Brief report

Social dimensions of judgments of integrity in public figures

Paul Sparks* and Tom Farsides
University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

The notion of ‘integrity’ remains relatively unexplored in the social psychological literature, despite it being central to some important theoretical perspectives (notably, self-affirmation theory). It is an eminently positive – and well-used – epithet in descriptions of public figures. The two studies reported here addressed laypeople’s conceptions of integrity. The findings indicate that in relation to eight public figures, the best general predictor of judgments of integrity was perceptions of ‘sincerity’ (characterized by attributes such as genuine and honest). For three of the public figures strongly linked to civil rights issues, judgments of integrity were also predicted by perceptions of ‘standing for something’. The findings suggest that the social character of integrity merits further psychological research attention.

Dimensions of integrity

Within social psychology, the importance to people of a sense of their own integrity is a discernable feature of Aronson’s ‘self concept notion of dissonance’ (Aronson, 1992, 1999) and is pivotal to Steele’s self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988). Interestingly, even within the latter approach, the notion of integrity remains largely unelaborated, although one characterization is cited frequently: ‘self-conceptions and images – as adaptively and morally adequate, that is, as competent, good, coherent, unitary, stable, capable of free choice, capable of controlling important outcomes, and so on’ (Steele, 1988, p. 262). Similarly, within the political psychology literature, the concept of integrity tends not to be examined in any depth, although it is seen as important in both people’s evaluations of political figures and in their voting behaviour (e.g., Domke, Shah, & Wackman, 2000; Newman, 2003; Pancer, Brown, & Barr, 1999).

One needs to turn to the philosophical literature to find any kind of detailed discussion of the notion of integrity. Philp’s (1999) suggestion that ‘A minimum, approximate definition of integrity is the capacity to stick to one’s fundamental commitments or principles in the face of other pressures’ (p. 22) might elicit widespread approval.

*Correspondence should be addressed to Dr Paul Sparks, School of Psychology, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9QH, UK (e-mail: p.sparks@sussex.ac.uk).

DOI:10.1348/014466610X520140
However, we can also find a series of carefully argued positions relating integrity not only to some sense of people ‘standing for something’ (Calhoun, 1995), in the way suggested by Philp, but also, for example, to an ‘integrated self’ (Calhoun, 1995) as sense of coherence, ‘the integration of “parts” of oneself – desires, evaluations, commitments – into a whole’ (p. 235). Clearly, one kind of coherence, a consistency between ‘principle and action’ (McFall, 1992, p. 81) will be both congruent with Philp’s definition and a familiar theme within the rich tradition of social psychological research into dissonance processes. One recent philosophical perspective on integrity that might be of particular interest to social psychologists is the view of Calhoun (1995) that some of the above interpretations of integrity are insufficient, since integrity is best thought of, not simply as a ‘personal virtue’ (involving, for example, coherence and consistency), but as a ‘social virtue’ (involving ‘the proper relation to others’ [p. 252]). Calhoun’s account of integrity is complex (cf. Cox, La Caze, & Levine, 2008) but the core idea that integrity involves more out-and-out social dimensions than might be expected from a focus on internal consistency (or coherence) might prove to be useful to social psychologists.

Given the importance of integrity to the social psychological positions mentioned above, we thought it useful to initiate some investigation of the ways in which laypeople think about integrity and to the extent that these views map on to the kinds of positions alluded to above. To this end, we report two studies which sought to identify (i) who a group of participants thought of as public figures possessing integrity and (ii) what kinds of attributes warrant such ascriptions of integrity. Both the reported studies are essentially exploratory pieces of research guided by a wish to better understand people’s attributions of integrity, to assess whether elicited dimensions of integrity might have some predictive impact on people’s general judgments of integrity, and to investigate the idea that there are important social dimensions to the ways in which people think about integrity.

**STUDY 1**

**Method**

**Participants**

One hundred and ten undergraduate psychology students (predominantly female) took part in return for research participation credit.

**Materials**

The short questionnaire contained the following simple instructions:

This short questionnaire is about the notion of *integrity* and how people use this term. *Integrity* is used in different ways by different people. Even philosophers who spend a lot of time considering this issue use the term in quite different ways! We are interested in the ways in which YOU use this term.

First, we would like you to indicate three people who you think of as people who have *integrity* (these may be living or deceased people, people known to you personally, people known to you via the media or some other source – anyone, in fact). Please list the names of three people in the spaces provided below and give an indication of why you think of
these people as having integrity. (If at first you find this difficult to do, please persist. We usually find that people are able to come up with something after a few minutes of trying).

Participants were then provided with three spaces in which to write the name of a person and to explain why they thought of that person as having integrity. They were subsequently asked which of the people they had listed had (in their opinion) the most integrity, why they thought that this person had more integrity than the other two, and what 'other words or phrases come to mind' when they thought of the word integrity.

**Design and procedure**

Questionnaires were distributed in a large lecture theatre, completed by participants and returned to the researcher.

**Results**

All but one of the participants listed three people, resulting in a total of 328 listed names. Although categorizing these names unequivocally is difficult (because of incomplete information), approximately 88 (27%) of the listed people were relations of participants, 122 (37%) were others known to them personally, and 118 (36%) were public figures of one sort or another. Of the 61 different public figures mentioned, 46 were mentioned only once and the most frequent was mentioned 7 times. Eight of these public figures received at least three nominations.

Of the reasons that participants gave for the ascription of integrity to public figures, fourteen were mentioned on at least three occasions: these related to the person being talented, modest, altruistic, respected, courageous, genuine, standing up for what they believe in, intelligent, dedicated, strong, self-sacrificing, fighting for justice, stoical, honest.

**Discussion**

Interesting from this study was the apparent ease with which participants were able to nominate examples of people who possess integrity. It is also noteworthy that there was a fairly even split in people nominated (as having integrity) between public figures, relations, and other people known to the participant. Furthermore (and with Study 2 in mind), there was a useful collection of characteristics that were mentioned several times as the reasons for participants’ ascriptions of integrity to public figures.

**STUDY 2**

**Method**

**Participants**

Sixty-nine psychology students (predominantly female) took part in return for research participation credit.
Materials
Participants were presented with the names of eight public figures who had received at least three nominations in Study 1 (viz. Tony Blair, The Queen, Princess Diana, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, David Attenborough, Mother Theresa, and Mahatma Gandhi). Participants were then asked to rate each public figure on (i) a single-item measure of perceived integrity and (ii) each of the 14 characteristics from Study 1 that had been mentioned in relation to public figures by at least three participants. One order of the public figures and two orders (one being the reverse of the other) of the 14 characteristics were used.

Integrity
Perceived integrity was assessed via a single-item measure: ‘To what extent do you consider each of the following people to have (or to have had) integrity?’ Participants were required to indicate their response on a seven-point scale ranging from ‘not at all’ (1) to ‘to an extremely great extent’ (7).

Characteristics
Participants were then asked to indicate the extent to which each nominated person possessed each of the following characteristics: talented, modest, altruistic, respected, courageous, genuine, to stand up for what they believe in, intelligent, dedicated, strong, self-sacrificing, fight for justice, be stoical (‘i.e., to show [or to have shown] great self-control in adversity’), honest. The response scale in each case was identical to that used for the Integrity measure described above.

Design and procedure
Questionnaires were distributed in a large lecture theatre or were collected from outside the first author’s office, completed and returned to the Department Office. Once the questionnaires had been checked to ensure that all questions had been answered, course credit was allocated.

Results
Mean ratings of integrity for the eight public figures were (in descending order): Mother Theresa ($M = 6.26$), Martin Luther King ($M = 6.20$), Mahatma Gandhi ($M = 6.17$), Nelson Mandela ($M = 6.13$), David Attenborough ($M = 5.03$), Princess Diana ($M = 4.84$), The Queen ($M = 4.16$), and Tony Blair ($M = 3.38$).

A principal components analysis (PCA) (with oblimin rotation) of 13 characteristics for each of the public figures was computed. Each public figure’s integrity rating was then regressed on to the component scores from the PCA.

---

1'Respected’ was excluded from the analyses because it was considered to be a ‘reaction-dependent’ characteristic (cf. Gilbert, 1976), essentially capturing the reactions of others that is, we judged it to be more an indication of how integrity might be inferred rather than a direct characteristic of integrity.
Mother Theresa
A four-component solution explaining 64.6% of the variance was revealed. Component 1 revealed heavy loadings for altruistic (.86); Component 2 revealed heavy loadings for talented (.84) and intelligent (.83); Component 3 revealed heavy loadings for modest (−.78), stoical (−.72), and honest (−.84); Component 4 revealed heavy loadings for courageous (.73) and to stand up for what they believe in (.85). The regression of integrity, $F(4, 68) = 11.22, R^2 = .41, p < .001$, revealed significant predictive effects only for Component 3 ($\beta = −0.57, p < .001$).

Martin Luther King
A four-component solution explaining 67.0% of the variance was revealed. Component 1 revealed heavy loadings for courageous (.89), stand up for what they believe in (.95), and dedicated (.71); Component 2 revealed heavy loadings for modest (.82), and altruistic (.70); Component 3 revealed heavy loadings for talented (.84), and intelligent (.64); Component 4 revealed heavy loadings for honest (.92) and genuine (.69). The regression of integrity, $F(4,68) = 5.85, R^2 = .27, p < .001$, revealed a significant predictive effect for Component 4 ($\beta = 0.40, p = .001$) and a marginally significant effect for Component 1 ($\beta = 0.22, p < .08$).

Mahatma Gandhi
A 3-component solution explaining 67.0% of the variance was revealed. Component 1 revealed heavy loadings for to stand up for what they believe in (.84), strong (.82), self-sacrificing (.87), and stoical (.82); Component 2 revealed heavy loadings for talented (.82) and intelligent (.96); Component 3 revealed heavy loadings for modest (−.88). The regression of integrity, $F(3,68) = 10.45, R^2 = .33, p < .001$, revealed a significant predictive effect for Component 1 ($\beta = 0.57, p < .001$).

Nelson Mandela
A three-component solution explaining 65.6% of the variance was revealed. Component 1 revealed heavy loadings for to stand up for what they believe in (.81), dedicated (.85), strong (.79), and fight for justice (.75); Component 2 revealed heavy loadings for talented (.82) and intelligent (.82); Component 3 revealed heavy loadings for genuine (−.72), stoical (−.79), and honest (−.71). The regression of integrity, $F(3,68) = 16.72, R^2 = .44, p < .001$, revealed significant predictive effects for Component 1 ($\beta = 0.22, p < .05$) and for Component 3 ($\beta = −0.50, p < .001$).

David Attenborough
A 3-component solution explaining 63.0% of the variance was revealed. Component 1 revealed heavy loadings for fight for justice (.82), stoical (.75); Component 2 revealed heavy loadings for genuine (.82) and honest (.79); Component 3 revealed heavy loadings for courageous (.86) and altruistic (.74). The regression of integrity, $F(3,68) = 11.40, R^2 = .35, p < .001$, revealed significant predictive effects only for Component 2 ($\beta = 0.54, p < .001$).
**Princess Diana**

A single-component solution explaining 56.0% of the variance was revealed. Heaviest loadings were for *genuine* (.84), *to stand up for what they believe in* (.84), and *self-sacrificing* (.82). The regression of integrity, $F(1, 68) = 63.47$, $R^2 = .49$, $p < .001$, revealed significant predictive effects for the single component ($\beta = 0.70$, $p < .001$).

**The Queen**

A three-component solution explaining 66.5% of the variance was revealed. Component 1 revealed heavy loadings for *altruistic* (.99), *talented* (.75), and *self-sacrificing* (.75); Component 2 revealed heavy loadings for *genuine* (.90) and *honest* (.87); Component 3 revealed heavy loadings for *stoical* (.96) and *to stand up for what they believe in* (.65). The regression of integrity, $F(3, 68) = 9.30$, $R^2 = .30$, $p < .001$, revealed significant predictive effects for Component 1 ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < .01$) and Component 2 ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < .05$).

**Tony Blair**

A two-component solution explaining 63.9% of the variance was revealed. Component 1 revealed heavy loadings for *altruistic* (.91), *genuine* (.87), *self-sacrificing* (.73), *fight for justice* (.79), and *honest* (.79); Component 2 revealed heavy loadings for *talented* (.69), *intelligent* (.80), and *dedicated* (.74). The regression of integrity, $F(2, 68) = 13.72$, $R^2 = .29$, $p < .001$, revealed significant predictive effects only for Component 1 ($\beta = 0.49$, $p < .001$).

The findings from these individual PCAs show a consistency in the characteristics that enable strong predictions of judgments of integrity. In order to achieve a degree of standardization of measures across analyses, we decided to construct separate measures of *Sincerity*, *Standing for Something*, and *Ability* based on the mean scores of characteristics that typically loaded heavily on related components in the individual PCAs reported above. Consequently, a measure of *Sincerity* was constructed from the individual items, *Altruistic*, *Genuine*, *Honest*, *Self-sacrificing*, and *Modest* (alpha varied from .68 to .87 across the eight public figures); a measure of *Standing for Something* was constructed from the individual items, *Dedicated*, *Justice*, *Courage*, *Stoical*, *Strong*, and *Stand up for something* (alpha varied from .63 to .89); a measure of *Ability* was constructed from the individual items, *Talent* and *Intelligent* ($r$ varied from .33 to .67). Basic descriptive statistics are provided in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sincerity M (SD)</th>
<th>Standing for something M (SD)</th>
<th>Ability M (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tony Blair</td>
<td>2.54 (1.03)</td>
<td>3.85 (1.16)</td>
<td>4.48 (1.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princess Diana</td>
<td>4.40 (1.20)</td>
<td>4.84 (1.00)</td>
<td>4.11 (1.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nelson Mandela</td>
<td>5.74 (0.79)</td>
<td>6.49 (0.55)</td>
<td>5.51 (0.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Queen</td>
<td>3.28 (0.98)</td>
<td>3.74 (1.11)</td>
<td>3.80 (1.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Theresa</td>
<td>6.35 (0.60)</td>
<td>6.16 (0.54)</td>
<td>5.04 (1.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Luther King</td>
<td>5.90 (0.70)</td>
<td>6.59 (0.46)</td>
<td>5.91 (0.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Attenborough</td>
<td>4.59 (0.86)</td>
<td>4.32 (0.92)</td>
<td>5.99 (0.89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahatma Gandhi</td>
<td>6.10 (0.62)</td>
<td>6.46 (0.57)</td>
<td>5.80 (0.84)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Study 2: Descriptive statistics for the three dimensions of integrity
Table 2. Study 2: Regressions of judgments of Integrity on each of the three dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother Theresa</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.53***</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Luther King</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.27*</td>
<td>.26†</td>
<td>−.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahatma Gandhi</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.27†</td>
<td>.39*</td>
<td>−.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nelson Mandela</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.33*</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Attenborough</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.36**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princess Diana</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.62***</td>
<td>−.09</td>
<td>.25†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Queen</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.40*</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.34*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Blair</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.55***</td>
<td>−.18</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05; †p < .10.

Regressions of Integrity on each of these three predictor variables yielded the pattern of results shown in Table 2. From this table, it can be seen that the general pattern is for what we have called *Sincerity* to be the strongest (in 5 out of 8 cases) and most frequent (for 7 out of 8 cases) predictor of people’s judgments of Integrity. *Standing for Something* is a strong and significant predictor for three of the people (all of whom were major international figures involved in civil rights issues) who receive the highest overall integrity ratings: Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King. *Ability* was also a strong predictor in three cases (for David Attenborough, The Queen, and Princess Diana).

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

A number of what we might think of as social virtues (since they essentially refer to something positive about the nature of people’s relationship with others) – such as being honest, genuine, altruistic, and self-sacrificing – was mentioned by participants in Study 1 as indicative of integrity for the nominated public figures. Moreover, a composite measure of *sincerity* did a very good job of predicting integrity for most of these public figures in Study 2. However, *standing for something* and *ability* seemed also to be useful predictors of integrity for some of these people. *Standing for something* was clearly a strong predictor for the major international political figures sampled. We would suspect that this latter component would be also construed as a social virtue, given the nature of the civic acts of the public figures who were nominated; however, we did not assess what it was exactly that participants viewed these figures as standing for (although *justice* was one of the characteristics of this component). These findings may be seen to be congruent with many of the findings from the political psychology literature which emphasize the importance of both integrity and competence judgments in the evaluation of political figures (e.g., Pancer et al., 1999), and with some from the social psychological literature (e.g., Schlenker, 2008) which underline the importance of commitment to principles within interpretations of integrity. However, our findings also suggest that a more thoroughgoing social interpretation of ‘integrity’ ascriptions merits closer scrutiny. That is, participants in our study understand important features of our relationships to others (e.g., honesty, altruism, self-sacrifice, genuineness) as constitutive of integrity. This emphasis on a social dimension to integrity is notably central within
especially Calhoun’s work and is apparent to an extent within Schlenker’s (2008) position but is conspicuously absent from most of the social psychological literature. Construing this social dimension as integral to the notion of integrity goes beyond the idea that integrity is causally associated with not only personal benefits but also prosocial actions (Schlenker, 2008).

Obviously, we cannot claim any generalizability for our empirical findings at this stage. For different public figures or for people who are known to participants at a personal level, we might get quite a different pattern of results (for example, it may well be that people judge integrity in people who they know personally in a significantly different way). Furthermore, people may judge integrity in themselves in quite a different way than they judge integrity in others. However, although the sample size here was relatively small, the preponderance of what might be called social virtues in relation to people’s ideas about integrity is interesting, as is their predictive impact on judgments of integrity. We should also note that the pattern of findings from our largely female sample (Study 2) might not be replicated in a more gender-balanced sample (since, for example, a variety of theoretical perspectives might lead one to expect that relationships to others to be more highly valued by females than by males). It is also likely that individual difference variables (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004) and contextual factors (Domke et al., 2000) will impact upon the importance of integrity in people’s judgments.

The findings here would seem to support the idea that there are social dimensions to integrity that are both important within laypeople’s thinking about the concept and largely neglected in interpretations of integrity that focus on e.g., ‘competence’, ‘free choice’, cohesion, or consistency. However, the moral dimensions of integrity that are apparent within both Steele’s and Aronson’s theoretical perspectives, for example, would fit in better with the characterization of integrity hinted at by our research participants. It may be that more attention to the ways in which laypeople interpret integrity would be beneficial for experimental studies (relating, for example, to self-affirmation theory) that rely on the manipulation of integrity perceptions in order to examine their causal effects. This could usefully augment studies directed at comparing the effects of affirming different values that are thought to be important to people’s sense of integrity (e.g., Jessop, Simmonds, & Sparks, 2009; Lehmiller, Law, & Tormola, 2010).

People value others’ morality (Wojciszke, 2005). The power of hypocrisy as a social criticism (Billig, 1987; Furia, 2009) and as a facilitator of behavioral change (Stone & Fernandez, 2008) can be viewed partly as a function of the threat to self-integrity that accusations of hypocrisy embody (Stone & Fernandez, 2008). The threat to self-integrity may be less a simple function of the inconsistency between the thought and the deed, the attitude and the action, than the social deception that is involved: what is crucial to the notion, it seems, is that ‘hypocrites mislead’ (Calhoun, 1995, p. 258; see also Drefcinski, 2003).

More attention to the notion of integrity within social psychology would seem to be merited because of the kind of social dimensions which have been referred to here. Recent research (Crocker, Niiya, & Mischkowski, 2008) which has suggested that self-affirmation effects may be less to do with self-integrity than with self-transcendence (embodying our sense of connection to others) is predicated on the notion that self-integrity does not already involve people’s relationships with others. Despite possible differences in judgments of integrity in self and others (alluded to above), the research that we have presented here on laypeople’s orientations to the notion of integrity
Paul Sparks and Tom Farsides

would seem to question that assumption: people’s relationships to others seem to be pivotal to our participants’ interpretations of integrity. Finally, we would suggest that greater attention to the concept of integrity would pay dividends in unpacking the relationship between integrity, hypocrisy, inconsistency, and other cognate concepts which are fundamental to our social worlds and to core theoretical perspectives within the enterprise of social psychology.

References


Received 6 October 2009; revised version received 9 June 2010