institutional rules, intent, and situational factors.

Procedural Simplification and Incomplete Verification Practices

Throughout various units, some verification steps were not fully carried out during document handling. Evidence showed inconsistent compliance with Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), including simplified approval procedures and acceptance of incomplete submissions. For instance, incomplete documents were sometimes processed without complete verification. As one staff member stated, "If students say it's urgent, I sometimes process it even if it's incomplete" (Informant 6). This issue was most common in the Academic Bureau and Financial Administration units. Although these practices might be seen as deviations from formal procedures, they could also be adaptive responses to situational factors like time pressure, service urgency, and workload. In this study, such behaviors are viewed as context-dependent practices that, under certain conditions, involve minor procedural deviations with possible ethical concerns, rather than outright petty corruption.

Relationally Driven Preferential Practices in Service Delivery

Preferential treatment of documents was observed for certain lecturers, senior staff, or students. Examples included placing documents ahead of others in the queue, replying to private messages requesting faster service, or letting individuals skip lines. These behaviors were strongly influenced by relational expectations, interpersonal duties, and hierarchical norms, especially within Student Affairs and Faculty Administration. Rather than being impulsive in a straightforward way, these patterns are more aligned with socially embedded practices like favoritism and informal patronage. Here, decisions seem driven by relationships and normative norms rather than spontaneous or low-thought responses. However, under time constraints or emotional pressure, such relational influences may merge with situational decision-making, potentially resulting in

quick or less thoughtful actions. While not intrinsically impulsive, these practices can sometimes intersect with impulsivity when decisions are made rapidly to meet social or organizational demands.

Misuse of Institutional Facilities

Interview and observational data indicated that office facilities like printers, stationery, and workspace are often used for personal tasks. This behavior seems widely accepted within the organization. One participant mentioned, "The office printer is often used for personal needs. Everyone does that" (Informant 2). Instead of viewing these actions solely as misconduct, they may represent informal norms or tolerated behaviors that develop over time in daily work life. In this study, using institutional resources for personal purposes is seen as a context-dependent practice that can raise ethical concerns about procedural boundaries and resource use under certain conditions. However, it is not automatically considered petty corruption, as its interpretation depends on organizational policies, intent, and normative expectations.

Acceptance of Small Tokens

Employees frequently received small tokens like snacks, drinks, or packaged foods from students as a sign of appreciation for their quick service. These acts were viewed as cultural ways of expressing gratitude rather than unethical behavior. As one person mentioned, "Students often bring bread or coffee. It's just normal" (Informant 9). These four categories of petty corruption are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Indicators of Petty Corruption

Category	Operational Indicators
Bypassing Standard Operating Procedures	Skipping verification steps, approving incomplete submissions, simplifying SOP sequences, and prioritizing service speed.
Favoritism and Unequal Service	Prioritizing lecturers, senior staff, or certain students; inserting documents ahead of others; responding to private messages; allowing individuals to bypass queues.
Misuse of Institutional Facilities	Using printers, stationery, and office rooms for personal purposes; normalizing personal use of institutional resources.
Acceptance of Small Tokens	Receiving snacks, drinks, or small items from students; framing such gestures as cultural expressions of gratitude.

3.1.3 Organizational Contexts Shaping Impulsivity and Deviations

Three contextual conditions strengthened impulsive behavior and contributed to the emergence of minor deviations.

High Service Pressure

Workload surges and crowded service environments led to time constraints and emotional stress. Observations recorded repeated service peaks, especially during academic registration and document issuance periods. These pressures often caused reactive decisions, particularly within the Academic Bureau and Student Affairs.

Permissive Organizational Culture

Across all units, minor deviations were generally accepted socially. Participants noted that expedited service, utilization of office resources, and small procedural shortcuts were common practices. The FGD affirmed that informal cultural norms promoting mutual help had a greater influence on decisions than formal policies.

Weak Process Supervision

Document reviews indicated that monitoring primarily targeted outcomes rather than detailed procedural compliance. There was no system in place to monitor adherence to SOPs. Deviations were infrequently documented or addressed, particularly in financial verification procedures. These contextual factors are listed in Table 3.

3.1.4 Foundations for a Psychologically Informed Prevention Model

The components presented here are based on recurring patterns found in the empirical results, especially concerning behavioral triggers, contextual pressures, and procedural deviations. These themes collectively distill the empirical findings into four core elements essential for creating a psychologically informed prevention model.

Table 3. Organizational Contexts Shaping Impulsivity and Minor Deviations

Contextual Condition	Operational Indicators (Observed/Reported)	Illustrative Evidence	Units Most Affected
High Service Pressure	• Heavy service volume during peak periods • Crowded service rooms leading to time pressure • Increased emotional strain during academic registration • Frequent interruptions in workflow	Observational notes documented queues of 20–30 students; staff showing visible tension or rushed processing.	Most prominent in Academic Bureau and Student Affairs
Permissive Organizational Culture	• Widespread normalization of minor deviations • Expectations to "help" through procedural shortcuts • Cultural emphasis on flexibility over rules • Acceptance of personal use of institutional facilities	FGD participants: expedited service, use of office resources, and small bypasses considered "normal practice."	Evident across all units, especially Student Services and Faculty-level offices
Weak Process Supervision	• Monitoring focused only on final outputs • No mechanism to track SOP compliance • Deviations rarely documented or corrected • Lack of process-level accountability	Document analysis: no SOP tracking tools; financial verification steps inconsistently implemented.	Strongly visible in Financial Administration and supporting units

Early Identification of Behavioral Risks

A subset of employees consistently displayed impulsive patterns regardless of context. These recurring tendencies were observed to highlight behavioural risks.

Interventions for Emotional and Pressure Regulation

Interview and FGD data showed that emotional strain and sudden pressure often triggered impulsive decisions. Participants highlighted the importance of stress management and emotional regulation strategies to support more consistent decision making.

Strengthening Integrity Norms

The common acceptance of small deviations shows a poor internal grasp of ethical standards. These results imply that integrity training should focus on everyday administrative practices instead of abstract ideals.

Behavioral Monitoring and SOP Compliance

The absence of process-level monitoring emphasizes the need for supervision systems that track procedural compliance, detect deviations, and provide corrective feedback. A visual representation of these components is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Foundational Components of a Psychologically Informed Prevention Model

Component	Description	Operational Focus	Primary Targets
Early Identification of Behavioral Risks	Certain employees repeatedly displayed impulsive patterns across multiple service situations. These tendencies indicate the need for mechanisms to identify at-risk behaviors early.	• Screening for impulsivity indicators • Monitoring recurring patterns • Behavioral risk profiling	Administrative staff showing consistent motor, cognitive, or non-planning impulsivity
Interventions for Emotional and Pressure Regulation	Emotional strain and sudden pressure were major triggers of impulsive decisions, as reported in interviews and the FGD.	• Stress management training • Emotional regulation programs • Managing peak-period service load	Frontline service personnel; employees handling high-volume or high-stress interactions
Strengthening Integrity Norms	Normalization of minor deviations indicates weak internalization of ethical norms. Integrity programs need to be embedded in daily practices.	• Ethics reinforcement linked to daily tasks • Integrity campaigns grounded in real cases • Strengthening accountability culture	All administrative units; especially those with permissive cultural norms
Behavioral Monitoring and SOP Compliance	The lack of process-level supervision highlights the need for structured monitoring tools that ensure step-by-step compliance.	• SOP compliance tracking • Behavioral audits • Corrective feedback loops	Units with high deviation rates, including Financial Administration and Academic Services

3.2. Discussion

The results indicate that quick, context-driven decision-making patterns among administrative staff are influenced by a combination of personal traits, situational factors, and organizational conditions. Data from interviews and observations reveal that employees often adapted their decision processes in response to high service workloads, emotional strains, and relational expectations. For instance, participants reported speeding up document verification during busy periods, while observational data showed simplified procedures in crowded service environments. These patterns, initially identified through inductive coding, were later understood as behaviors aligned with impulsivity dimensions, such as quick action, emotionally motivated responses, and limited planning. Rather than being fixed traits, these tendencies seem to develop in response to specific situational and organizational contexts. This connection between impulsivity and administrative behaviors aligns with broader psychological findings that stress and emotional arousal increase reliance on fast, intuitive decision-making (Hofmann & Vohs, 2018; Sharma & Singh, 2023), implying that impulsivity may serve as a coping mechanism under cognitive overload or relational pressure (Hamilton & DeVries, 2025).

Motor impulsivity seems linked to employees prioritizing task completion over procedural accuracy. This aligns with Kessler's findings that high workloads in public service settings often lead employees to make quick decisions at the cost of thorough checks. Our study adds to this by showing that the quick actions tied to motor impulsivity often result in specific procedural deviations. For instance, employees frequently bypassed Standard Operating Procedures under pressure, approving incomplete documents or skipping verification steps to maintain service flow. These behaviors may represent rapid, stimulus-driven responses, aligning with concepts in the BIS-11 framework, though they do not confirm the construct directly.

Cognitive impulsivity emphasizes how emotional reactivity influences administrative decisions. Employees often sped up service when facing complaints, crowded rooms, or rising tensions. This supports Gross's emotion regulation theory, which states that high emotional arousal can impair deliberate thinking. The study also found that cognitive impulsivity was associated with emotionally driven shortcuts. To reduce tension or avoid conflict, employees sometimes made quick decisions that cut short procedures. These actions may be seen as emotionally influenced decisions that, in certain situations, limit reflective thought and impact adherence to rules. However, these behaviors should not be viewed solely as impulsivity; they might also be adaptive or strategic responses employees use to handle workload, interpersonal stress, or service pressures. In this context, such behaviors are viewed as context-dependent responses that, while related to impulsivity, are not necessarily impulsive in a strict sense.

Non-planning impulsivity highlights the need for structured workflows to prevent reactive decisions. Boufounou and colleagues' earlier research pointed out that disorganized systems increase the likelihood of procedural deviations. This study builds on that by demonstrating that employees with low future orientation and weak task organization often switch tasks without a clear order, leading to inconsistent workflow patterns. Consequently, non-planning impulsivity was associated with irregular procedural compliance, as employees tend to respond to immediate situational demands. This pattern aligns with the BIS-11 dimension of non-planning impulsivity, which focuses on inadequate anticipation of consequences. These tendencies are also supported by research showing that institutional stressors significantly influence behavioral risks in public-sector settings (Tummers & Bekkers, 2021).

Interpersonally driven impulsivity shows how relational expectations shape administrative actions in collectivist settings. Hofstede suggested that such cultures value interpersonal harmony and relational duties more than formal rules. The results support this, indicating that employees modify their service focus based on personal, professional, or hierarchical ties. This aligns with Lamsal's research on relational favoritism in higher education. However, this study adds that such behavior might be motivated by spontaneous relational pressure rather than deliberate favoritism. This underlines the idea that informal favors often dominate service exchanges in collectivist institutions (Kock & Moqbel, 2021), leading to culturally accepted deviations.

These associations demonstrate that impulsivity is a multidimensional construct, with each dimension linked to specific types of administrative deviations. Motor impulsivity relates to procedural bypassing, cognitive impulsivity to emotionally driven shortcuts, and non-planning impulsivity to inconsistent workflow patterns. This clear mapping offers a theoretically grounded explanation of how impulsive tendencies impact everyday administrative behavior in higher education. The study extends the literature on small-scale deviance by providing contextually relevant

insights into its psychological dimensions, especially concerning daily administrative tasks. Rather than proposing a new theoretical model, the findings empirically illustrate how psychological and contextual factors may interact to cause minor procedural deviations, complementing existing theories that focus on cultural and structural explanations (Kaptein, 2023; Gaitán et al., 2022).

The patterns identified in this study indicate that impulsivity acts as a psychological mechanism explaining how service pressure, emotional tension, and relational expectations influence administrative choices. Instead of viewing administrative deviations solely as procedural failures, the findings emphasize understanding how employees manage emotional demands, cognitive load, and social expectations. This perspective aligns with Gross's emotion regulation model, which suggests that individuals experiencing emotional stress often depend on quick, heuristic decision-making strategies. In the context of UNIMA, impulsive behaviors seem to be triggered not only by urgent situational factors but also by cultural norms related to interpersonal obligation and service reciprocity. This is consistent with research in leadership and ethics, which shows that stress and emotional overload can increase the chances of spontaneous behavioral deviations (Harvey et al., 2024).

A comparison with previous research indicates that the current findings both support and expand existing theoretical frameworks. Kessler pointed out that public service settings with heavy workloads tend to foster quick decision-making. This study further develops that idea by showing how such tendencies specifically relate to the motor aspect of impulsivity. Lamsal explored how relational networks affect preferential service, and this study adds a novel perspective by connecting relational favoritism to interpersonally driven impulsivity rather than solely deliberate actions. Past research has characterized petty corruption as a result of cultural normalization (Oprea, 2024; Singh, 2021; Tian & Zhao, 2024). The current work corroborates these findings and emphasizes the psychological factors—especially emotional reactivity and limited planning—that influence how these behaviors manifest in real time. These insights enhance organizational theories suggesting that permissive cultures tend to magnify micro-deviations and legitimize everyday misconduct (Di Stefano et al., 2019).

These behavioral patterns often arise because higher education administrative settings blend uncertain workflow demands with strong relational expectations. Employees tend to balance institutional rules against the need for interpersonal harmony. In this context, impulsivity serves as a shortcut for employees to resolve immediate tension or handle overwhelming workloads, even if it risks procedural integrity. The link between impulsivity and specific deviant behaviors indicates that employees often rely on instinctive, emotion-driven responses when formal procedures seem inefficient or cumbersome. This highlights the importance of corruption prevention strategies that address both psychological factors and organizational structures. The proposed prevention approach, informed by these findings, emphasizes emotional regulation, supervisory practices, and integrity-focused processes. These insights align broadly with existing international discussions on corruption prevention (Ali & Jasim, 2024; Di Stefano et al., 2019; Waldman & Bowen, 2016). However, it is important to recognize that this model is exploratory and context-specific, not yet systematically tested or validated, serving as a preliminary framework to guide future research and practical measures rather than as a definitive or universally applicable model.

The findings also enhance the application of psychological theories within organizational settings. The patterns of quick, low-effort actions identified in this study may be viewed as aligning with motor impulsivity, as described in the BIS-11 framework, rather than as a directly measured attribute. Cognitive impulsivity corresponds with dual process decision theories that suggest emotionally driven choices are made rapidly and intuitively. Non-planning impulsivity reflects limitations in executive functions, including decreased future focus and weaker strategic planning. These theoretical links support the idea that impulsivity provides a valuable psychological perspective for understanding minor behavioral deviations in administrative contexts. The implications extend to empirical evidence of BIS-11 dimensions manifesting in real-world service environments and the incorporation of emotion regulation frameworks into the study of administrative behavior (Gross, 2015; Hofmann et al., 2009).

Practically, the results highlight the need for interventions that tackle both structural and behavioral facets of administrative integrity. Identifying employees prone to impulsiveness early can enable targeted training efforts. Focused programs on emotional regulation and stress management can help staff make more mindful choices during stressful situations. Strengthening ethical norms through initiatives may decrease the cultural tolerance for minor breaches. Also, process-oriented monitoring systems can assist supervisors in more effectively spotting and correcting procedural issues. These practical insights align with leadership and ethics research advocating

for supervisory frameworks that actively reduce misconduct (Harvey et al., 2024; Waldman & Bowen, 2016).

The study's limitations should also be recognized. Firstly, the qualitative single case design limits how broadly the results can be applied to other higher education institutions with different cultural and organizational settings. Therefore, the behaviors observed at UNIMA might be specific to its particular institutional environment. Secondly, the researcher's partial insider status could have affected observations, despite efforts like reflexive journaling and triangulation. Employees might also have changed their behavior during observations because of the sensitive nature of corruption-related topics. Thirdly, impulsivity was assessed through observed and described behaviors rather than validated psychometric tools, which could reduce accuracy in understanding the concept. Fourth, interviews might have been biased by social desirability, especially when discussing ethically sensitive issues. Future studies should consider mixed methods, standardized impulsivity measures, multi-site comparisons, and experimental designs to more thoroughly explore the psychological factors behind petty corruption.

4. Conclusion

Impulsive behavior appears to significantly influence variations in service quality, consistency, and integrity, as observed in this study. Employees at Universitas Negeri Manado exhibited four interconnected types of impulsivity: rapid action, emotional reactivity, unstructured task handling, and decision-making driven by relationships. These behavioral patterns help explain why small procedural mistakes often happen spontaneously in service settings marked by pressure, urgency, and unclear workflow. The results show that petty corruption does not stem solely from deliberate misconduct but is often rooted in momentary impulses influenced by emotional stress, social factors, and permissive cultural norms. This perspective adds to the literature by offering a psychologically grounded, context-specific understanding of early minor procedural deviations. Instead of proposing a new theory, the findings provide empirical insights into how psychological and situational factors interact to influence everyday administrative behavior, complementing existing research that mainly focuses on structural and policy explanations.

The findings indicate that impulsivity may serve as a psychological mechanism explaining how everyday workplace pressures are connected to unethical behavior. This integration refines existing theories of deviant workplace actions by emphasizing the importance of emotional regulation, self-control, and relational influences in understanding unethical decisions in public service settings. The study also contributes practically by proposing a prevention model grounded in psychological principles, targeting both behavioral and structural factors affecting integrity. This model includes early identification of behavioral risks, emotional regulation training, integrity promotion initiatives, and ongoing monitoring of service processes, offering a framework to bolster ethical governance in universities. Overall, the research highlights the need to combine psychological insights with organizational reforms to prevent petty corruption and sustain integrity in higher education administration. Theoretically, it provides context-specific insights into how impulsivity and emotion regulation may operate in high-pressure administrative environments. Rather than broadening these frameworks universally, the results suggest that impulsive behaviors tend to occur under specific conditions, such as high workload, emotional stress, and relational demands, influencing quick decisions during routine tasks. Practically, interventions should be designed according to these contextual factors. For example, training in emotional regulation and decision-making under stress might benefit frontline staff, while supervisory monitoring and process checks can address situational factors leading to procedural errors. These implications are specific to particular organizational contexts and should be tailored to settings sharing similar structural and cultural traits.

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Conflict of interest

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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