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Co-constructing integrity: A conceptual framework

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Orientation: The use of an integrity framework can positively influence the impact senior management has on middle management's experience of integrity and subsequently contribute towards creating a positive work environment and establishing healthy relationships between these two groups.

Research purpose: The aim of this research is to obtain insights from psychology practitioners about the potential application of, and the value added by, a particular integrity framework within organisations.

Motivation for the study: Establishing a positive work environment and organisational culture that upholds integrity and that is conducive to behaviour marked by integrity, requires investment into the development of leadership integrity. Utilising an integrity framework will enable psychology practitioners and organisational leadership to create an environment in which healthy relationships can be established between all stakeholders, in particular, between senior and middle managers, allowing integrity to flourish.

Research approach/design and method: A hermeneutic, qualitative study was undertaken and convenient sampling was used. Participants included industrial and counselling psychologists. A listening post was convened and the data obtained were analysed using thematic analysis.

Main findings: The findings indicate organisations can use the framework effectively by customising it according to their specific needs, organisational strategy, vision and mission.

Practical/managerial implication: The framework will enable senior management to influence follower behaviour positively regarding their integrity within the organisation. The framework will assist middle managers in gaining a better understanding of the impact senior management has on their experience of integrity.

Contribution/value-add: The study also highlights the important role organisations play in creating and establishing an ethical work climate that will ensure corporate integrity. This will enable organisations to provide value to their corporate stakeholders and to society at large.

Introduction

Organisations have an important responsibility to create a sustainable environment in which unethical employee activity is addressed through ethical business practices, based on leadership's stance towards integrity (Rossouw & Van Vuuren, 2010; Schlechter, 2009). Those on whose shoulders this responsibility rests include managers at all levels of the organisation, as well as those practitioners (i.e. human resources practitioners, industrial and organisational psychologists and organisational consultants) who are responsible for enhancing human capacity and capability.

The insight of psychology practitioners as to what constitutes good ethical behaviour – more specifically, behaving with integrity and how such behaviour is influenced in organisations between management levels – is not clear from existing research. In earlier related studies, greater emphasis seems to have been placed on the role of the practitioner in developing integrity. This was done by implementing various interventions focusing on the development of leadership integrity, the establishment of an organisational culture that upholds integrity as one of its key values and an assessment of the levels of integrity in the workplace (Odendaal & Roodt, 2009).

Accordingly, a framework has been developed to explain the impact senior management has on middle management's experience of integrity (see Figure 1) (Van Niekerk & May, 2012). In the first component of this framework, middle managers' views of how *senior managers influence integrity*

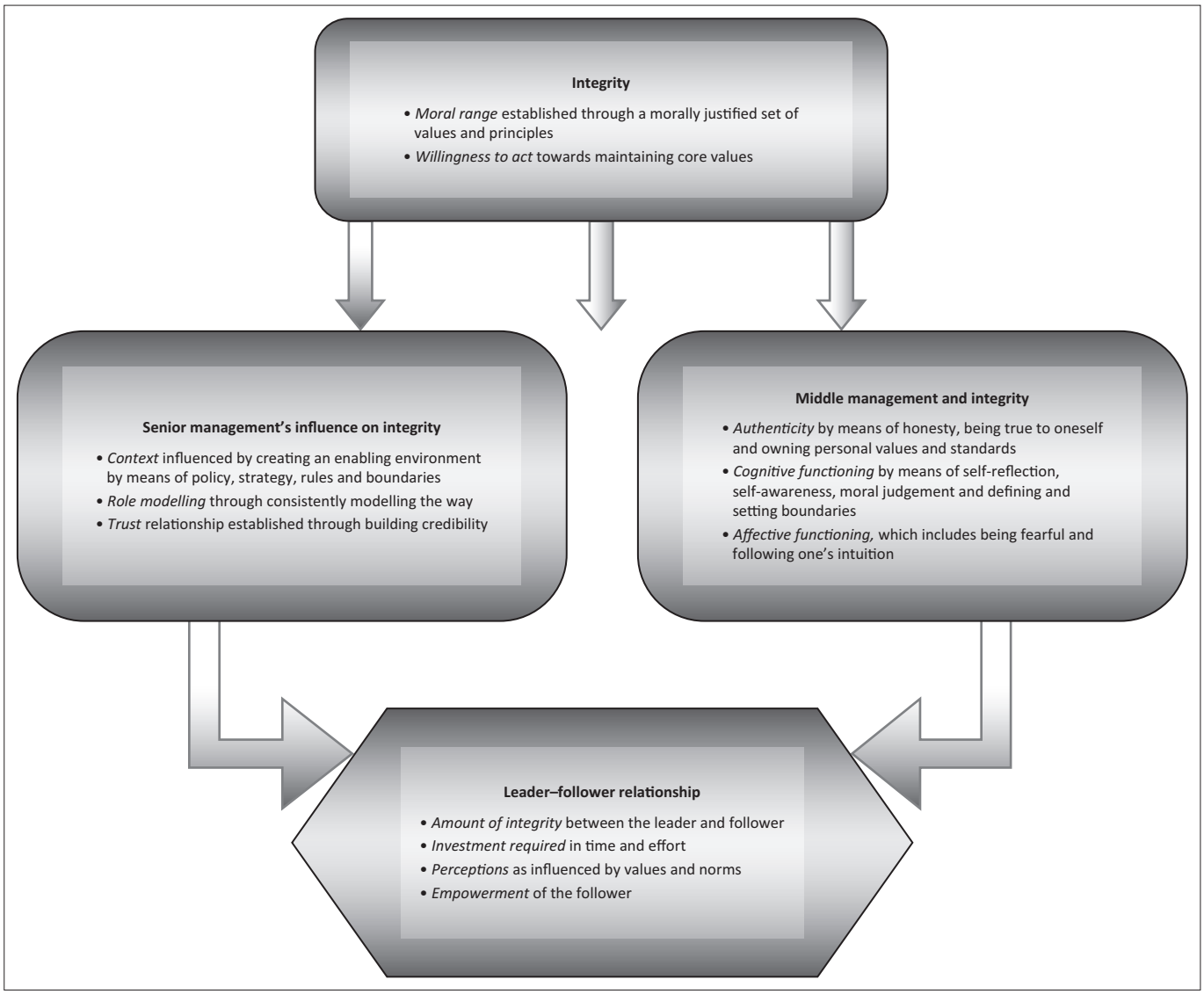

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FIGURE 1: Middle managers' experience of integrity, as impacted on by senior managers.

are affected by three factors: the first factor is a context in which behaviour showing evidence of integrity is influenced by the creation of an enabling environment guided by policies, strategies, rules and boundaries which allow integrity to develop (Antonakis, Cianciolo, & Sternberg, 2004; Erakovich & Kolthoff, 2016); the second pertains to the role senior management plays in consistently modelling the way towards behaviour that reflects integrity (Palanski & Yammarino, 2009); and lastly how, by achieving credibility, a relationship of trust is established (Palanski & Yammarino, 2009; Werbel & Henriques, 2009).

Within the second component, middle managers relate to integrity through authentic behaviour: this trait is displayed when they are honest and true to themselves, and they own the personal values and standards they live by (Endrissat, Müller, & Kaudela-Baum, 2007; Fields, 2007). Middle managers also relate to integrity through cognitive functioning (self-reflection, self-awareness, moral judgement and boundaries) and affective functioning (being fearful, following their own intuition).

The third component of this framework highlights the importance of senior managers understanding the impact their leadership can have on the *leader–follower relationship* in terms of (1) the *amount of integrity present* between the senior and the middle manager, respectively; (2) the *investment required* by the senior manager (in time and effort) to establish a climate of integrity; (3) the influence which the senior manager's values and norms exert on the middle manager's *perception of integrity*; and (4) how the senior manager *empowers* the middle manager to behave with integrity (Van Eeden, 2005; also see Palanski & Yammarino, 2009).

The last and final component of the framework is *integrity*, as it is defined and filtered into the three preceding factors, displaying how middle managers view integrity specific to moral range and a willingness to act. Middle managers believe that moral range is established by determining a

morally justified set of values and principles in accordance to which everyone can function. However, this does require a willingness to act in line with those core values and principles and to work towards maintaining and preserving them (Barnard, Schurink, & De Beer, 2008).

The framework has now been completed, but to date its application has not yet been explored in full. Because psychology practitioners are influential in implementing such frameworks, it is necessary to obtain their insights and views on the applicability of this framework and how it could add value to the organisation.

Research purpose and objectives

The use of an integrity framework can arguably contribute to the creation of a positive work environment and to a healthy relationship between stakeholders, in particular between senior and middle managers. If implemented effectively, such a framework will assist in creating an environment in which integrity development can flourish. Psychologists are co-responsible for establishing an environment that is conducive to behaviour marked by integrity (Rossouw & Van Vuuren, 2010; Van Niekerk & May, 2012). Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore psychology practitioners' views on the application and potential added value of implementing an integrity framework in an organisation. A secondary objective is to further explore various aspects of the aforementioned integrity framework (see Figure 1) and to process the participating psychology practitioners' insights into a working hypothesis. Obtaining these psychology practitioners' insights regarding the potential value of the framework can help guide organisations in the development of leadership integrity, in addition to supporting the establishment of an organisational culture that upholds integrity as one of its key values.

Literature review

Integrity in organisations

Organisations worldwide face numerous challenges, including unethical behaviour (Xu, Loi, & Ngo, 2016). But what does ethical behaviour comprise, or how can an employee's behaviour reflect integrity? Cohen (1995, p. 317) defines ethical (integrious) behaviour as an 'intentionally responsible action, honouring implicit and explicit social contracts, and seeking to prevent, avoid or rectify harm'. Within the organisational context, Cohen (1995, p. 317) supports the premise that such conduct embraces 'promoting long-term goodwill within and across group boundaries and respecting the needs of others both within and outside the firm'. For the purpose of this study, ethical behaviour is thus regarded as an act undertaken for the good of the organisation, its employees and clients.

The role of management

Organisations rely on management to ensure their survival and growth in a competitive world. Management is represented on various levels within the organisational hierarchy, that is, senior, middle and junior management, each with different degrees of authority and responsibility. At a strategic level, senior management is concerned with the functioning of the organisation as a whole by setting objectives, determining corporate policy and making strategic decisions (Brown, 2013; Mullins, 2010). Middle management is responsible for the implementation of these objectives and decisions, by coordinating and integrating numerous activities (Brown, 2013; Williams, 2011). As team leaders and supervisors, junior managers report to middle management and assume responsibility for the operational and administrative functions of the organisation (Brown, 2013; Mullins, 2010; Williams, 2011).

Furthermore, management at all levels is tasked with ensuring the success of the organisation through exhibiting responsible leadership across the organisational structure. Within their respective areas of responsibility, management is continuously engaged in influencing organisational behaviour through planning, organising, leading and controlling various resources to meet organisational goals (Schermerhorn, 2004; Wagner & Hollenbeck, 1992). Managers at each of the three levels also have an important interpersonal function, namely that of leadership (Mintzberg, 1973). In this role, they aim to motivate their followers to achieve predetermined objectives (Williams, 2011) and they do this by utilising their interpersonal skills and building relationships of trust (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982). This is in line with the view of Antonakis et al. (2004), who define the leadership role as an inspirational practice and emphasise the importance of the dyadic relationship between the manager's leadership style and the follower's perception thereof, as well as the context in which this relationship operates. If this dyadic relationship is well balanced, responsible leadership emerges (Maak & Pless, 2006).

Responsible leadership also depends on the presence of principled individuals and the establishment of an environment that is conducive to ethical behaviour, and therefore encourages integrity (Ogunfowora, 2014; Storr, 2004; Van Niekerk & May, 2012). Integrity is vital for responsible leadership, as it focuses on the moral values expected of individuals and on their willingness to be held accountable for their actions, as dictated by the context (Cox, La Caze, & Levine, 2008; McCoy, 2007). Managers who behave in a credible manner and consistently act in harmony with what they proclaim are able to deal effectively with the multitude of challenges they face on a daily basis (Brenkert, 2006; Van Niekerk & May, 2012; White & Lean, 2008).

Shaping behaviour that is characterised by integrity

To better understand integrity (as opposed to a lack thereof) and develop tools and measures which can assist in dealing more effectively with that lack, managers rely on the assistance and knowledge of behavioural specialists such as industrial and organisational psychologists and practitioners.

Consequently, there has been a substantial increase in the number of questions aimed at assessing a person's integrity during interviews, and in the use of integrity–assessment instruments within the organisational environment (Schenk, 2009). Other measures such as codes of conduct, background screening, the signing of oaths and the appointment of integrity officers have helped reduce risks associated with a lack of integrity (Erakovich & Kolthoff, 2016). The role of the managers and psychology practitioners responsible for developing behaviour that can be deemed to show integrity is furthermore based on reinforcing appropriate ethical behaviour and on reshaping inappropriate behaviour – thus, to conform to an organisational culture and environment in which employees can function optimally (Hailu, 2013; Inyang, 2008). A study conducted by Zhu, Treviño, and Zheng (2016, p. 111) found that ethical leadership certainly relates to followers' moral identity and moral attentiveness. It was further found that a direct relationship exists between a follower and a leader's moral attentiveness and that ethical leadership is able to reconcile the relationship between a leader and a follower's moral identity.

Research design

Research approach and strategy

This study followed a hermeneutic, qualitative research approach aimed at discovering the hidden meanings and interpretations that tend to be attached to particular experiences (Henning, Van Rensburg, & Smit, 2005; Hutton, 2009). Qualitative data can reveal complexity and provide holistic and informative insights (Creswell, 2009; Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2006) such as exploring psychology practitioner's views on the application and potential added value of implementing a particular integrity framework within organisations.

Research method

Research setting

A listening post was conducted at a large South African university to obtain insights from seven psychology practitioners about the potential application and added value of a particular integrity framework (see Figure 1) within organisations. The research was conducted by two academics, one with a doctorate degree and the other with a master's degree obtaining her doctoral degree a year ago. Both researchers are experienced psychology practitioners and registered psychologists, one in the category of industrial and the other in the category of clinical with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA).

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

The listening post was planned in accordance with the requirements described above, and seven psychology practitioners and one lawyer, who specialises in business ethics (and integrity), were invited to participate. One of the researchers approached the participants individually and explained the aims of the study. Participation was voluntary and written informed consent was obtained. Before the listening post, relevant background information about the framework, as well as the framework itself, was shared with all the participants.

Research participants and sampling methods

Convenient sampling was used (Henning et al., 2005). The participants were included because they were available and deemed capable of providing rich, salient information about their experiences as psychology practitioners in various organisational settings (Brewerton & Millward, 2001).

The seven participating psychology practitioners, which included the convenor and the scribes (in their roles as participants) consisted of two black women, one white woman, two black men and two white men. Their respective qualifications included an honour's degree, three master's degrees and three doctorates. Six of the seven participants were registered as professional psychologists in the categories of industrial (five) and industrial and counselling (one), respectively, with the HPCSA. All participants were employed in teaching positions, in addition to having previously provided and are currently providing psychological practitioner and consulting services to organisations within South Africa. Through these roles, they have gained substantial experience in the fields of integrity and leadership within the local organisational context.

Data collection methods

As mentioned earlier, a listening post was used as data collection method. The notion of a listening post was developed by the Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society (Stapley, 2006) for use in research and consultancy to gain a deeper understanding of society, beyond mere individual and personal preoccupations (Khaleelee & Stapley, 2013). As an exploratory event, a listening post focuses on a specific matter requiring a deeper understanding. As suggested by Dartington (2000), participants are encouraged as a group to engage in free-floating discourse and associative thinking during the listening post, in order to explore and process relevant experiences about the topic discussed. This first stage, which is mediated by a convenor, lasts 1 h. During the second hour, the material that emerged is analysed so as to formulate hypotheses about the research topic. The validity of the listening post depends on the convenor's ability to provide opportunities for participants to share their experiences within a contained space, without judgement, memory or desire (Miller, 1993), and to manage the boundaries between the alternating roles of convenor and participant. The theory underlying the listening post acknowledges that the convenor is always part of the dynamics of the group; therefore, the convenor is a participant as well. The experienced convenor held the boundary between convening and being part of the listening post minimising the impact on the data. In other words, it is the convenors awareness of his involvement in the dynamics of the listening post which minimises his impact on the data. The description is also applicable to the scribes.

In using a listening post to collect data, the nature of this method creates a potential problem in terms of saturation (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003) because the sample size is determined by the method and not the saturation of data. The researchers decided to accept a sample of seven, with the option of enlarging the sample size if the data proved insufficient for valid interpretation. However, during the data analysis process, data saturation was reached, that is, it reached a point where themes and sub-themes were constantly repeating and where adding further participants would not have led to additional insights (Creswell, 1998).

The primary task of those participating in the listening post was stated as follows: 'In your role experience, explore the application and potential added value of the framework in organisations.' The convenor – a specialist in systems psychodynamics – introduced the primary task and managed the time and task boundaries. The convenor joined in the discourse in the role of participant during the two 1-h periods. The event discourse was transcribed and analysed by both researchers. During the first session, the application and potential added value of the framework for use in organisations were explored. During the second session, various aspects of the framework were discussed and processed into working hypotheses.

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

Participants were assured that all information they provided would be treated as confidential. All seven psychology practitioners accepted the invitation. As suggested by De Vos, Strydom, Fouché, and Delport (2006), the researchers' understanding of the data was continuously challenged to ensure the quality of the analysis. Following these steps enabled the researchers to apply a creative yet scientific and analytically rigorous procedure (Babbie, 2001). Validity was ensured by applying various checks on the findings, such as participatory modes of research, the clarification of researcher bias, the labelling and interpretation of the data, and reporting on the findings (Creswell, 2009; Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003). The reliability of research findings depends on the researcher continuously assessing the validity of the questions being asked in relation to the research design, along with the procedures followed (Ritchie et al., 2003). According to Gibbs (2007), the reliability of findings is confirmed when different researchers, following the same approach consistently, contribute to the research. In this case, both researchers acted as scribes during the listening post, and both analysed the data independently. A work session was arranged during which the notes made, as well as the analyses and interpretations of the data, were compared. The themes identified by the researchers were found to be comparable, and a list was subsequently finalised.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. As suggested by Henning et al. (2005), the data were categorised into plausible patterns, themes, sub-themes and related elements (Henning et al., 2005), as shown in Table 1, to generate working hypotheses – a statement of tentative understanding, from a meta-position based on evidence from the data (Schafer, 2003). Finally, the findings were used to conceptualise a framework to illustrate the psychology practitioners' insights about the application and potential added value of the integrity framework (Figure 2).

Reporting style

To ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, identifying elements were excluded from the data and the researchers' notes were stored securely. The participants were simply identified in the researchers' notes as 'Participant 1', 'Participant 2' and so forth, and verbatim quotes provided in this article are attributed similarly (Neuman, 2007).

Results

In this section, the themes, sub-themes and related elements (Table 1) are discussed. Working hypotheses are presented, and the implications of the themes and the working hypotheses for the use of the framework are discussed.

The four main themes that emerged were: (1) integrity is a dance between self, others and the system; (2) a wish to oversimplify integrity; (3) at times, integrity displays a shadowy side; and (4) the notion of the psychological contract – context-specific and expectations.

Integrity as a dance between self, others and the system

The meaning of integrity is not only constructed by an individual, but rather within the dance (or relationship) between the self and others within the organisation, and in the wider community.

The meaning of integrity is co-constructed: Different stakeholders and contextual factors

Previous research has shown that senior managers have a direct impact on how middle managers experience integrity (Van Niekerk & May, 2012). In this study, the psychology practitioners concluded that integrity was co-constructed and influenced by various leadership styles, specifically those of senior managers. The interrelationship between senior and middle managers was highlighted, with Participant 6 and Participant 7 noting middle managers'

TABLE 1: Grouping of themes into sub-themes and related elements.

Themes	Sub-themes and aspects
Integrity is a dance between self, others and the system	• The meaning of integrity is co-constructed: Different stakeholders and contextual factors • Your integrity, as defined by me • Me versus other • Integrity is co-constructed in systems
A wish to oversimplify integrity	• Ensuring certainty and reducing complexity by removing shades
The shadowy side of integrity	• Judgement • Integrity as power play – gaining control over others • Integrity as a defence of the self and an attack on the other
Psychological contract – context-specific and expectations	• Multiple comparisons within specific contexts and expectations

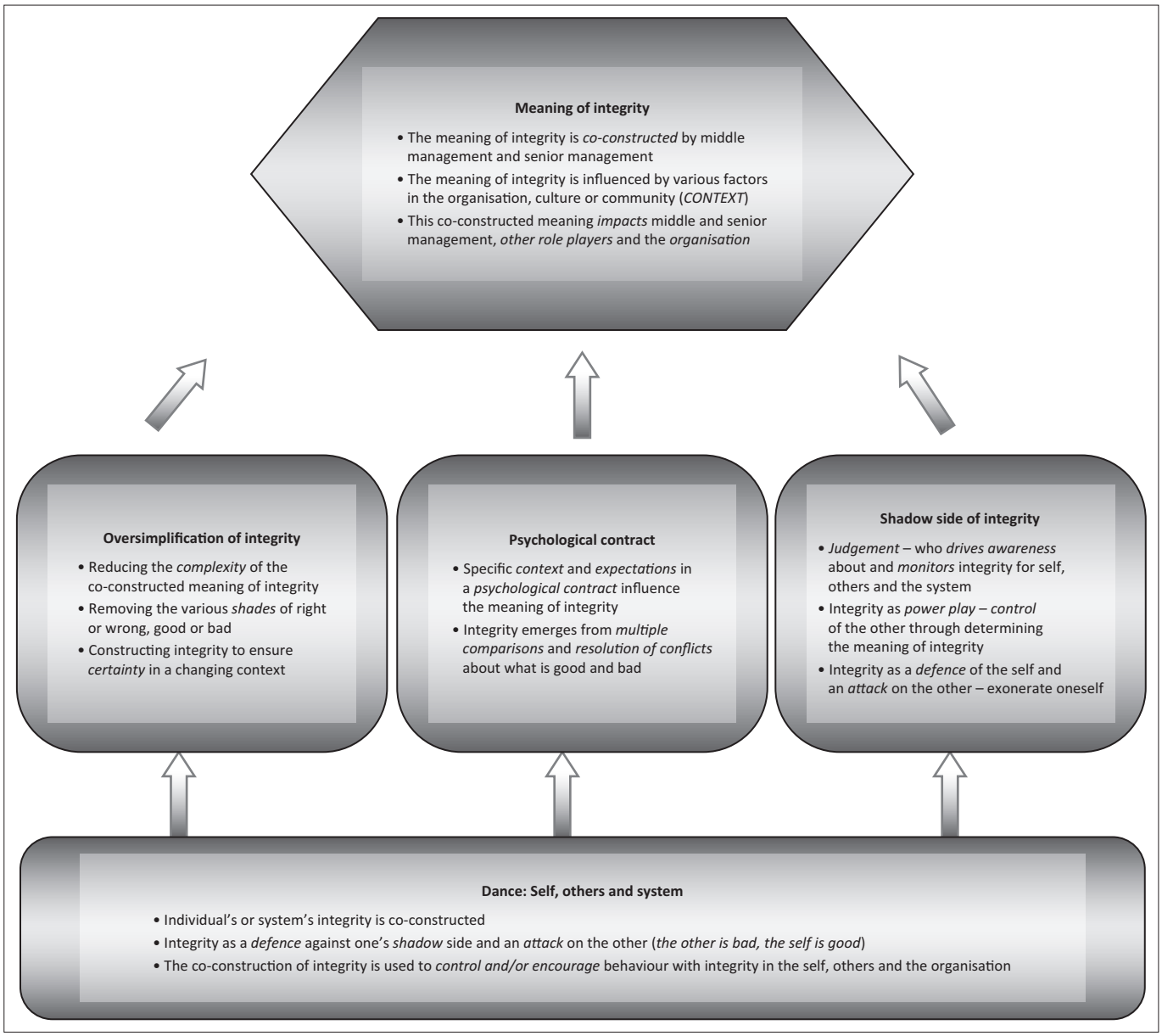

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FIGURE 2: Psychology practitioners' insights into how senior managers can develop middle manager integrity.

experience of integrity was directly influenced by whether a senior manager behaved with integrity, that is, whether she or he 'walked the talk'.

The psychology practitioners highlighted another level of complexity in this relationship, by emphasising the role of other stakeholders – in the organisation, in communities and in society – in the construction of integrity. They further emphasised that it was the interaction between contextual factors such as the organisational culture (Participant 6, male, black person), the work and social environments (Participant 1, female, white person) and other factors (not explored in this listening post) that have an impact on an individual's construction of integrity in an organisation.

Participant 4 proposed that the structure and culture of the society or community determine the behaviour of different cultural groups, which have different opinions about the meaning of integrity. Different cultural groups (societies), organisations and individuals have different expectations about what it means to behave with integrity. One participant stated:

> 'I would go with that, because I think that expectations about integrity are different at home from what is required at our organisations. I might be out of line when using a phone at home without permission, whereas at the workplace I would normally use a phone without permission.' (Participant 2, female, black person)

Participant 4 and Participant 6 agreed and echoed that social context co-determines behaviour marked by integrity.

As suggested by Participant 1 and confirmed by the other participating psychology practitioners, integrity is dynamic.

That dynamism probably derived from integrity being co-constructed, influenced by the different expectations of stakeholders and by the broader context (i.e. relationships, departments, organisations and societies).

Your integrity as defined by me

It seems that through relationships, individuals attempt to define the integrity of others. As Participant 1 stated, 'your integrity is defined by me', implying an attempt to assume control of another person's perception of integrity and aligning it with one's own. Participant 1 added:

> 'Integrity is a defence against your own shadowy side ...' (Participant 1, female, white person)

… perhaps alluding to a need to be seen as good, living up to our own expectations about integrity.

Cognisance should also be taken of the presence of competiveness between ourselves and others. Participant 4 saw indications of our competitive nature in the question of who shows more integrity than the other. Given that question, it appears that individuals attempt to manipulate the answer so that it reflects more favourably on them, tending to assume control of others' perceptions of integrity and trying to align their views to be more:

'on par [*with their own*]' (Participant 6, male, black person).

Participant 4 agreed, adding that:

> '… integrity, as co-constructed, can be used to control integrity [*in the self, in others and in the organisation*].' (Participant 4, male, black person).

Participant 2 summarised it well, saying:

> 'My truth versus your truth versus the actual truth becomes our truth (or even law).' (Participant 2, female, black person)

Me versus others

Is there perhaps more to this 'darker' side of the relationship between me and the other? Participant 3 stated that:

> '… it becomes a game of attack versus defence'. (Participant 3, male, white person).

Participant 1 agreed, adding that:

> '… integrity is a defence against your own shadowy side, your quest to stay pure, [*and the desire to live*] up to my own expectations of myself.' (Participant 1, female, white person)

Bearing in mind the earlier statement about the competiveness inherent in relationships, it is proposed that integrity is not only used as a tool to control others but also as a means to attack and judge others by attributing unacceptable behaviour to them. Therefore, Participant 3 suggested that integrity had to do with:

'… what … I project onto others.' (Participant 3, male, white person).

This could possibly justify the need to presume that:

> 'I am never guilty [*of unethical behaviour, thus idealising myself as having integrity*]'. (Participant 3, male, white person).

On the other hand, as suggested by Participant 5 (female, black person), you could preserve your integrity by momentarily relinquishing control and 'admitting to your own faults and giv[ing] control away, yet restor[ing] your own integrity through admitting your faults' and addressing unethical behaviour.

Integrity co-constructed within systems

Participant 4 and Participant 5 stated that an organisational system is co-constructed by all the stakeholders in that system. As discussed above, integrity becomes a co-creation between you and me, and apparently, we can control what happens within the system. This relates to questions raised by Participant 2, namely:

> 'Who manages integrity? Is it the system or the self, and does it happen through monitoring or [*by assuming*] … self-responsibility?' (Participant 2, female, black person)

Participant 2 and Participant 4 suggested that integrity was managed by the self, while Participant 1 referred to it as:

> '… having conversations with oneself towards increased self-awareness, as well as [*having*] an awareness of all the others around us'. (Participant 1, female, white person)

Participant 7 concurred, stating:

> 'We *are* the system so we allow what happens.' (Participant 7, male, white person).

In view of this, Participant 1 highlighted the importance of continuously re-evaluating yourself, in order to increase your own self-awareness with the aim of better understanding your responsibility towards the leader, the system and the organisation.

Working hypothesis: Seemingly, the meaning of integrity is dynamic and co-constructed in an apparent dance between me, you and us, during which your integrity is defined by me, and my integrity is defined by you, and our integrity is defined by you and/or me.

Implications for the use of the framework: Senior and middle managers should not underestimate that the dynamic meaning of integrity is influenced by relationships among stakeholders and contextual factors, that is, the corporate context and wider community. Stakeholders can negatively influence the meaning of integrity by advancing a shadowy, individual definition at the expense of a shared understanding of integrity. However, psychology practitioners can facilitate the co-construction of the concept of integrity by creating an environment that is conducive to the development of leadership integrity. It is important to remember that the psychologist practitioner is a stakeholder and an active agent in the co-construction of integrity. Thus, in the dance of co-constructing integrity, senior and middle

management, as well as psychology practitioners, have a dual role of being both influencers of others' integrity and co-creators of an environment advancing a negotiated and common understanding of the concept.

A wish to oversimplify integrity: Ensuring certainty and reducing complexity

Through this theme, it appears that individuals tend to oversimplify the meaning of integrity by:

> '… knowing …' (Participant 3, male, white person).

… who does and who does not have this attribute, thus rationalising their own and others' behaviour.

This tendency to rationalise reveals how we deal with varying shades of behaviour that reflects integrity daily, challenging our desire to simplify the construct. As noted earlier, Participant 2 pointed out – as an example of the dissonance inherent in our situational perceptions of integrity – that at home you may not use the phone without permission, while at work you would. Participant 4 discussed our understanding of the various shades of sin, for example:

> '… stealing R1 versus killing someone.' (Participant 4, male, black person)

Seemingly, individuals attempt to remove the grey areas from their perception of behaviour that shows integrity and endeavour to construct meanings that create greater certainty about what is good or bad, right or wrong.

Working hypothesis: an apparent wish to oversimplify integrity reduces the complexity of the co-constructed meaning of the concept of integrity and is an attempt to create greater certainty about what integrity means in our relationships and in dynamic organisational contexts.

Implications for the use of the framework: when the meaning of integrity is oversimplified, a misleading and psychologically unsafe work environment could be created, where the complexity of integrity is not clearly understood or dealt with, possibly affecting the relationship between all stakeholders negatively. Additionally, oversimplifying the meaning of integrity will have a negative effect on efforts in the organisation to develop and augment stakeholders' understanding of this construct. This, in turn, will hinder psychology practitioners' ability to develop and promote an organisational culture that is conducive to fostering behaviour which is marked by integrity. It is imperative that psychology practitioners understand and work with the complexity of the co-constructed meaning of integrity. The integrity framework proposed in this study can be used to guide psychology practitioners in this task.

The shadowy side of integrity

Although this theme overlaps with 'the dance of integrity', the focus here is not on the co-construction of integrity, but on how the concept of integrity is used as a tool to gain control over others in our relationships, organisations and communities. It seems that individuals try to control others not only by manipulating the meaning they ascribe to integrity but also by engaging in destructive subconscious processes.

Judgement

Participant 5 stated that:

> '… integrity is not what is wrong or what is right, but integrity is context-bound. We use our judgement as an evaluation of what it means to behave with integrity'. (Participant 5, female, black person),

Participant 3 suggested that:

> '… integrity is in the eye of [*the*] beholders.' (Participant 3, male, white person).

While Participant 6 specified that:

> '... integrity is used to attack/judge/control [*the other*]' (Participant 6, male, black person).
>
> 'By judging others' amount of integrity, we seem to attribute to, or project bad behaviour onto, others' (Participant 3, male, white person).

Participant 4 highlighted that:

> '… projection [*is*] (judgemental).' (Participant 4, male, black person)

Simultaneously, one may:

> '… presume [*that*] I am never guilty, thus idealising the self as having integrity.' (Participant 1, female, white person).

In the dynamic of idealising oneself, it appears that others are judged and, consequently, denigrated as behaving without integrity.

The inclination to judge others as showing a lack of integrity raises further questions about who drives our awareness of our own integrity, that of others and that of the system, and who then is responsible for monitoring our behaviour, and that of others or of a system. Perhaps the formal processes driving our awareness of integrity and our monitoring of it are affected by our tendency to judge ourselves as behaving with integrity and others as behaving without it.

Integrity as power play – Gaining control over others

In the co-construction of integrity, a certain level of power play may enter the picture. Participant 7 questioned:

> 'Who [*really*] is in the position to define integrity in the organisation?' (Participant 7, male, white person)

Participant 4 stated that:

> '… in the patient–doctor relationship, for example, the patient is dependent on the subjective diagnosis of the doctor.' (Participant 4, male, black person).

Therefore, in particular situations, the construction of integrity appears to be one-sided and not representative of a shared understanding.

In other words:

> '... the doctor decides [*what integrity is*], and the patient could be at the mercy of the doctor' (Participant 4, male, black person).

Participant 6 commented that:

> '... all comrades are equal, but some comrades are more equal than others.' (Participant 6, male, black person)

This suggests that, on any (level) playing field, some individuals have more power than others, resulting in a struggle to influence the meaning we attribute to integrity. These metaphors about the co-construction of integrity seem to be hierarchical because depending on the prevailing situation, one person might be dominant and the other subordinate. In relationships where people have marked differences and distance in power, the co-construction of integrity could result from a power play influencing who has the power to dictate the meaning of integrity in a particular situation, regardless of an individual's range of moral values and principles. Consequently, a power play among stakeholders could cause dominant voices to dictate the nature of the combined set of values and principles, possibly having an impact on an individual's existing range of moral values.

Integrity as a defence of the self and an attack on the other

When an individual judges another as not behaving with integrity, a shadowy aspect of integrity could be at play. We tend to preserve our sense of what constitutes integrity in our behaviour, while attacking others by labelling their behaviour as lacking such integrity. It seems that people want to see themselves, and to be seen, as behaving with integrity. To preserve our self-image in this regard, we may tend to project onto others a sense of being or behaving without integrity. This tendency was highlighted by Participant 3:

> 'What do I project onto the different aspect of not me (the other), creating all kinds of processing to dump non-integrity [*onto the other*].' (Participant 3, male, white person).

The other participants agreed, noting that in other words:

> '[*I*] then … own the good and project the bad.' (Participant 3, male, white person).

Linked to the 'projected lack of integrity' being displayed within the organisational context, Participant 7 suggested that projecting onto others the label of 'behaving without integrity' is evident in situations where employees wish to 'exonerate themselves from unethical behaviour', maintaining that they behave with integrity (i.e. they are good, others are bad). Participant 7 added:

> 'Perhaps the issue is that [*in my view, I am*] the organisation, [*and therefore I create the organisation and determine the meaning of*] integrity [*in my interaction with others*].' (Participant 7, male, white person)

To move beyond using integrity as a means to *attack* the other (i.e. the other is bad, the self is good), individuals should come to terms with their own potential to behave either with or without integrity. Accordingly, Participant 3 stated that:

> '… [*individuals*] have to keep the complex other [*and self*] in mind.' (Participant 3, male, white person).

Thus:

> '… the integration of the good and the bad within oneself is required, not only [*by*] attributing good behaviour [*to*] oneself (i.e., behaviour that shows integrity), but [*by*] realising that one is also capable of behaving without integrity.' (Participant 1, female, white person)

Working hypothesis: It seems that integrity can be used as a defence against your own shadowy side, in an attempt to remain 'the better one', based on your own and others' expectations of what constitutes behaviour that shows integrity. Simultaneously, integrity can be used as an attack on the other through projection, that is, by idealising the self (being seen to behave with integrity) and by denigrating the other (being seen as lacking integrity).

Implications for the use of the framework: Senior managers can use their position of power to define integrity in the organisation, thereby influencing the integrity of middle managers. Yet, because integrity is managed by the self, the middle manager (or others) can manage the influence a senior manager has on their integrity by managing their own integrity. To ensure the effective implementation of the framework, senior and middle managers and psychology practitioners should be aware of the negative elements of biased judgement, the existence of power plays and the possible projective processes which may influence their attempts to develop and enhance integrity.

Psychological contract

The final theme that emerged from this study is based on the notion of a psychological contract. Such psychological contracts are formed within a specific context pertaining to the expectations of the various stakeholders involved. Also, this type of contract is constructed through multiple comparisons that define, describe and create the rules underlying behaviour which shows integrity.

Multiple comparisons within specific contexts and expectations

Participant 1 stated that integrity is context-specific and not static and is therefore constantly evolving. '[Based on the prevailing context] our expectations determine how we act with integrity' (Participant 1, female, white person). In line with this, Participant 5 suggested that 'integrity can be psychologically contracted'. Thus, the integrity of a psychological contract is ensured when the respective expectations of all stakeholders are optimised and when all involved are prepared to contribute whatever is needed. Participant 3 concluded that:

> '… the result of such a contract is ethical conduct.' (Participant 3, male, white person).

According to Participant 4, observing the end result of such a contract as contributing to ethical conduct appears to be an effective way to shade integrity, which would simplify its ultimate acceptance as a law or a norm. Thus, the psychological contract becomes the 'platform on which people behave either explicitly or implicitly' (Participant 7, male, white person). Implicit behaviour is inherent in our mental perceptions of integrity, and explicit behaviour is manifested in behaviour (or actions) that speaks of integrity. Therefore, as stated by Participant 7:

> '… [*integrity*] becomes the consequence of our decisions'. (Participant 7, male, white person)

Participants 2, 4 and 5 were of the opinion that integrity could therefore be viewed as comprising various sets of dyadic relationships (e.g. right versus wrong, explicit versus implicit, law versus expectation).

Working hypothesis: Depending on the specific context and the expectations underpinning the psychological contract, there will always be different interpretations of the concept of integrity. Accordingly, integrity seems to be all about the multiple comparisons used to resolve conflict, relative to what is good and what is bad.

Implication of theme and working hypothesis in the use of the framework: By integrating the framework early on in the process of formulating a psychological contract, and by identifying the specific contexts within which personal interactions will take place in the organisation, senior managers can positively influence middle managers' experiences of integrity. This framework will also enable psychology practitioners to assist stakeholders in developing their personal psychological contracts and to resolve conflicts relative to their understanding of, and behaviour in terms of, integrity.

Discussion

Outline of results

The psychology practitioners' insights into senior managers' ability to develop middle manager integrity is illustrated in Figure 2 and will now be discussed in more detail.

Generally, the psychology practitioners – given their role experience – thought the framework was a true reflection of how senior management would potentially have an impact on middle managers' experiences of integrity. They believed the framework could add value to an organisation, if applied effectively. However, during the listening post, the psychology practitioners expanded on:

- the definition of integrity,
- the social component of integrity, and
- the purpose of maintaining integrity in organisations.

Several recommendations were made for expanding the framework.

As noted earlier, the co-construction of integrity can be seen as a dance between the self, others and the organisation. Therefore, in any organisation, integrity is co-constructed by individuals, groups and executive leaders (Erakovich & Kolthoff, 2016; Van Niekerk & May, 2012). An aspect that is perhaps ignored in our general understanding of integrity is the impact which societal and organisational culture have on stakeholders' experience of what constitutes behaviour that is marked by integrity.

The dance of co-constructing integrity has various consequences and different outcomes. These are often ignored in the process of developing or defining behaviour that shows integrity. Firstly, we tend to ignore our inherent desire to oversimplify our understanding of integrity and how it operates within organisations. Secondly, the shadowy side of integrity is frequently ignored to enable us to maintain the fallacy that we always intend our actions to be good and virtuous (Cox, La Caze, & Levine, 2018). Lastly, this is further impacted by our inability to integrate different and diverse expectations into our complex understanding of behaviour that is marked by integrity.

In the relationships between stakeholders (both internal and external to the organisation) we create, co-create, negate, undermine and maintain our own behaviour (Lamos & Ivtzan, 2016) which we deem to show integrity. We should not underestimate the impact which society, communities and the organisational culture have on our personal perception of integrity (Van Niekerk & May, 2012). In the ongoing process of constructing the meaning of integrity, the dance involves the confluence of all the divergent stakeholder perceptions, as well as of the great variety of different contexts that influence the dynamic nature of integrity.

Practical implications

The culture of a society, community and organisation, along with other factors, comprise the landscape in which we develop integrity (Waddock, Bodwell, & Leigh, 2017). We should not be overwhelmed by this landscape, but should be aware of it and the effect it can have on our attempts to develop behaviour that shows integrity – particularly with reference to the relationship between senior and middle managers. It is also important to realise that it is not only senior managers who have an impact on middle managers' experience of integrity: the reverse is also true. Furthermore, the confluence of the range of moral values held by middle managers with those of senior managers is vital in constructing a work environment marked by integrity (Erakovich & Kolthoff, 2016).

For organisations to utilise this framework effectively, the organisational strategy, vision and mission should be integrated with the framework prior to implementation or when reviewed. In doing so, organisations can influence behaviour positively, so that it testifies to integrity. This study has accentuated the vital role organisations play in creating and establishing an ethical work climate. Establishing corporate integrity will enable organisations to provide value not only to their corporate stakeholders but also to society at large.

Limitations and recommendations

Although this study aimed to obtain insights from psychology practitioners about the potential application and added value of this framework, it can be viewed as a potential limitation because the insights of middle and senior managers were excluded. Therefore, it is proposed that this study be expanded to obtain the insights of middle and senior managers. The responsibility for creating a sustainable environment in which ethical business practices are upheld rests on the shoulders of all managers. Therefore, obtaining their views on the potential application, and the value this integrity framework may add to their organisations, is imperative.

The importance of exploring managers' insights emphasises the need for researchers to further investigate how diversities such as positional level, cultural groups and the different nature of organisations or industries can enhance our understanding of the dynamic nature of integrity. However, it is the researcher's recommendation that in such a study a sample be selected which is representative of the composition of the workforce and all race groups.

A recommendation for managers at all levels within the organisation, as well as for the psychology practitioners (i.e. human resources practitioners, industrial and organisational psychologists and organisational consultants) responsible for enhancing human capacity and capability, would be to become more mindful of the dynamic nature of integrity. The heightened awareness of the dynamic nature of integrity will help them better understand what impact their relationship with others has on people's experience of integrity. This will lead to a clear differentiation between role players acting with integrity and those who lack integrity. Being more mindful of what constitutes integrity will allow all role players to join in a dance aimed at co-constructing and achieving behaviour that is marked by integrity.

A further recommendation would be for organisations to customise this framework according to their specific needs and in line with the organisation's strategy, vision and mission. That will assist in creating and establishing an ethical work climate which fosters corporate integrity.

Conclusion

In this study, seven psychology practitioners explored their own perceptions of integrity, in order to construct an understanding of the constituent elements of this concept. Doing so has enabled the authors to draw valid conclusions with regard to the value of the proposed integrity framework, for use in organisations. In essence, these psychology practitioners had to replicate the process typically experienced by middle managers. Those managers would need to first explore their own understanding of integrity, before being able to understand how senior management may affect that experience. Similarly, the psychology practitioners participating in this study had to first understand their own perceptions of integrity, before being able to confirm the potential value of an integrity framework for use in organisations.

The similarities inherent in the two processes serve to validate the primary notion derived from the study and incorporate this into the integrity framework, again emphasising the point of this integrity framework, which is that integrity is co-constructed.

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Competing interests

The authors wish to declare that they have no competing interests that may have inappropriately influenced them while conducting the research and writing this article.

Authors' contribution

A.V.N. and M.S.M. were equally responsible for planning this research project, as well as collecting and analysing the data, and interpreting and writing up the findings.

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