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Ethical Probity in Public Service

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Synonyms

[Ethics](#); [Integrity](#); [Integrity management](#); [Integrity violations](#)

Introduction

The car industry, sports associations, and financial institutions are just a few examples of sectors that recently have been discredited by serious ethical transgressions. The impact is enormous. In addition to economical damage, such integrity violations often hinder fair competition, can lead to environmental and public health risks, and deeply affect the personal lives and well-being of citizens. This also applies to the public sector where such improbities unfortunately occur as well.

Although public sector organizations pay more and more attention to ethics and integrity nowadays, ethical probity has always been important to the public sector. As the fourteenth century frescoes of “Good and Bad Government” (Meoni 2005) demonstrate, the concern for ethical

probity and, more precisely, public integrity has a much longer tradition. These frescos in Siena’s Palazzo Pubblico (its former city hall) were intended to remind public office holders to act with integrity. The wall paintings served as an early code of conduct, based on Aristotelian virtues like courage, justice, prudence, and temperance, and provided ethical guidance to the city’s governors and administrators. The tantalizing images illustrate that good (ethical) governance leads to a well-maintained, safe, and prosperous city, whereas bad (unethical) governance results in poverty, injustice, and ultimately total chaos. Indeed, public integrity is as old as government itself (Bowman and Williams 1997).

This entry provides an overview of the key elements of ethical probity in the public sector: what is it, where does it go wrong, and how can it be managed? To this end, the first section describes the general importance of public integrity. The concept of public integrity is explored and defined more in detail in the second section. To give more substance to the concept of public integrity, typical integrity violations and their effects are reflected upon in section three, followed by a discussion of their underlying causes (section four). The fifth and final section centers on integrity management. More specifically, an extended integrity management approach, which distinguishes between hard, soft, and general instruments, is presented. This trichotomy is both more practical and precise than the traditional compliance-integrity classification

(Paine 1994), which tends to neglect the organizational and institutional aspect of integrity management.

The Importance of Public Integrity

The importance of integrity is generally formulated in terms of the reinforcement of the constitutional state (Cowell et al. 2011), the enhancement of public trust (Lewis and Gilman 2005), and the improvement of economic growth, social stability, and quality service delivery (Bossaert and Demmke 2005) and as the cornerstone of good governance (Huberts et al. 2008). Table 1 summarizes some arguments frequently used in the literature. As the table indicates, one can distinguish between (external) societal and (internal) organizational arguments for fostering public integrity. While societal arguments tend to be primarily normative in nature, organizational arguments are generally supported by empirical research as well. Moreover, arguments on the importance of public integrity are often framed both as satisfiers and as dissatisfiers (Kaptein 2005). Hence, the value of public integrity lies not merely in its positive effect on behavior and performance but also in the negative effects that a lack of public integrity implies.

Integrity and Ethics: Definitions

More than a century ago, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche argued that integrity is a recent virtue: it is not yet mature, is often misunderstood, and is something in the becoming (Wurzer 1975). To this day, however, integrity remains a term that is not yet fixated and lacks a broadly accepted meaning. The inherently dynamic nature of the concept means it is highly sensitive to changes over time, situation, and place, which contributes to its complexity. Thus, while integrity is a strongly upcoming theme in public administration research (Menzel 2015) and notwithstanding the many efforts to bring together different views, integrity remains an essentially contested concept (cf. De Graaf 2003).

Ethical Probity in Public Service, Table 1 External and internal arguments for ethics and integrity

Societal arguments	Organizational arguments
The government is extremely powerful, is authorized to use violence, and holds a monopoly on, for instance, issuing passports, subsidies, benefits, permits, and licenses. This creates a lot of dependency	An unethical organizational culture leads to feelings of fear, uncertainty, and psychological insecurity. Employees are aggravated by unethical behavior of their coworkers
The government is funded by taxes. Taxpayers have the right that their money is spend on behalf of the general interest, instead of on the private interests of government officials	Organizational integrity contributes to employees' general well-being, work satisfaction, work motivation, organizational trust, and commitment; it leads to better work relations and performance and to more prosocial employee attitudes and reduces work stress, emotional exhaustion, and sick leave
To be able to function effectively and efficiently, the government requires legitimacy. Ethics and integrity are a prerequisite for attaining and maintaining public support	Organizations with a good reputation and which are known for their high ethical standards are more attractive. For such organizations it is easier to employ high-quality personnel
The government has to lead by example if it wants the citizens to abide to the law and public morale. Ethical role modeling is thus of utmost importance	Integrity violations cost a lot of money, damage the organizational reputation, and hamper the due functioning and service delivery of the organization

To further complicate matters, the terms ethics and integrity are often used as synonyms. Some conceptual clarity is needed, however. According to Huberts (2014), integrity refers to acting in accordance with relevant moral values and norms. The adjective "moral" is important here since it underlines that integrity pertains to values and norms that are strongly vested in, and connected with, shared societal opinions and judgments about what is considered right and wrong. Integrity is thus about doing the right thing, in the right way (Heywood and Rose

2015), within a specific context. More specifically, whether someone can be said to have acted with integrity is judged not only in relation to the organization's own moral norms and values but also to the collection of norms and values held by its primary and secondary stakeholders, e.g., citizens, the various (private) organizations affected by public policy, and, ultimately, the (international) society at large (cf. Six et al. 2007). It follows that integrity is a dynamic construct, for which the moral standards may vary over time and even per public organization (Hunter 2012) as standards are defined by varying sets of primary and secondary stakeholders.

Ethics on the other hand is a much broader concept and often refers to the policy content and outcomes, which is much more related to moral-political choices. Typical examples of policy ethics include whether a country should go to war, whether drugs should be legalized, how we feel about euthanasia, medical care, nuclear energy, biodiversity, and similar strong issues. Nevertheless, in both public and business administration literature, ethics is often used as a synonym for integrity. But as long as the context is clear and we are able to understand whether we are concerned with (internal) organizational processes, procedures, policies and behavior (integrity), or the broader moral-political issues (ethics), this is not particularly problematic. Following this line of reasoning, and in line with common practice in this field of research, the concepts integrity and ethics are thus used interchangeably throughout this paper.

Ethical Improbity: Examples and Effects

To give more substance to the concept of integrity, it helps to give some examples of integrity violations that actually occur in the public sector and of the effects such violations may incur. Without having the ambition to be exhaustive nor to describe the whole possible array of integrity violations in detail, a rough distinction can be made between material and social integrity violations.

Material integrity violations involve financial or other benefits for private gain, such as

corruption, fraud, theft of company resources, accepting gifts, the misuse of information, and conflicts of interest. Social integrity violations on the other hand are linked to all kinds of inappropriate work floor behavior. This refers to unethical conduct between colleagues, between management and their employees, and between civil servants and citizens. Examples include discrimination, intimidation, sexual harassment, bullying, and the misuse of power but also the misconduct of civil servants in private time which compromises their formal position and the reputation of their organization.

Integrity violations are closely related to other forms of employee deviance, rule breaking, and counterproductive behavior (Lasthuizen et al. 2011). As such, the boundaries between unprofessional behavior and integrity violations often remain unclear in practice. Moreover, within the public sector especially, there are signs of increasing *integritism*: integrity judgments are made without sufficient grounding, either because the norms and values in question are exaggerated and not of fundamental moral importance or because judgments about aspects of behavior are generalized to persons or organizations as a whole (Huberts 2014).

As noted above, integrity violations have important negative effects on both the internal and the external organization. More specifically, four characteristic consequences of integrity violations can be distinguished: snowballing, contamination, revelation, and radiation (see Table 2). These effects illustrate that integrity violations, even the smallest ones, should be taken seriously and call for immediate action.

Drivers for Ethical Improbity

In recent years, public scrutiny seems to have intensified and “watchdogs” like the media, NGOs, courts of audit, scholars, and citizens certainly have become more focused on the misuse of public resources and power. It could even be argued that integrity programs and training – that to some extent have been implemented within most public organizations – have made

Ethical Probity in Public Service, Table 2 Four effects of integrity violations (Adapted from Niessen 2004)

Effects	Description
<i>Snowballing</i>	Small incidents of unethical behavior tend to grow out to bigger ones. Not addressing unethical behavior in time, and turning a blind eye, signals out that it is okay. This enhances the risk that trespassers will engage more frequently, and on a larger scale, in integrity violations
<i>Contamination</i>	Unethical behavior of an employee tends to infect other colleagues. Violations that are ignored, or not dealt with properly by the organization, could be interpreted as being acceptable. This enhances the risk that others in the organization feel justified or encouraged to do the same
<i>Revelation</i>	Transparency is an important public sector value. Civil servants operate in a fishbowl, constantly watched from all directions and examined under the magnifying glass. Integrity violations are thus likely to be discovered and revealed by the media, often leading to public outrage and diminishing public trust
<i>Radiation</i>	Unethical behavior within a certain part of the civil service is damaging for the reputation of the entire civil service. Citizens and the media generally do not make a distinction between the different parts of public administration. Hence, integrity violations are attributed to the whole public system and thereby undermine its credibility

management and employees more aware and sensitive about possible wrongdoing, leading to more internal reporting and investigations. This makes it difficult to determine whether there are more integrity violations than before or whether they are merely uncovered more often, a phenomenon that Huberts (2014) also refers to as the “integrity paradox.”

Whether it is merely increased sensitivity or an actual increase in violations, every integrity

violation is one too many since public trust is at stake. Understanding the causes of integrity violations is thus crucial: it makes us more aware of integrity risks, and it enables us to redress them. Among the causes are many “likely suspects.” Often mentioned causes at the individual level are, for instance, having financial problems, addictions, and wrong friends. In addition, susceptibility for social and material standing, group pressure, and the lack of self-confidence are mentioned in psychological assessments as possible predictors for unethical behavior, as are high scores on character traits like pride, greed, and vanity.

However, many integrity violations are committed not by employees who were initially planning to act unethically (“bad apples”) but rather by employees who were infected (contaminated) by an “unhealthy” organization (“bad barrel”). Unrealistic targets, unethical leadership, unclear or contradictory rules, failing internal procedures and control systems, group pressure, too much autonomy, underpayment, and too many seductions are frequently mentioned as drivers for unethical behavior (Kaptein 1998). Similarly, the ethical climate in the organization and the extent to which ethics codes are in place and enforced help to create a social environment in which individuals are more or less likely to engage in ethical behavior (Kish-Gephart et al. 2010). To quote the French writer Victor Hugo (1862): “If the soul is left in darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but the one who causes the darkness.” Hence, in case of integrity violations, it is not enough just to detect and remove the “bad apple”: attention should also be paid to flaws in the organizational structure and culture that infect the “apples.”

Likewise, societal developments and trends at the macro level also interact with causes at the meso- and microlevel to produce unethical outcomes. To illustrate, the recent financial crisis has led to austerity measures and budget cuts across the public sector. Growing job insecurity (postponed promotions, not-extended contracts, layoffs) raises stress, frustration, and feelings of unfairness on the work floor. This is a source for vindictiveness against the employer (Hoekstra

2016). It makes employees more likely to flirt with impropriety and can thus result in the abuse of company assets, theft, and other integrity violations (Treviño and Nelson 2004). At the same time, organizational changes such as restructuring and budget cuts negatively affect the time, resources, and attention organizations (can) spend on ethics programs (Treviño and Weaver 2003). Combined, both trends (higher risks and less resources for ethics and integrity management) provide the ingredients of a rather poisonous cocktail.

To conclude, then, unethical behavior is seldom explained by one or two dominant causes (Kish-Gephart et al. 2010). Instead, integrity violations are the result of a complex array of interacting and often mutually reinforcing factors across individual, organizational, and societal levels.

Safeguarding Ethical Probity

Given the complex, multi-determined nature of integrity violations, there is no *one size fits all* solution to safeguarding ethical probity. Most academic research, however, focuses on remedies and policies at the organizational level. These, after all, are within the direct control of the organization and are therefore considered the most viable and realistic measures for public managers to implement. Moreover, they address the organizational obligation to be a good employer: given their direct influence on the moral behavior of employees, organizations have an implied responsibility for supporting their employees and protecting them from “un-ethicalities” through the implementation of comprehensive integrity policies.

To manage the complexity of organizational integrity, a wide range of initiatives and instruments is needed. Most studies, in both public and business administration, refer to the seminal work of Paine (1994), in which she distinguishes between two types of strategies. The “compliance” strategy is a strongly rules-based and top-down approach intended to prevent noncompliant behavior. The “integrity” strategy

is a values-based and bottom-up approach intended to increase the moral competence of employees. Instead of preventing wrongdoing, the second strategy aims to support employees in making the “right” decisions. Depending on the specific situation of an organization, a combination of both strategies is generally considered to be the most effective way (Lawton et al. 2013).

The abstract, conceptual distinction between these two strategies is problematic, however, for three reasons. First, the term “integrity” strategy is confusing in itself since both strategies can (and should) be used to foster integrity. Secondly, instruments can belong to both strategies. Training sessions belong, for instance, to the compliance strategy, when they are focused on educating and communicating integrity rules, but when they are aimed at raising moral awareness and competence, then they match with the integrity strategy. The same applies to the code of conduct. When it is essentially rule-driven and centrally imposed, it should be labeled as a compliance instrument, but when it is value-driven and the result of a company-wide (bottom-up) approach, then it seems to fit the integrity approach. Third, features that pertain to the institutional aspects of integrity management have an unclear position within this dichotomy. Most scholars (seemingly intuitively) attribute these aspects to the compliance approach. Yet setting up ethics structures and procedures and conducting risk analysis but also formalizing, monitoring, evaluating, and adjusting policies are fundamental requirements for the success of both the compliance and the integrity strategy. For instance, efforts to improve the ethical climate of an organization (integrity strategy) should also be designed, documented, planned, and monitored and require a coordinating role for an integrity officer.

For reasons of clarity and to do more justice to the foundational role of the institutional aspects of integrity management, a trichotomy seems more accurate and practical. Following Paanakker and Heres (2015), a division between the “hardware” and “software” of integrity management is proposed. In line with their used computer metaphor, and to emphasize the overall importance of the institutional dimension for both the hard- and the

Ethical Probity in Public Service, Table 3 Dimensions of an organizational integrity approach

Integrity management	
Software	This dimension concerns measures aimed at positively influencing the ethical culture within the organization through employees' internalization of (public) values. Ideally, the measures aim at creating a culture marked by openness, safety, mutual respect, and trust. Managers play a particularly important role in this. Examples of the "software" include introductory courses, ethical leadership, dilemma training courses, and the oath of office
Hardware	This dimension concerns the supervision, control, and enforcement of rules, procedures, and guidelines needed to support and reinforce the ethical culture of the organization. Finance, legal, audit, and HR departments play an important role in this. Examples of the "hardware" include procedures for procurement, contracting, and side jobs, as well as reporting and investigation procedures
Operating system	This dimension concerns measures intended to institutionalize and sustainably embed integrity policies in a systemic manner. To this end, a clear and shared vision is formulated that connects software and hardware measures and ensures their internal consistency and reinforcement. Integrity or compliance officers play an important role in organizing and coordinating integrity within organizations. Examples of the "operating system" include monitoring the number and nature of integrity violations, evaluation of policies, and risk analyses

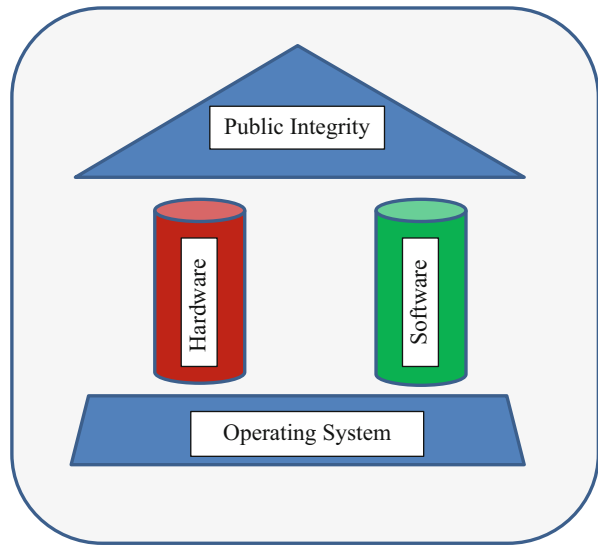
software, the "operating system" could be added as the third dimension of an integrity approach (Hoekstra et al. 2016). Table 3 describes the resulting trichotomy of integrity management.

The trichotomy of integrity management highlights the different dimensions of an integrity management approach. The first two entail content-related elements and instruments, whereas the third one is of a more procedural nature that pinpoints the organizational (systemic) efforts focused on the institutionalization of integrity. It refers to the process of advancing its sustainability, since care for integrity should be a continuous effort rather than an incidental action. Inspired by Transparency International's Greek temple as a metaphor for the constituting parts of a National Integrity System, the three dimensions are visualized in Fig. 1.

Conclusion

Ethical probity is a necessary requirement for public sector organizations. In most literature the term integrity is used as a hallmark for ethical probity. Integrity is, however, an essentially contested concept since it is time, place, and context dependent. Integrity is also a very broad concept, considering the wide array of integrity violations. Such violations have serious consequences for government agencies and should be addressed adequately. It is more effective, however, to take preventative actions to avoid integrity violations and to guide public officials how they can do "the right thing." Recognizing that "one size fits all solutions" and blue prints do not exist; this article described some agreed-upon approaches how organizational integrity can be managed and how ethical probity can be fostered. Moreover, it argues that it is time to expand the existing compliance-integrity dichotomy and to include the procedural, institutional aspects of integrity management more explicitly. This organizational dimension, dubbed as the operating system, should be acknowledged more specifically. It provides a sustainable, systematic basis

Ethical Probity in Public Service, Fig. 1 Model for upholding public integrity



for ethical probity that unites the integrity hard- and software.

Cross-References

► [Ethics and Integrity](#)

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