

THE COMPETENCIES OF INTEGRITY

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The study explored the construction of integrity in a South African work context and from the viewpoint of business leaders (n=6, females = 2 males = 4). Three of the business leaders were managing directors, two senior executive officers and one senior manager. The types of business backgrounds included government, consulting, marketing, mining and construction. Data were gathered using ten in-depth interviews. Grounded theory data analysis yielded ten competencies related to integrity in the work place, including self-motivation, moral courage, self-discipline, consistency, honesty, fairness, diligence, responsibility, commitment, and trustworthiness. The competencies of integrity are clustered into intrapersonal, interpersonal and work orientated competencies.

Keywords: *Integrity; integrity tests; competency-based assessment*

Since Sackett, Burriss and Callahan's (1989) distinction between overt and personality based integrity tests, integrity has been regarded for its significant impact on work behaviour. Use of results from integrity tests pre-employment could help to combat disruptive and counterproductive employee behaviour (Camara & Schneider, 1994; Cullen & Sackett, 2004). Large scale meta-analysis on the predictive validity of integrity tests have been completed (e.g., Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 1993) and, subsequently, Murphy (2000) reported that over five million integrity tests have been annually administered in the US context. However, integrity testing has been criticised for questionable construct validity (Cullen & Sackett, 2004; Townsend, Bacigalupi, & Blackman, 2007) as well as underlying conceptual inconsistencies (Barnard, 2007; Becker, 1998; Palanski & Yammarino, 2007; 2009). Barnard, Schurink and De Beer (2008) defined integrity as a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon based on a set of moral beliefs and inner drives that is affectively and cognitively managed to produce context appropriate integrity related behaviours. The authors agree that accurate operationalisation of the workplace integrity construct is important for its meaningful measurement.

Measures of Integrity in the African Context

Apart from Fourie's (2006) and Barnard's (2007) qualitative investigation of integrity, African research related to the construct clarification of integrity is limited. A test approach has been widely adopted. For example, the Giotto integrity test (see Rust, 1999) has been imported for use in South Africa. Other tests include the Contextual Performance Scale (CPS), the Integrity Profiles (IP-200) and the Integrity Measuring Instrument (IMI) (Professional Board of Psychology, 2010). Despite the availability and corporate use of these tests (specifically in South Africa but also in African business units of the larger corporations), there remains a lack of published research on the theoretical and conceptual foundations underlying the development and use of integrity tests in the African work environment.

Integrity Testing in the Context of Competency Based Assessment (CBA)

Conceptual clarity underlying a psychometric test has a direct bearing on its usefulness. A competency based approach to assessment (Meyer & Semark, 1996; Potgieter & Van der Merwe, 2002) could be of value to integrity measurement. Approaching integrity assessment from a competency based perspective is new, yet in line with the current trend in assessment theory and workplace assessment practices (Bartram, 2004; Cardy & Selvarajan, 2006; Heinsman, De Hoogh, Koopman & Van Muijen, 2007).

Goals of the Study

The study sought to distinguish competencies of integrity at the workplace that transcend specific jobs. To achieve that goal, a competency framework of integrity is proposed as part of this study. The research questions guiding this study were: 1) What are the behavioural manifestations of integrity in the work context? 2). Can the construct of integrity be conceptualised meaningfully in work settings?

Method

Research Approach

A qualitative approach to determining the competencies of integrity was used. The approach was preferred because it is regarded as highly effective in exploratory and descriptive interpretivist research (Crotty, 2005; Charmaz, 2003; Kelly, 2004; Maree, Joubert & Prinsloo, 1996). The approach is relevant to this study to construct work-related integrity competencies (Barrett, 2003; Sandberg, 2000).

Research Participants

Six participants were initially selected through purposeful and reputational sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These were based on recommendations from experts in the field of corporate governance and ethics indicating the participant to be information rich and reputable with regard to the phenomenon being studied. Each of the six participants could be described as *business elites* (Hertz & Imber, 1995) or *corporate elites* (Thomas, 1995), as they all held senior or executive level positions in long-term profitable businesses, predominantly based in Southern Africa. The six participants included two females. Of the six, three were white and three black. Ages ranged between 40 and 60. (Thomas, 1995), as they all held senior or executive level positions in long-term profitable businesses, predominantly based in Southern Africa. The six participants included two females. Of the six, three were white and three black. Ages ranged between 40 and 60.

Data Gathering

Data was gathered through in-depth interviewing, a technique regarded by many as well suited to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2003; Harkess & Warren, 1993; Potter & Hepburn, 2005; Rubin & Rubin, 1995) and epistemologically congruent to the interpretivist orientation in this study. Critical incidents reflecting integrity behaviour (strong and poor) as well as observed characteristics typical of high or low integrity were probed.

Data collection is driven by theoretical sampling to the point of data saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and sampling of data sources stops when categories become repeated or redundant (Durrheim, 2004). Initially six interviews were conducted. To explore and clarify aspects of the findings four follow-up interviews were also completed. After the fourth follow-up interview data indicated a point of content theoretical saturation. I also kept field notes as a valuable addition to the data (see Wolfinger, 2002) and a reflexive journal (cf. Bryman & Burgess, 1999; Kelly, 2004) to substantiate and keep track of my constructions in relation to the participants' experiences.

Data Capturing and Storage

Interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed by a professional. All Afrikaans excerpts were translated into English to aid non-Afrikaans speaking readers' understanding of the text. Due to the limited scope of this article only the English version of an excerpt is given here. In noting transcription pitfalls and conventions suggested by Easton, McComish and Greenberg (2000) and Lapadat and Lindsay (1999), punctuation was not used in the original English version transcriptions (see also Wolfinger, 2002).

Data Analysis

Due to its reported functionality in grounded theory analysis (see Coffey, Holbrook & Atkinson, 1999; Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004; Muhr, 1997), ATLAS.ti was used to manage, analyse and store data. Meaning was ascribed to data during the four stages of the grounded theory data analysis process, namely category generation, integration and demarcation (delimiting) of categories and writing the final theoretical model (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Fieldnotes, graphic memoing as well as the creation of code-families and networks in ATLAS.ti facilitated further conceptualisation of categories as well as organising groups of related categories.

Procedure

Approval of the research was granted by the I/O Psychology Department at UNISA. All participants also signed a consent form agreeing to be interviewed for the purposes of this study. The ethical principles of confidentiality and informed consent were attained through anonymous reporting of data and thorough debriefing of research participants before, during and after interviews (cf. Leininger, 1994). To ensure trustworthiness the study was submitted twice to a panel peer review in the I/O Psychology Department of UNISA and member checks were conducted with participants.

Results

Ten categories emerged from the data reflecting behaviours that may be regarded as consequent manifestations of integrity: self-motivation, moral courage, self-discipline, consistency, honesty, fairness, diligence, responsibility, commitment, and reliability. Upon further analysis these were clustered into three broad competency clusters, namely interpersonal, intrapersonal and work-orientated competencies of integrity (see Figure 1). The ten competencies that resulted from the data analysis are subsequently discussed within the broader three clusters and clarified with verbatim evidence in the data.

Intrapersonal Competencies

The three competencies self-motivation, moral courage and self-discipline reflect integrity-related behaviours that manifest on an intrapersonal level. These are described next.

Self-motivation. In response to the question to describe someone with integrity, participants presented a number of related meanings. For example, one participant said about integrity: “You know, I think there’s a correlation between people with integrity and people who fail in life because integrity has something to do with what drives you – a kind of self-motivation. When you don’t have work you’ll do something even if it is washing dishes at home” (participant #1).

Another poignant description of someone with integrity denotes having energy and drive: “Someone with a bit of spark in his arse, someone with a bit of bliksem in him” (participant #1). Integrity was clearly linked to active motivation as opposed to passivity, laziness and a careless attitude: “a positive attitude to doing things to getting things done ... you know a can-do attitude an energetic view of getting things done” (participant #2). The participant continued to describe employees with integrity as “people who go the extra mile [to] put their heads down they will make things right they will add the extra value they will go the extra mile” (participant #2). When one’s integrity is challenged by difficult circumstances, self-motivation seems to be an integral part of people’s reaction to such circumstances. The inner drive to persevere is reflected in the following narrative: “I said I’ll do anything he said okay we need a sweeper I said I’ll take it okay ... it was just I really slogged I wanted it so badly you know ... I got up very early I started practising and all of that because I didn’t have any luxury to be lazy and stuff like that you know I really burned the candle” (participant #5).

In summary, self-motivation to achieve goals, persevere and overcome obstacles, fulfil commitments and maintain or even exceed expectations and performance standards is an important integrity category.

Moral courage. Moral courage relates to assertively living what one believes in. Participants provided various examples of fighting for ones beliefs and showing courage and assertiveness as descriptive of people with integrity. Numerous work-related experiences also reflected a number of strenuous challenges to participants' integrity. Their narratives in this regard reflect integrity as courage to choose right from wrong and assertiveness in maintaining their principles and viewpoints. The following extracts are illustrative:

“I can't trust them they don't have balls ... what does trust mean it means that somebody is going to stand up for you when things get rough despite being unpleasant so to practice integrity you need balls... integrity is a sense of solidity” (participant #6). “integrity also meaning having to defend your core values as well if I believe this is an idea or a value that's right you know no matter what would I be given a carrot or would I be threatened or what I'll stand by it” (participant #5). “if something is based on principle then you fight for it” (participant #1). “You need to refresh your assertiveness skills and say “no”, or voice your opinion without feeling guilty” (participant #1).

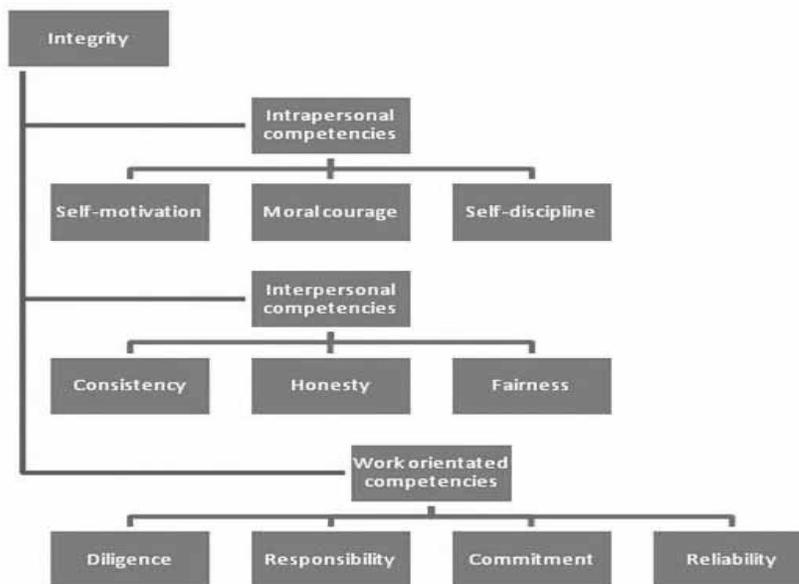


Figure 1. A construct specific competency model of integrity

Peterson and Seligman (2004) classify integrity as a virtue under the character strength of courage. Similarly, Carter (1996) considered moral convictions a part of integrity. As such, moral courage is defined as a conviction in your values, beliefs and principles which is displayed and voiced in an appropriately assertive manner.

Self-discipline. In the context of integrity self-discipline seems to reflect self-control to get things done, to work hard and not succumb to temptations. For example, a participant observed: “All the pupils at my school lived in the hostel and we all had to get up early in the morning to work on the farm, then go to school and after school work the farm animals and crops and do sport activities again. At night you had to study. This all had a great impact on our self-discipline” (participant #1).

Another participant explained how he disciplined himself to work hard and save money: “I had to clean up the buses wash the buses and so on it was like a 4:00 am 3:00 am job ... by the time it’s 6:00 or 7:00 am I then go home okay ... whatever savings I got or whatever money wages I got from the bus company I then started a small business” (participant #5). His self-discipline became more evident when resisting group pressure: “you know they will call you boring coward and all of that you know but for me I could resist that”.

Another participant described someone with integrity as a person who is disciplined in his or her lifestyle and who acts according to his or her beliefs: “he is much stricter on himself in terms of his lifestyle yes more disciplined and stricter with let me say not bending the rules especially with his religion” (participant #3). In a similar vein integrity was linked to emotional control: “she is a remarkable person, she remains the same all the time you know she never even shows anger” (participant #4). In this regard, Murphy (2000) notes that people with limited integrity tend to act on impulse. Park and Peterson (2003, p. 36) define self-control as “regulating what one feels and does, being disciplined; controlling one’s appetites and emotions.

As a competency of integrity, self-discipline is therefore described as living according to a set of self-defined norms (rules) (whether it is to work hard or general religious/ moral principles) and applying emotional and behavioural self-control.

Interpersonal Competencies

The three interpersonal competencies relate to integrity as displayed in one’s relationships and interactions with other people. These include the competencies of consistency, honesty and fairness.

Consistency. Being consistent in the way one presents oneself to others is related to the consistency between what one communicates about one’s character, values and principles and the enactment of these values and principles. One participant stated: “I think integrity means showing yourself in a similar way or showing similar sides often” (participant #6). Others observed: “I know somehow I’ll be responsible to live those values I wouldn’t just put them on the wall” (participant #5) and “the way we approach life for me is a matter of integrity are you going to keep to your commitments are you going to stay in your values whatever those are” (participant #6). In this regard, integrity can be more specifically described as consistency between words and actions (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007). Another participant noted that integrity relates to consistently applying the same values to one self as you do to others: “it has to be for everybody else what you apply to yourself must go to everybody else” (participant #5). Lennick and Kiel (2005) and Simons (2002) considered integrity as aligning one’s internal values, norms and beliefs with one’s behaviour.

Consistency is consequently observed in actions that are congruent with one’s values and principles. Integrity also means applying the same set of standards in all aspects of one’s life – both personal and in business (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). **Honesty.** Honesty involves telling the truth without purposefully hiding the whole or parts of the truth in order to benefit one-self. A participant observed: “... integrity [is the] live[d] ...truth as opposed to the opposite ...” (participant #2). In another’s opinion, limited integrity is evident when one is intentionally and frequently or consistently dishonest: to me lack of integrity really goes with dishonesty ... I think whilst some people are by their very nature dishonest from my definition of integrity I think their dishonesty would come out even more in a

situation where they have power and authority ... for me lack of integrity is really ... there is intention with the dishonesty (participant #4)

Honesty manifests in transparent and open communication and thus includes keeping people proactively informed, sharing information, speaking the truth and declaring one's intentions. A participant observed that "integrity has to do with the way you work with people straightforward and honestly" (participant #1). Another participant explained that integrity entails more than just being honest: "integrity is more complex and more deep than honesty some people don't know themselves, but you know when you lie so it's easier to know that you're lying but you lack integrity if you're lying to yourself" (participant #6). Honesty on an intrapersonal level may thus even precede honesty in interpersonal relationships. If one is true to or honest with oneself, it follows logically that one will not be dishonest with others.

In the literature, honesty has often been linked to integrity (see Craig & Gustafson, 1998; Murphy, 2000; Park & Peterson, 2003; Wanek, 1999). Sackett and Wanek (1996) refer to three books on integrity testing in the workplace in which honesty is directly related to integrity. Wanek (1999, p. 183) also stated that "what were once termed honesty tests are now more often called integrity tests". However, there are also numerous arguments stating that integrity and honesty are not the same and honesty is rather regarded as a consequence of integrity (Becker, 1998), or integrity has a broader connotation than honesty (Murphy, 2000). Becker (1998) was of the view that honesty is a necessary but not sufficient condition for integrity. Park and Peterson (2003, p. 35) use the words "authenticity", "honesty" and "integrity" interchangeably and define them as "speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way ..."

Fairness. Fairness means behaving justly and equitably towards others. Decisions are considered fair if they have been made objectively, based on transparent principle or fact without evidence of unfair bias. Data reflected adequate evidence of fairness as a consequence of having integrity. Some participants reflected a strong focus on fairness and equity as opposed to bias and discrimination in their construction of integrity. One said: "now where integrity comes in for example it's about being objective in other words you'll not have favours" (participant #4). Another stated that to act with integrity you should "do it fairly as possible with the most justice as you can bring out" (participant #2). During a moment of self-reflection a participant also noted: "am I being honest am I being fair in all my dealings" (emphasis added) (participant #5).

In conclusion, fairness has also been linked to integrity in the literature. Studies on people's perceptions of leadership behaviour reflecting integrity show that those leaders are also regarded as fair (see Craig & Gustafson, 1998).

Work Orientated Competencies

Diligence, responsibility, commitment and reliability are integrity-related behaviours of particular importance to the work- place.

Diligence. Diligence relates to a conscientious and hardworking character. Diligence was frequently implied in participants' descriptions of people with integrity. A person with integrity was described as: "she was very hard working" (participant #4). People described as having little integrity were also described as not working hard. A participant noted: "a person who is ... work shy cannot be proud and have integrity" (participant #1). One CEO also regarded hard work or diligence as core values in his company and described employees with integrity as hard-working people: "people who go the extra mile ... they will put their heads down they will add the extra value" (participant #2).

Besides showing evidence of being diligent and industrious (working hard throughout their lives), the research participants also linked integrity to working hard in order to achieve goals and persevere with their commitments. Diligence thus means working hard to realise goals, to persevere in one's work effort and to have an industrious character. In their Values in action classification of personality strengths, Park and Peterson (2003, p. 35) use the concept "diligence" interchangeably with "industry" and "perseverance" and define these concepts as follows: "Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; 'getting out the door'; taking pleasure in completing tasks."

Responsibility. Another key component that emerged from the research participants' construction of integrity is responsibility. Being responsible is portrayed in one CEO's conviction that integrity is displayed by being responsible for the organisation's resources: "you build a company so that people can feel secure so for me, integrity means ensuring security, security of the organisation's finances, its people and its processes" (participant #1). Another participant particularly referred to a leader's responsibility towards others: "we must not underestimate the fact that as leaders you know we are role models ... we should always think of how our own behaviour impacts upon those that we're leading" (participant #4). A CEO considered accepting responsibility for the wellbeing of others important to integrity. Other participants asserted that integrity comes into play in the context of power and authority in particular: "...power goes with responsibility [so] you can't be in a power position and don't have responsibility" (participant #4) or "playing by the rules ... not ducking and diving breaking company rules and regulations just decent behaviour with the regulations... whatever is a policy in the organisation that's been agreed upon it should be practised to the letter" (participant #2).

In conclusion, responsibility entails being responsible to others in thinking about the effect one's actions may have on them as well as being responsible for the appropriate use of the organisation's resources. Responsibility is distinguished as a competency of integrity which is reflected in a concern for one's role in the organisation and the team, as well as for the impact of one's behaviour on others.

Commitment. Commitment implies being dedicated and persistent in keeping one's promises and honouring one's agreements, obligations and work responsibilities. Table 1 illustrates various examples related by participants on commitment as a behavioural manifestation of integrity. Research participants considered commitment to include an attitude of perseverance; to complete the task, to fulfil one's duties, responsibilities and promises and to adhere to one's values and beliefs. Commitment means displaying an attitude of not giving up until one has achieved one's set goals. Mason (2001) linked commitment to the ethics of integrity. He states that people withdraw from their commitments because they do not share the basic integrity ethic of respect for other people.

Reliability (trustworthiness). Reliability refers to being dependable and trustworthy. A participant described someone with integrity as a person who can be trusted to "...keep an appointment, to be punctual [and] to do as they say" (participant #6). Trust has been linked to integrity, especially in studies on employees' perceptions of their leaders' integrity (Craig & Gustafson, 1998; Murphy, 2000). Murphy (2000) uses the words "dependability" and "reliability" interchangeably with the words "trustworthiness" as well as with "integrity". Integrity is displayed when people are reliable and can as such be trusted upon to keep to their commitments.

Discussion

The ten competencies of integrity identified in this study seem to be similar to integrity-related behaviours studied in the field of industrial and organisational psychology in general (see Craig & Gustafson, 1998; Simons, 2002), and more specifically with regard to integrity assessment (see Camara & Schneider, 1994; Ones et al., 1993; Wanek, 1999; Wanek, Sackett & Ones, 2003). Wanek (1999, p. 183) refers to honesty, dependability, trustworthiness, reliability and conscientiousness as the “characteristics of integrity”. Rust (1999) cites responsibility, job commitment, consistency and dependability as some of the constructs of integrity. In a subsequent article, Wanek et al. (2003) note that integrity has alternately been called honesty, trustworthiness, dependability, conscientiousness and reliability. This study was an attempt to provide a unifying conceptual framework as a basis for integrity test development and validation. This study is unique in its qualitative approach to studying construct validity and it provided a rich description of the underlying competencies of integrity.

Implications for Integrity Practices

At face value some of the competencies proposed in this study seem to some extent related. For example, a perceived alignment between a person’s words and her actions (i.e. consistency), inevitably develops trust. Furthermore, a relation between the competencies of self-motivation, honesty, consistency, commitment, diligence, self-discipline, responsibility and reliability may be expected. Competencies that have been linked to the concept of conscientiousness include personality descriptive such as consistency, self-discipline and reliability (Simons, 2002); dependability, perseverance and achievement orientation (Furnham & Taylor, 2004); being dependable, responsible and careful (Murphy, 2000); dutifulness, self-discipline and deliberation (Costa & McCrae, 1992); and hard work (diligence), perseverance, impulse control, self-control, responsibility and achievement motivation (Hogan & Ones, 1997). In general the link between integrity and conscientiousness has been long established (Hogan & Brinkmeyer, 1997; Hogan & Ones, 1997; Murphy & Lee, 2005; Ones & Viswesvaran, 2001; Sackett & Wanek, 1996), however the two constructs are not regarded as surrogate measures of one another (Murphy, 2000). Although Palanski and Yammarino (2007) argued that integrity as consistency between word and action should constitute the core understanding of integrity, I dare to propose that in the work context, conscientiousness may constitute a predominant behavioural component of integrity. As such tests of conscientiousness may be used to provide some evidence of integrity and vice versa.

Limitations of the Study

In this study I focused on integrity from an individual point of view. It is my belief that the contextual nature of integrity highlights the need to study integrity also from a systems perspective. I realise that behaviour reflecting limited integrity in a particular context may not always be attributable to individual characteristics alone. Relevant situational factors over which an individual has no control, and which interact with her integrity characteristics should also be explored as causative factors (compare Furnham & Taylor, 2004). Yorkovich, Waddell and Gerwig’s (2007) criticism against competency based assessment is based on its individualistic focus. These authors suggest that a more holistic approach is needed in which the individual is not the sole focus of assessment, but the organisation, the market environment and strategic foresight is also included. Similarly Palanski & Yamarino (2009) suggest exploring integrity on an individual, group and organisational level of analysis. The competencies of integrity that has been identified in this study provide a good foundation for further studies confirming the credibility thereof in relation to integrity in other work contexts. Specifically, the results provide constructs for developing a competency-based integrity assessment tool. Research exploring the relation between various current integrity tests and these integrity competencies may also be of further interest.

Table 1 Data Evidence of Commitment as a Behavioural Manifestation of integrity

Integrity is displayed in maintaining commitments “ *if one has had disappointments or projects have failed, one has to put in a bit of elbow grease and get through it*” (participant #1) “*whatever you do is in an unfair and imperfect world but you still have to be effective in this world you must enjoy what you’ve committed yourself to show resilience and make it happen*” (participant #1) “*we will always pay the correct amount as per contract as per agreed price we will go out of the way to do that ... it’s a high priority to actually perform to the letter of what we agree to*” (participant #2) “*they made a commitment which they’ve adhered to where they sort of take an amount of money which will take them two years to pay off ... and they’ve stuck to their word to the letter*” (participant #2)

People with limited integrity show poor commitment

“I’ve had experiences where people let me down that I’ve been absolutely shocked by it... the question is are you going to keep to your commitments are you going to stay in your values whatever those are so that really in a nutshell brings for me integrity” (participant #6)

Note. Responses are verbatim examples from the data

Conclusion

A competency framework of integrity that has the potential to inform integrity testing in the workplace is proposed. The proposed competency framework provides a sound theoretical basis to develop integrity specific assessment tools and developmental interventions aimed at enhancing integrity in an organisational context.

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