

THE CONSTRUCTION OF INTEGRITY IN THE SA WORK CONTEXT

BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

Integrity has become an important behavioural attribute in the workplace, significantly impacting on various employment and employee development decisions. Despite the noticeable increase in the use of integrity tests there are some significant unresolved issues, particularly disagreement regarding the construct validity of integrity tests (Cullen & Sackett, 2004). Construct clarification of integrity remains complex and hugely debated, which is indicative of the fact that further research is required to enhance our understanding of the construct of integrity in the workplace. The limited South African research on the construct of integrity introduces a second component to this initial issue, namely that the construct of integrity may not be fully understood in the South African context. Thirdly, integrity tests are based on a specific construct-perspective of integrity that do not account for positive psychology perspectives or for the more developmental conceptualisations of integrity evident in philosophy and general psychology (Barnard, 2007).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

- To explore and define integrity as constructed by business leaders in the South African work context.
- To develop a conceptual framework to understand and work with integrity in the South African work context.
- To derive a substantive model of integrity.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative research approach was deemed most efficient in resolving the stated research objective and its exploratory, descriptive and explanatory nature. Assuming a constructivist epistemology (see Crotty, 2005) and consistent with ontological assumptions underlying critical realism (see Snape & Spencer, 2004) integrity is studied as a real behavioural phenomenon, which becomes meaningful as a result of people's understanding of and experience with it. From such a constructionist perspective integrity is not only subjectively experienced but manifests in socially and contextually defined and accepted conventions that facilitate the way people in the workplace construct the phenomenon. As such, where qualitative research is the overall research approach of this study, the interpretivist stance that I followed, portrays a distinctive theoretical perspective in qualitative research (see Crotty, 2005).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Constructivist grounded theory

From an interpretivist orientation, I utilised a constructivist grounded theory methodology to achieve the stated purposes of this research. In particular constructivist grounded theory emphasises the subjective interrelationship between researcher and research participants resulting in theoretical products that are based on their co-construction of meaning.

- The study was initially directed by purposeful sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in seeking participants who could contribute to the understanding of integrity in the workplace.
- In the spirit of grounded theory methodology, the sampling strategy followed was flexible and iterative (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997) and also based on the guiding principles of theoretical sampling (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990).
- In purposefully selecting information rich research participants, sampling was particularly directed by selecting exemplary cases (Plummer, 2001; Yin, 2003). Participants were thus selected on the strength of the recommendations of key informants indicating the participant to be information rich and reputable with regard to the phenomenon being studied (cf. Ostrander, 1995; Thomas, 1995).

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

In total six participants were selected having in common the following:

- They could all be described as business elites (Hertz & Imber, 1995) or corporate elites (Thomas, 1995), because they all had senior and executive level positions in highly successful businesses in the South African work context.
- They had all been referred to me as champions of integrity in their work relationships and business dealings.

DATA

Data gathering

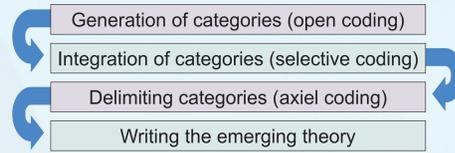
In-depth interviewing as a type of semistructured or unstructured interviewing technique was utilised as it is ideally suited to a grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2003) and true to the epistemological notions in interpretivist research (Kvale, 1996). Four follow-up interviews concluded a total of ten interviews with six research participants. After the fourth follow-up interview data indicated a point of theoretical saturation.

Data capturing and storage

Interviews were tape recorded with both a digital recorder and a cassette recorder. Taped interviews were then transcribed and the transcriptions were imported as primary documents into ATLAS.ti. Data was furthermore substantiated by compiling fieldnotes and by keeping a reflexive journal throughout the data gathering and data analysis process (cf. Bryman & Burgess, 1999; Kelly, 2004).

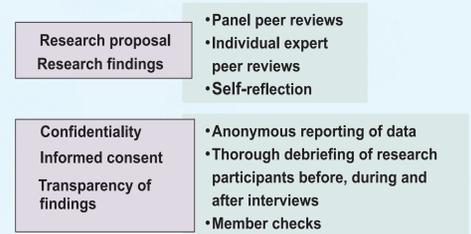
Data analysis: Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)

Constant comparison - naming, comparing and memoing strategies through 4 iterative stages of analysis:



Data analysed in ATLAS.ti on both a textual and conceptual level (cf. Pandit in Henning et al., 2004).

Ensuring quality and ethical research



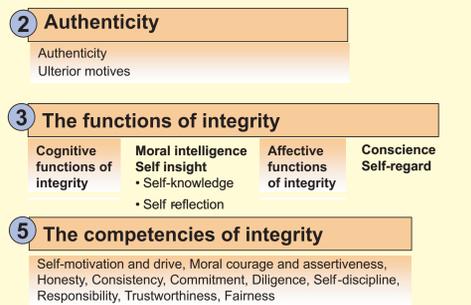
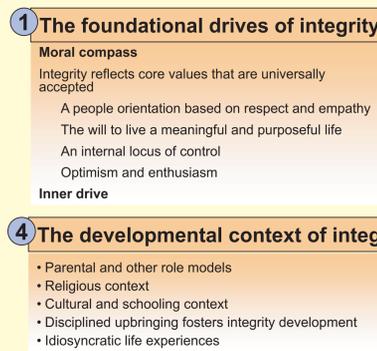
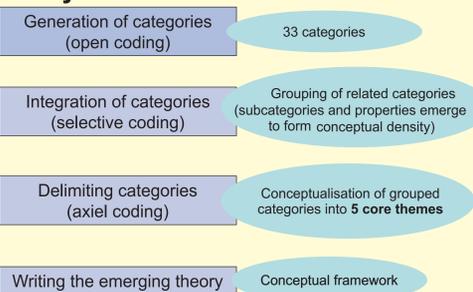
RESEARCH FINDINGS

Phase of data analysis

Results

5 core themes

Grouping of categories into 5 core themes



CONCEPTUALISATION

1 The foundational drives of integrity

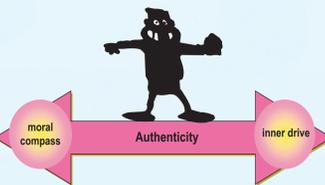


Integrity entails an internalised set of values and principles that function as the norms and standards one lives by and which direct all one's actions and decisions, i.e. one's moral compass. Ultimately integrity is determined by the content nature of the moral compass and integrity behaviour is driven by one's willingness to act according to the internalised values, beliefs, norms and principles that constitute one's moral.

Integrity is however also driven by one's inner needs, aspirations, wants and goals, conceptualised as one's inner drive. The relevance of the inner drive to integrity seems twofold. Firstly, there seems to be a positive link between integrity and inner drive, in that one's inner wants, needs and aspirations constitute the motivational forces for achievement, progress and hard work that underlie integrity. Secondly however, one's personal needs and aspirations may tempt one to act in ways that do not speak of integrity, but rather of selfish and self-seeking behaviour.

Integrity is thus based on potentially conflicting drives or opposite forces - personal motives and ideals contained in the inner drive and values and principles from the moral compass.

2 Authenticity



In constructing integrity, the interviewees described authenticity as being a fundamental aspect of integrity and they described authenticity as being genuine, straightforward, and true to oneself. Acting with integrity therefore means acting in congruence with one's inner feelings, wants, values and principles (i.e. your inner drive). Integrity however also pertains to acting authentically to the moral compass. A dynamic irony is evident in relating good integrity with being authentic, yet poor integrity with behaviour motivated by self-interest, because one cannot be regarded as authentic if one does not act according to one's inner wants and needs. Therefore integrity is driven by one's inner drive as well as one's moral compass and to live with integrity, one should be authentic with regard to both these foundational drives

3 The functions of integrity

The functions of integrity facilitate a person's ability to balance the foundational drives of integrity (i.e. the moral compass and inner drive) and thus the ability to direct behaviour that display either more or less integrity. As such it is proposed that moral intelligence and self-insight as well as self-regard and a sensitive conscience will facilitate integrity related behaviour.

Cognitive - integrity relates to the ability to distinguish right from wrong, based on the knowledge and understanding of generally accepted norms and principles and their applicability and significance in a particular situation. Integrity is displayed in being able to reflect on and reason the significance and applicability of principles in any particular situation. Integrity also relates to the ability to judge and evaluate oneself against generally accepted and appropriate values and principles (self-knowledge & self-reflection = self-insight).

Affective - One's conscience and self-regard are the affective components in guiding decisions and actions. The conscience has an evaluative function, judging one's behaviour against the moral compass, with consequent negative feelings if one's behaviour does not reflect integrity. Self-regard (a rational and positive sense of self) incorporates being comfortable with who one is as a result of perceived strengths and despite perceived limitations. A poor sense of self is either based on an overinflated self-esteem or on feelings of inferiority and may result in an exaggeration of one's capabilities or in holding up false pretences.



4 The developmental context of integrity

On probing the development of integrity, it became evident that on the one hand research participants' integrity development is strongly rooted in their upbringing. On the other hand narratives from the data provide evidence that research participants' integrity never ceases to develop. Integrity appears to be shaped in the context of the research participants' upbringing as well as in a variety of situations that permeate their adult lives. The developmental context of integrity speaks to its relative nature, emphasising the point that integrity is developed and formed relative to one's context.

5 The competencies of integrity

Self-motivation: An inner drive and energy to set goals and work hard to achieve them, to fulfil commitments and maintain or even exceed standards of performance.

Moral courage and assertiveness: The courage to act on and stand up for what one believes in and to publicly show and voice one's principles and values. It also includes the courage of self-reflection in the quest for self-insight.

Honesty: Truthfulness with oneself and others about one's intentions and capacity. It includes telling the truth and declaring one's intentions. It manifests in transparent and open communication and in sharing information proactively.

Consistency: Consistent application of and living according to core values and principles in all the different areas of one's life (i.e. work and personal life).

Commitment: Persevering to attain what one has committed oneself to do, to one's duties, responsibilities and obligations whether it is a public (commitment to others) or private (commitment to oneself) commitment and despite difficult or otherwise challenging circumstances.

Diligence: Displaying a diligent attitude towards one's work, persevering in one's work effort and having an industrious character.

Self-discipline: Being disciplined in living according to one's values and principles as well as in attaining what one has set out to do (as expressed in one's inner drive). Disciplining oneself to function within the boundaries of one's moral compass, agreed-upon rules and principles and commitments to oneself and others.

Responsibility: Accepting responsibility for one's goals and aspirations, limitations and strengths, the choices one makes and the consequences of one's actions. Accepting responsibility for other people/institutions, their interests and one's role in one's interrelationships with them.

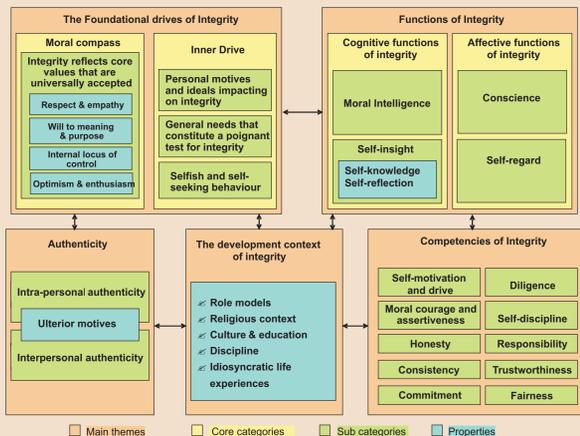
Trustworthiness: Displaying a reputation for keeping one's word, commitments and responsibilities to the effect that others can trust one to do what one says.

Fairness: Being fair, equitable and unbiased in one's decision making, especially decisions that involve and impact on others.

DISCUSSION

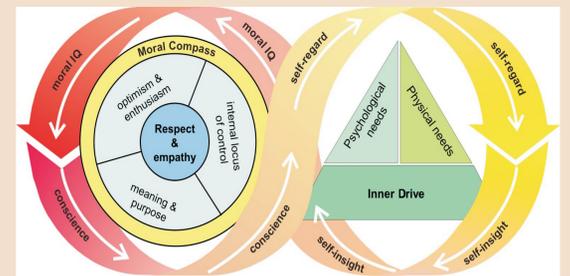
1. A conceptual framework of integrity

An explication of the interrelationships between the core themes presented above, resulted in a conceptual framework of integrity. The conceptual framework resembles the core themes (indicated in pink), their related primary categories (indicated in yellow) and subcategories (indicated in green) as well as properties (indicated in blue) of each category. The themes, categories and their properties in the conceptual framework are descriptive of integrity in the South African workplace.



2. Integrity: a balancing act

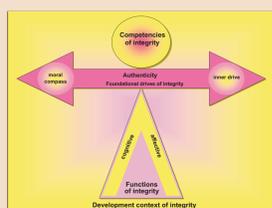
Despite being equally significant, there is a potentially conflicting dynamic between the foundational drives of integrity that makes living authentically and with integrity a challenging experience. Being driven to act from the moral compass may for example constitute more altruistic and other-focussed behaviour at the cost of one's inner drive. Differently, being driven to act from one's inner drive may constitute more self-centred behaviour. It seems that to achieve integrity, one needs to attain a certain balance in living authentically in relation to the moral compass and inner drive. The literature reveals a similar duality in conceptualising integrity, contrasting personal integrity with moral integrity. Integrity definitions that focus on either of these two perspectives tend to do so to the detriment of the other manifesting inconsistent theories on the construct (see Cox et al, 2005). This study provides evidence of both perspectives in the construction of integrity, indicating that the conceptualisation of integrity should express the underlying tension present in integrity's opposing foundational drives as well as the way in which this tension is managed.



The cognitive and affective functions of integrity function in a reciprocal relationship to manage this tension and to direct behaviour that reflect consideration of one's moral compass and inner drive. The cognitive functions of integrity relates to the ability to distinguish between right and wrong on the basis of knowledge of generally accepted principles of living (i.e. moral intelligence) as well as on a thorough knowledge of the self and one's personal strengths and limitations (self-insight). The affective function of integrity pertains to caring about right and wrong or the desire to do right, and includes negative emotional responses such as guilt and shame when one has not acted or lived according to one's principles and standards. It also includes self-knowledge, self-regard and commitment to certain values and principles, that is, one's conscience.

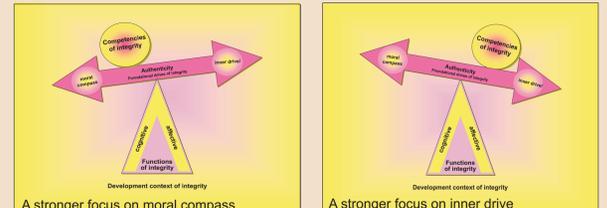
3. A substantive model for integrity in the SA work context

In the proposed substantive model for integrity in the SA work context, the four functions of integrity work together and are all needed in one's strife towards integrity. At times a person relies more heavily on one or two of the functions and at other times more on the others, implying that the functions of integrity provide a balanced or rather synergistic power in facilitating one's integrity behaviour.



4. Contextually appropriate integrity behaviour

Various situations and contexts appeal differently to a person's moral compass and inner drive, resulting in a differential focus on either of the two. In a particular situation, focusing on one's inner drive may reflect more integrity, whereas in another context a stronger focus on one's moral compass would be essential in displaying good integrity. It is through the functions of integrity that one is able to maintain a balance between one's moral compass and inner drive; a particular balance that reflects contextually appropriate integrity behaviour.



CONCLUSION

Integrity is conceptualised as: *An authentic commitment to one's moral compass and inner drive and balancing the constant tension between these potentially opposing drives through the cognitive and affective functions of moral intelligence, conscience, self-insight and self-regard, resulting in particular overt behaviour that reflects the extent of one's integrity. The balance that is required to result in contextually appropriate integrity behaviour is unique to the context of the specific situation as well as to the developmental context of the person.*

The research findings, indicate that integrity is a multidimensional and dynamic construct, implicating assessment of integrity for various purposes and in various contexts. The proposed model present a sound and holistically integrated theoretical basis from which to construct behavioural assessment and development tools applicable

Further research is proposed in terms of:

- Duplication of the research in different contexts to this study. Negative cases could also be used as an alternative methodology to confirm propositions made here.
- Research exploring integrity development pertaining to specific career stages may be of great value in the management of employees and specifically in leadership development. Developmental theories focusing on the development of integrity in the work context do not exist.
- Confirmation or strengthening of the findings through a quantitative research methodology in order to provide a sound foundation for the construction of an integrity assessment tool.