Integrity and vulnerability as building blocks of perceived moral character and leader profile attractiveness

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Abstract

Integrity is often regarded as cardinal to moral character and a desirable leadership attribute. However, integrity that is not moderated through an adjunctive virtue such as vulnerability can produce leaders who are stubborn or self-righteous. Through a vignette experiment, the contribution of integrity and vulnerability towards the perception of moral character and the attractiveness of a leader's behavioural profile were explored. Results confirm that integrity contributes even more strongly to both perceived moral character and attractiveness of a leader's behavioural profile when combined with vulnerability. The findings provide new insights into integrity and vulnerability as adjunctive virtues and building blocks of perceived moral character and ethical leadership attractiveness.

1.   Introduction

Corruption is a global concern, with several studies uncovering leaders' influence on organisational corruption (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Sankar (2003) claims that there is a global crisis of moral character in leadership and that moral failures can, at least partly, be attributed to the absence of integrity and moral character. It appears that leaders are often appointed or selected on the basis of their track record of results (Walumbwa et al., 2008), charisma and functional management competencies (Sankar, 2003), at the possible cost of sacrificing integrity and moral character (Leavy, 2016). McKenna and Campbell (2011) assert that although charisma and competencies are important, they do not guarantee a morally upstanding leader.

Leadership authors have increasingly emphasised the impor-tance of integrity and moral character as essential aspects of

effective leadership (Newstead, Dawkins, Macklin & Martin, 2019). Leaders with moral character (having the knowledge, will and courage to consistently act morally) (Lickona, 1991) are regarded as critical to the success of organisations (McKenna & Campbell, 2011). Therefore, when it comes to leadership selection and development, it is important that moral character and integrity receive emphasis (Leavy, 2016).

Individuals, in general, care about morality (De Klerk, 2017b; 2017a). It is, therefore, likely that employers and subordinates would prefer leaders who show evidence of moral character and integrity. Integrity (i.e. acting consistently according to a set of moral values) is an essential facet of moral character (Palanski & Yammarino, 2009). Yet, leader integrity and moral character have received insufficient empirical attention in empirical scientific research (Wang & Hackett, 2016). However, integrity that is not moderated by virtuous character traits can produce leaders who are self-righteous, inflexible and stubborn. McKenna and Campbell (2011) emphasise the inherent tensions that exist between different values and character traits, also between integrity and vulnerability. They position integrity and vulnerability as opposite but complementary character traits and postulate that a healthy dose of vulnerability has the potential to moderate stubborn integrity. Vulnerability should not necessarily be seen as a state of weakness (Ito & Bligh, 2016; McKenna & Campbell, 2011). Vulnerability in this context refers to self-awareness, with the courage, strength and humility to accept one's fallibility (Brendel, 2014; Hoekstra, Bell & Peterson, 2008; Seppala, 2014). An awareness of one's own propensity to err can unlock the courage and humility to be open-minded to ideas, to accept uncertainty and to recognise mistakes and limitations as part of the human condition (Brecher, 2017).

The role of leader vulnerability has received limited attention in mainstream empirical research (Lopez, 2018). Vulnerability tends to be absent in lists that describe preferable leader traits (Newstead et al., 2019). It follows that the role of vulnerability in promoting moral character or integrity as an adjunctive virtue also received limited research. Nevertheless, vulnerability has been correlated with leadership characteristics such as emotional connection with followers and building trust (Lopez, 2018). Although research on the benefits of an awareness of one's own vulnerability is steadily increasing, the attractiveness of vulnerability as part of a leader's behavioural profile remains largely unknown (Ito & Bligh, 2016).

The objective of this article is to explore the contribution of integrity and vulnerability to the perceived moral character and the attractiveness of a leader's behavioural profile. The constructs of integrity and vulnerability are explored, and propositions are developed about their relationship with perceived moral character and the attractiveness of a leader's behavioural profile. A 2x2 factorial vignette survey provided the data to explore the propositions. This design enabled the researchers to isolate the independent variables (i.e. integrity and vulnerability) and control how they could influence the perceptions of moral character and the attractiveness of a leader's behavioural profile (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Steiner, Atzmüller & Su, 2016). Statistical analyses used in this study include analysis of variance (Anova) and two-way Anova. Conclusions and practical implications are discussed.

2.   Literature study

2.1   Leadership and the virtues of moral character

The importance of noble character to leadership excellence is consistently emphasised (Byrne, Crossan & Seijts, 2018; Quick & Goolsby, 2013; Seijts, Crossan & Carleton, 2017), even though there is no consensus on a unified definition of character (Crossan, Byrne, Seijts, Reno, Monzani & Gandz, 2012). Character is a set disposition to behave in one way or another, or to lead one particular kind of life (MacIntyre, 1981). Character encapsulates what a person values and believes in, their ethics and disposition to live an exemplary life (Gini & Green, 2014). Crossan et al. (2017) and Horowitz (2001) describe character as a complex and fairly stable combination of traits, values and virtues, but which continues to develop throughout one's life. Sarros and Cooper (2006) describe character according to three dimensions, namely: universalism (tolerance and concern for the welfare of others); transformation (values-driven inspiration); and benevolence (selflessness and integrity). Character traits matter, not only because they determine the behaviour of leaders, but indirectly also because they influence the behaviour of subordinates (Liborius, 2014).

Character and morality are inextricably linked, with the term 'moral' relating to principles of right and wrong (Riggio, Zhu, Reina & Maroosis, 2010; Sankar, 2003). A leader with a strong character is undivided in his or her fundamental beliefs (shows integrity) and acts with the intention of achieving a morally appropriate outcome (Liborius, 2014). A preferred character is often described by referring to virtues such as integrity, humility and trust (Liborius, 2017; Newstead et al., 2019). Many definitions of character tend to converge on the idea of doing what is morally right (McKenna & Campbell, 2011), and the capability of doing what is right despite external pressures to do otherwise (Lickona, 1991). When a leader's character is anchored in moral values and virtues, it provides a moral compass for his or her actions (Becker, 2009; Sankar, 2003). Virtuous character traits such as honesty, consideration of others and self-transcendence are routinely linked with moral character (Newstead et al., 2019).

Lickona (1991) describes moral character according to three dimensions, namely: cognitive (knowing what the right thing is to do); affective (concern about doing the right thing); and action (acting with competence and a will to do the right thing). Attributions of moral character are largely perception-based (Peng & Wei, 2018). For this article, 'moral character' is defined as the knowledge, will and courage to act morally (Lickona, 1991), for the greater good (Sarros & Cooper, 2006).

2.2   Integrity as a critical moral character trait

The notion that integrity is essential for moral and effective leadership is widely held (Crossan et al., 2012; Erakovich & Kolthoff, 2016; Gentry, Cullen, Sosik, Chun, Leupold & Tonidandel, 2013; Palanski & Yammarino, 2011). Transformational leadership (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999), ethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006), spiritual leadership (Fry, 2003) and authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008) all include integrity as a core element of effective leadership.

Simons (2002) refers to integrity as the perceived alignment between a person's words and actions, whereas McKenna and Campbell (2011: 3) refer to integrity as the trait that renders a person "undivided in his or her fundamental beliefs and attitudes, presenting those values to everyone". Tullberg (2012) and Koehn (2005) note that integrity is often described as internal consistency. The stability and reliability of consistency present a reality of a coherent and morally responsible self (Dobel, 1988). Integrity "requires 'sticking to one's principles', moral or otherwise, in the face of temptation" (McFall, 1987:7). Koehn (2005) also emphasises that integrity is also about compliance with moral norms or expectations. Integrity is a complex concept that is closely aligned with, and inseparable to moral standards (McFall, 1987). In addition to consistency and commitment to one's values and principles, integrity is also about moral trustworthiness, self-knowledge, and an absence of self-deception (Dolovitch, 2002). Definitions of integrity seem to converge on the idea of "consistently acting on moral values across situations" (Bauman, 2013:419).

Integrity is often presented as an essential feature of moral character (Audi & Murphy, 2006; Sarros & Cooper, 2006). Integrity and moral character represent subjective moral judgements as they cannot be seen, but have to be inferred from observed behaviours (Moorman, Darnold & Priesemuth, 2013). Attributions of moral character and integrity are thus largely perception-based (McCann & Holt, 2013; Peng & Wei, 2018). For this article, 'integrity' was operationalised as not compromising on the values of honesty, respect, fairness, and trust, notwithstanding adversity, and trustworthiness (Bauman, 2013; Erakovich & Kolthoff, 2016; Moorman, Darnold & Priesemuth, 2013). From these discussions, the first research proposition is constructed:

Proposition 1: Perceived integrity is an important leadership trait regarding perceived moral character.

2.3   Integrity and the adjunctive virtuous trait of vulnerability

Virtues tend to function together, and character is shaped by a set of virtuous traits (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007; Riggio et al., 2010). Audi and Murphy (2006) and Palanski and Yammarino (2007) differentiate between substantive and adjunctive traits. Substantive traits like honesty and integrity tend to be morally good in themselves. Adjunctive traits are not inherently morally bad or good, but are complementary traits to promote moral worthiness.

Although integrity may be a vital component of moral character, it does not define moral character exhaustively or exclusively (Audi & Murphy, 2006). There is a shadow side to unrestrained integrity. It has been found that integrity shows an inverted U-shaped effect on followers in that unrestrained integrity is often perceived as being arrogant and insulting (Stouten, Van Dijke, Mayer, De Cremer & Euwema, 2013). As noted by Kohlberg (1971:13): "What is one man's integrity is another man's stubbornness." Similarly, Crossan et al. (2012:4) argue that "an excess of integrity can lead to self-righteousness and total inflexibility". Self-righteousness is about exaggerated ideations of one's moral development (Bicknell, 2010) and insensitive dogmatism of absolute justice (Avnon, 2014).

Self-righteousness thus relates to exaggerated ideations of integrity. Indeed, Tullberg (2012) notes the risk of self-righteousness that may stem from excessive integrity, and Radzik (2012) advises about the risk of moral-extremism to be charged with being self-righteous. Koehn (2005:26) cautions against over-reliance on consistency when describing integrity that is not balanced by morality, as one can be "consistently wicked". He also alerts us to the risk of inflexibility of the compliance aspect of integrity and emphasises that integrity is about compliance with what is right. Shaw (2013:415) advises that if integrity were merely about consistently sticking to beliefs, "we would have no way to distinguish integrity from stubbornness". He reasons that true integrity requires one to be sufficiently vulnerable to subject one's beliefs to critical scrutiny. Breakey (2016) forewarns about the danger of integrity-extremism if one does not question whether one's values are moral and appropriate. Dolovitch (2002:1650) argues that "someone who is simply unwilling to expose his views to criticism is vulnerable to serious self-deception or can rightly be accused of a narrowmindedness, stubbornness or fanaticism". Stubbornness and inflexibility retain consistency and commitments when not appropriate (Webber, 2015). Rather than being stubborn, Dolovitch (2002:1649) reasons that a person of integrity should demonstrate "deliberative flexibility".

Unrestrained integrity can potentially resemble a form of leader narcissism, a form of leadership in which traits such as humility and vulnerability are de facto absent (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006; Sosik, Chun & Zhu, 2014). Unmoderated integrity feeds on all-too-common leadership paradigms that centre on the leader "being all decisive, powerful, masculine, driven, self-assured, fearless, ruthless, risk-taking" (Hoekstra et al., 2008:79). An example of moral extremism is the infamous Iran-Contra affair, in which self-righteous beliefs lead Oliver North and others to go beyond the confines of their authority to engage in highly questionable policies (Dobel, 1988). In contrast, Brendel (2014) emphasises the importance of vulnerability and the importance of both weaknesses and strengths to ensure virtuous character strength. It follows that morality and integrity that are not moderated by adjunctive traits, such as vulnerability or humility, can produce inflexible, stubborn and self-righteous leaders with an inability to receive feedback.

McKenna and Campbell (2011) emphasise the inherent, but healthy tensions that exist between different character traits, including integrity and vulnerability. Although a trait such as integrity can be viewed as ideal to a certain extent, McKenna and Campbell (2011) argue that it is possible that a virtuous trait becomes too strong and when it exists in excess and may hamper leader performance. For this reason, it is suggested that as far as leadership character is concerned, integrity should always be in healthy tension with vulnerability (McKenna & Campbell, 2011). For similar reasons, Tullberg (2012:93) argues that "integrity can be seen as an adjunctive virtue and not as a substantive virtue". Correspondingly, McKenna and Campbell (2011) propose that vulnerability can be regarded as an adjunctive trait to integrity, which can potentially moderate exaggerated or stubborn integrity. A reasonable argument can thus be made that integrity will tend to function optimally as an adjunctive trait together with related, balancing traits that will promote perceived moral character and integrity (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007).

Consensus on an exact definition of 'vulnerability' is still lacking (Zagorac, 2017). However, vulnerability should not necessarily be seen as a state of weakness (Ito & Bligh, 2016; McKenna & Campbell, 2011), and vulnerability is not about being soft-hearted or weak (Brown, 2013; Lopez, 2018). Indeed, leader vulnerability has been strongly related to courage, which has been found to be a key factor in allowing leaders to lead with vulnerability (Lopez, 2018). Giving expression to vulnerability in the business world requires courage and strength of character (Lopez, 2018). Ito and Bligh (2016:67) reason that vulnerability can play a vital role in "enhancing a leader's resilience, and can be framed as a positive quality, even a strength". Vulnerability is about self-awareness, with the courage, strength and humility to accept one's fallibility (Brendel, 2014; Hoekstra et al., 2008; Seppala, 2014). To be vulnerable means that one is willing to expose one's uncertainties, to take emotional risks and to display openness to critical feedback (Bartz & Bartz, 2017). Preconditions to demonstrate vulnerability include aspects such as "humility, self-awareness, and the courage to acknowledge imperfections" (Ito & Bligh, 2016:68). Vulnerability is about being open to ideas other than one's own, accepting uncertain states and risk, having self-awareness and the ability to recognise one's faults and limitations (Bartz & Bartz, 2017; Brecher, 2017; Riggio et al., 2010). Indeed, Hoekstra et al. (2008:80) calls for leaders to "abandon the pursuit for unattainable perfection", but to be open to others' opinions and to admit fallibility.

Being vulnerable as a leader involves being transparent and open to emotional exposure in one's relationship with others (Lopez, 2018). Ito and Bligh (2016) reason that a leader's ability to share vulnerability is an effective way to build deep relationships with followers and to promote the experience of charisma. It is thus not surprising that Lopez (2018) describes prominent charismatic leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela, Gandhi and Mother Teresa. They were sufficiently vulnerable to make use of exposing emotional vulnerability as a way of connecting with others. Nevertheless, the risks that emotional exposure presents to a leader emphasises the courage required to demonstrate vulnerability (Nienaber, Hofeditz & Romeike, 2015).

Although empirical research on leader vulnerability is scant, available studies on leadership vulnerability and character tend to confirm the importance of vulnerability for integrity and character strength (Demirci, Ekşi, Ekşi & Kaya, 2019; Lopez, 2018). Leader vulnerability has been correlated with positive leadership characteristics such as charisma, emotional connection with followers, building trust and establishing psychological safety (Lopez, 2018; Mane, 2019; Meyer, Le Fevre & Robinson, 2017). Demirci et al. (2019) found that several aspects of character strength correlate significantly with vulnerability. Meyer et al. (2017) found that perceived leader vulnerability signals leaders' truthfulness and integrity. In addition, a host of authors conceptually posit the importance of vulnerability for integrity and character strength (Bartz & Bartz, 2017; Bharanitharan, Chen, Bahmannia, & Lowe, 2019; Bloom, 2020; Brendel, 2014; Brown, 2013; Byrne et al., 2018; Glanz, 2007; Goering, Crawford, Cockburn, & Colbert, 2016; Hoekstra et al., 2008; Lapidot, Kark, & Shamir, 2007; Lopez, 2018; Nienaber et al., 2015; Simmons, 2014). Leavy (2016) asserts that leaders with moral character show sufficient vulnerability for accurate self-awareness compared to self-focused or egocentric leaders who tend to overrate their

own moral stature. For this study, 'vulnerability' was operationalised as self-awareness (Walumbwa et al., 2008); being honest and open to ideas other than one's own (Meyer et al., 2017), accepting uncertain states and recognising one's own limitations (Brecher, 2017; Riggio et al., 2010); and risking to trust others (Meyer et al., 2017; Nienaber et al., 2015).

Vulnerability in isolation is not inherently moral. Vulnerability without adjunctive character traits, such as integrity, can produce leaders who are inconsistent, directionless and without principles (Audi & Murphy, 2006). As an adjunctive virtuous trait to integrity, vulnerability can conceivably temper potential stubbornness and inflexibility. It can thus be argued that, when integrity exists in a healthy tension with vulnerability as a moderating trait (McKenna & Campbell, 2011; Palanski & Yammarino, 2007), it is likely to promote perceptions of moral character and integrity. It can then be reasoned that vulnerability has a symbiotic relationship with integrity. Integrity is likely to unlock the value of vulnerability to promote moral character (Meyer et al., 2017), whereas vulnerability is likely to moderate integrity from transmuting into stubbornness. From these discussions, the next propositions follow:

Proposition 2: Vulnerability is an important character trait to promote perceptions of a leader's moral character; not necessarily in isolation, but rather as an adjunctive trait.

Proposition 3: The combination of integrity and vulnerability promotes the perception of moral character more strongly in a leader's behavioural profile than with these traits in isolation.

Perceptions of leaders' behavioural integrity have a positive influence on the trust and engagement of subordinates (Demirtas, 2013; Moorman et al., 2013; Neubert, Carlson, Kacmar, Roberts, & Chonko, 2009). The relationship between vulnerability and trust (Meyer et al., 2017; Nienaber et al., 2015) testifies to the potential attractiveness of the balance between healthy vulnerability and integrity in leaders. With healthy vulnerability representing a character strength (Brendel, 2014; Seppala, 2014), the combination of integrity and vulnerability is asserted to be virtuous in a leader's behavioural profile. Therefore, the next proposition reads:

Proposition 4: Leaders with behavioural profiles that contain both integrity and vulnerability will present profiles that are more attractive than those who do not.

In most contexts, perceptions of moral character and integrity make important contributions to the impression that one person forms of another (Goodwin, Piazza & Rozin, 2013). People tend to have a reasonably high moral conscience that enables them to have a fairly good idea of what constitutes moral behaviour (De Klerk, 2017a; 2017b). Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse and Kim (2014) found that individuals with higher levels of moral character can be identified. Furthermore, Leavy (2016) and Riggio et al. (2010) reason that virtuous persons can accurately judge the traits of self and others. Helzer et al. (2014), too, found that individuals can identify and distinguish moral character. It is thus reasonable to argue that employees can distinguish between behavioural profiles that do or do not embody integrity, vulnerability and moral character. Accordingly, the last proposition reads:

Proposition 5: Individuals will be able to recognise and distinguish behavioural profiles that embody moral character, high integrity and vulnerability, especially when these traits exist in combination, whereas profiles that suggest the absence of these traits will be less recognisable.

The ability of individuals to distinguish with high discernment regarding certain specific traits were controlled in the study, as explained in the research methods section under the discussion of 'manipulation checks'.

3.   Research method

3.1   Research design

For this study, a factorial vignette experiment design was used (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010). In vignette experiments, participants are presented with realistic, but hypothetical 'cases' or situations to enhance realism, yet allowing researchers to manipulate and control independent variables (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Steiner, Atzmüller & Su, 2016). Vignettes are short 'case' descriptions representing hypothetical circumstances or situations, to which the respondent is invited to respond (Benedetti, Jackson & Luo, 2018; Oll, Hahn, Reimsbach & Kotzian, 2018). Because vignettes represent real-life situations, they increase the validity and generalisability of results (Oll et al., 2018; Von Davier, Shin, Khorramdel & Stankov, 2018).

Data were gathered by means of a 2x2 factorial survey consisting of four vignettes that represented the four different leadership profiles. Vignette experimental designs have high internal validity because of the ability of the researcher to manipulate independent variables and observe the resulting effect on situations (Oll et al., 2018; Von Davier et al., 2018). The vignettes of different leadership profiles were developed by manipulating independent variables, namely 'perceived integrity' and 'perceived vulnerability', to represent high and low levels for a fictitious leader called Jack.

A 2x2 experimental design enables the study of the effects of two independent variables on the dependent variables (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010). In this study, the two independent variables were integrity and vulnerability, whereas the two dependent variables were perceived moral character and leader profile attractiveness. The four (2x2) combinations of the independent variables are indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Factorial design matrix

		Integrity	
		Low	**High**
Vulnerability	**Low**	Low integrity and low vulnerability (LILV)	High integrity and low vulnerability (HILV)
	High	Low integrity and high vulnerability (LIHV)	High integrity and high vulnerability (HIHV)

Respondents received only one questionnaire with one of the vignettes each. They thus reflected on only one of the profiles, with follow-up items to explore respondents' perceptions of their perspectives on perceived integrity, vulnerability, moral character and leader behavioural profile attractiveness perceived for that profile. As data collection occurred only once throughout this design, the chance of changes to, or loss of, respondents that are usually associated with a pre-test-post-test experimental design, was non-existent (Schlechter, Hung & Bussin, 2014). Contrary to the often-unnatural conditions of a laboratory experiment, the respondents had the freedom to complete the questionnaire in their real work environment without being exposed to unfamiliar stimuli. This enhanced the realism of the study (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010).

3.2   Data collection instruments

3.2.1   Vignettes

The vignettes were developed to represent observable acts of integrity and vulnerability, based on the descriptions and conceptualisations discussed in the literature study and on relevance to the context of the sample organisation. To control for external variance, all profiles were developed to contain equal functional capability and likeability (charisma), as far as possible, in a brief profile description, with only vulnerability and integrity being manipulated (high versus low for each of the 2x2 possibilities).

The manipulation of integrity related mainly to aspects included in the definitions of integrity, such as consistent adherence (or non-adherence) to fundamental beliefs and a clear set of values (for example, safety and respect) (Bauman, 2013; McKenna & Campbell, 2011). Aspects included in the manipulations of vulnerability included being open to ideas other than one's own, emotional self-awareness and the ability to recognise one's faults and limitations (Brecher, 2017; Riggio et al., 2010; Walumbwa et al., 2008). In order to enhance the realism and validity of the vignettes, they were constructed in an iterative process between the researchers in which the vignettes were independently reviewed and criticised by each researcher, and adapted until consensus was reached. The vignettes were kept as brief as possible, without compromising internal validity (Steiner et al., 2016), to promote clarity, attentive reading and consideration, and an increased response rate. The four leadership profiles are indicated in Table 2. Each profile commenced with the statement: "Jack is a mid-level manager in a global organisation. Senior management requires a leader for special projects and is considering Jack".

Table 2: Leadership profiles

Low integrity, low vulnerability (LILV)	High integrity, low vulnerability (HILV)
Jack stated that he values safety above maximising profit. However, based on his track record, he sometimes would take safety shortcuts to increase profits in line with the company's primary aim. Even though Jack says that he will complete agreed-on tasks, he sometimes leaves tasks incomplete.	Jack stated that he values safety above maximising profit. He refuses to compromise his commitment even when it means making less profit owing to extra safety measures. Jack mostly completes agreed-on tasks when he says he will.

Low integrity, low vulnerability (LILV)	High integrity, low vulnerability (HILV)
When his team approaches him with ideas and challenges, he tends to change his view depending on the person/s to whom he is talking. Jack prefers to do tasks himself and rarely acknowledges failures.	When his team approaches him with ideas and challenges, he generally is consistent with his view regardless of the person/s to whom he is talking. Jack tends to do tasks himself and rarely acknowledges failures.
Once a decision is made, he will follow it diligently regardless of whether a better option is presented.	Once a decision is made, he will follow it diligently regardless of whether a better option is presented.
Jack is not acutely aware of his strengths and weaknesses and sees sharing emotions and feelings as a sign of weakness.	Jack is not acutely aware of his strengths and weaknesses and sees sharing emotions and feelings as a sign of weakness.
Low integrity, high vulnerability (LIHV)	**High integrity, high vulnerability (HIHV)**
Jack stated that he values safety above maximising profit. However, based on his track record, he would take safety shortcuts to increase profits in line with the company's primary aim. Even though Jack says that he will complete agreed-on tasks, he often leaves tasks incomplete.	Jack stated that he values safety above maximising profit. He refuses to compromise his commitment even when it means making less profit owing to extra safety measures. Jack always completes agreed-on tasks when he says he will.
When his team approaches him with ideas and challenges, he changes his view depending on the person/s to whom he is talking. Jack is keen to share tasks and often acknowledges failures.	When his team approaches him with ideas and challenges, he is consistent with his view regardless of the person/s to whom he is talking. Jack is keen to share tasks and often acknowledges failures.
Once a decision is made, he is comfortable with changing direction if a better option is presented.	Once a decision is made, he is comfortable with changing direction if a better option is presented.
Jack is aware of his strengths and weaknesses and is comfortable with sharing emotions and feelings.	Jack is aware of his strengths and weaknesses and is comfortable with sharing emotions and feelings.

3.2.2 Manipulation checks

To evaluate the effectiveness of the manipulation of the independent variables, each of the leadership profiles was accompanied by the same questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to measure how respondents perceived Jack's integrity, moral character and the attractiveness of his behavioural profile as a leader for the specific profile that they received. Perceived integrity was measured by deriving five items from the studies of Moorman et al. (2013), Bauman (2013) and Erakovich and Kolthoff (2016). These studies converged on the idea that leadership integrity will not compromise the values of honesty, respect, fairness, and trust, notwithstanding adversity, and a person with integrity will thus demonstrate trustworthiness. Perceived vulnerability was measured by deriving five items based on the studies of Walumbwa et al. (2008), Brecher (2017) and Riggio et al. (2010), and centred around self-awareness (Walumbwa et al., 2008); being honest and open to ideas other than one's own (Meyer, Le Fevre & Robinson, 2017); accepting uncertain states and recognising one's own limitations (Brecher, 2017; Riggio et al., 2010); and risking to trust others (Meyer et al., 2017; Nienaber et al., 2015). The items included in the survey questionnaire are indicated in Table 4.

3.2.3   Independent variable data collection instruments

Perceived moral character was measured by two related items, i.e. the attributed perception of moral character (Peng & Wei, 2018) and benefitting the greater good (Cohen et al., 2014; Helzer et al., 2014; Riggio et al., 2010; Sarros & Cooper, 2006).

The attractiveness of each behavioural profile was investigated through three items, i.e. Jack being perceived as a good leader, willingness to work for Jack, and selecting Jack as a leader (Brecher, 2017; Riggio et al., 2010; Walumbwa et al., 2008). The items included in the survey questionnaire are indicated in Table 4.

3.2.4   Sampling and sample description

The study was conducted with 162 middle to senior-level leaders of a global engineering firm. Purposive sampling was used to obtain similar numbers of responses from a wide geographical spread of respondents and respondents from three different managerial levels to advance heterogeneity in response-behaviour (Steiner et al., 2016). Moreover, all selected respondents have been subjected to various forms of self-awareness training before the study. This was done to control somewhat for external variance as these participants were conceivably reasonable accurate judges of vulnerability and character. As participants were presented with situations in the vignettes that were familiar to them, the risk of artificial responses was largely avoided (Steiner et al., 2016). The survey was distributed through SunSurveys, a survey software tool – similar to SurveyMonkey – that provides anonymised data to the researcher. A link to the survey with a description of the purpose and details of the research was sent to the entire research sample. By clicking on the link provided, respondents gave informed consent to participate in the research. Ethical clearance for conducting the research was obtained from the University of Stellenbosch Research Ethics Committee.

A total of 125 respondents completed the survey (77% response rate). Respondents represented a broad range of geographical locations, i.e. Australia and New Zealand (n = 52; 42%), sub-Saharan Africa (n = 51; 41%), Asia (n = 14; 11%), and Middle East and North Africa (n = 8; 6%). Most respondents were male (n = 91; 72.8% and n = 34; 27.2% female respondents). The age of the respondents ranged from 30 years to 61years, with an average age of 44.

4.   Results

4.1   Descriptive results

Three of the profiles (HILV, HIHV, LIHV) received 31 responses each, while one profile (LILV) received 32 responses. The descriptive statistics of these responses are indicated in Table 3.

Table 3: Responses per leadership profile

Profile	N	Mean	STD
High integrity low vulnerability	31	2.49	0.68
High integrity high vulnerability	31	4.22	0.44
Low integrity high vulnerability	31	2.69	0.40
Low integrity low vulnerability	32	1.87	0.46
(N = number of participants; STD = Standard deviation)			

Although the differences of the means were not subjected to analysis of variance (Anova) as this was not within the scope of the study, the respective means appear to be aligned with the two-way Anova results reported in Figures 1 and 2.

4.2 Internal consistency of the measures

Table 4 indicates the items used to measure these variables, as well as their respective internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alpha).

Table 4: Items, variables and internal consistencies

Variables and Items		Alpha if deleted
Integrity – Cronbach's alpha=.93		
1.	A leader with these character traits is trustworthy.	.91
2.	This leader is honest, even in the face of adversity.	.90
3.	A leader with this profile is fair in difficult instances.	.92
4.	This leader delivers on promises.	.92
5.	This leader is not afraid to stand up for what he or she believes in.	.93
Vulnerability – Cronbach's alpha=.90		
6.	A leader with these character traits is open to change.	.85
7.	This leader is someone who is willing to accept uncertain states.	.89
8.	A leader with this profile is aware of his or her strengths and limitations.	.91
9.	A leader with this profile easily trusts people.	.89
10.	This leader is comfortable with delegating work and trusting people.	.86
Leader Profile Attractiveness – Cronbach's alpha=.91		
11.	I think a leader with this profile will be a good manager.	.88
12.	I will select a person with these character traits as a leader.	.86
13.	I will work for a person with these character traits.	.85

With all Cronbach's alpha values ≥ 0.9 for the measurement of all constructs, the measurement of the constructs with these items was deemed reliable for this study as it showed high internal consistency. The internal consistency for perceived moral character could not be calculated because only two items were included in the questionnaire.

4.3   Integrity and vulnerability as distinguishable traits

The statistical significance of the variance in the means between high and low of vulnerability and integrity respectively, and in isolation, was assessed through Anova (Table 5).

Table 5: Analyses of the variance in means of vulnerability and integrity

Effect	Level of integrity	Level of vulnerability	Mean (STD)	P-value
Integrity	Low	-	1.82 (0.53)	0.000
	High	-	3.83 (0.94)	
Vulnerability	-	Low	2.73 (1.04)	0.456
	-	High	2.88 (1.24)	

The Anova results in Table 5 confirm a statistically significant difference in the means of low levels of integrity compared to high levels of integrity ($F(1, 123) = 218.93$, $p = 0.0000$). When considering Proposition 5, this study thus found that higher levels of integrity is a distinguishable character virtue in leadership profiles. In contrast, the Anova results confirm there is no statistical difference in the means of low levels of vulnerability compared to high levels of vulnerability ($F(1, 123) = 0.556$, $p = 0.456$). From this, one can conclude that the perceived attractiveness of the leader profiles with low levels of vulnerability does not show a significant statistical difference compared to the profiles with high levels of vulnerability in isolation. This study thus did not find evidence that higher levels of vulnerability is a distinguishable character trait on its own in leadership behavioural profiles (Proposition 5).

4.4   Perceived moral character

The significance of the combined effect of vulnerability and integrity on the perception of moral character for the four leader profiles was assessed through two-way Anova of each of the means. The interactions were compared through Fisher's Least Significant Difference (LSD) post hoc multiple comparisons. A 2 (integrity) x 2 (vulnerability) Anova revealed a significant interaction between integrity and vulnerability ($F(1, 121) = 13.77$, $p = 0.0003$). Figure 2 illustrates the interaction of integrity and vulnerability on the perception of moral character for the four leader profile vignettes.
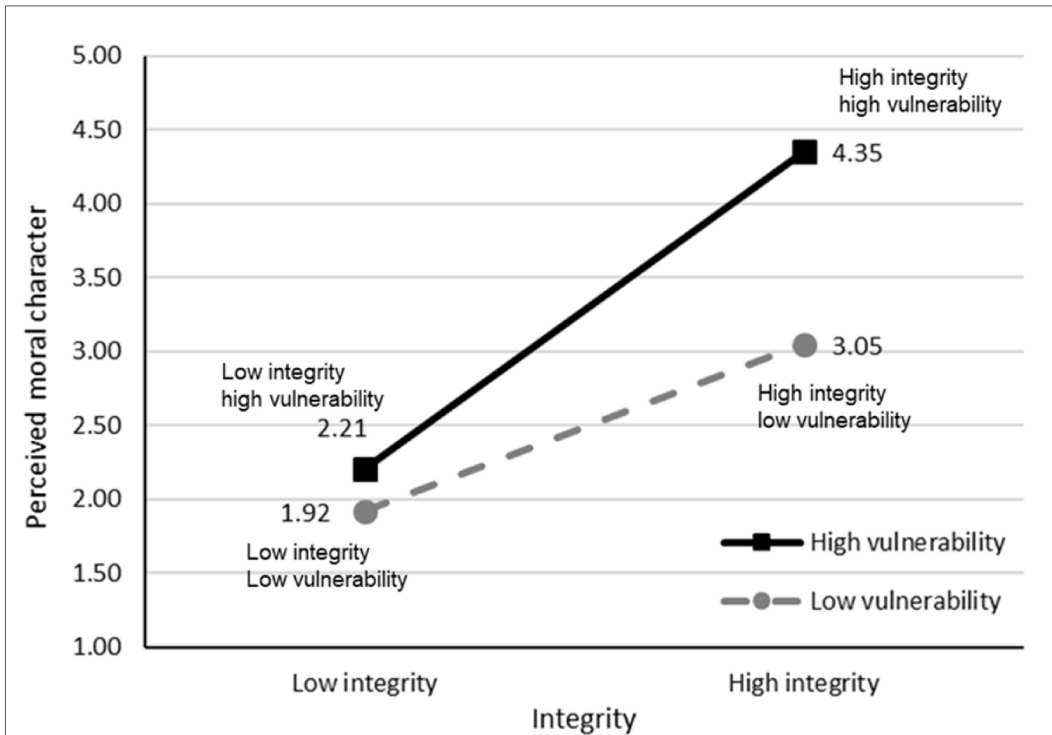
Figure 1: Perceived moral character

It is evident from Figure 1 that high-integrity leaders were perceived to have a stronger moral character (HILV: M = 3.05, and HIHV: M = 4.35) than a low integrity leader, notwithstanding the level of vulnerability (LILV: M = 1.92 and LIHV: M = 2.21). These results provided support for Proposition 1: Integrity is an important trait of perceived moral character.

However, vulnerability was seen to have a significant role in the perception of moral character. Perceptions of moral character measured the highest for the profile with high levels of both integrity and vulnerability (HIHV). Indeed, the presence of vulnerability increased the perception of moral character. Even when integrity was low (LIHV: M = 2.21), the perception of moral character was significantly higher than when vulnerability was low (LILV: M = 1.92). This provided support for Proposition 3: The combination of integrity and vulnerability increases the perception of moral character. However, with LIHV having a significantly lower mean than HILV, the results provided support for Proposition 2: Perceived vulnerability is an important trait of moral character, but as an adjunctive trait and not in isolation.

4.5   Leader profile attractiveness

The significance of the combined effect of vulnerability and integrity on leader profile attractiveness for the respective four leader profiles was assessed through two-way Anova of each of the means. The interactions were compared through Fisher's Least Significant

Difference (LSD) post hoc multiple comparisons. A 2 (integrity) x 2 (vulnerability) Anova revealed a significant interaction between integrity and vulnerability ($F(1, 121) = 27.38$, $p = 0.0000$). The analysis confirmed that the variances of the means statistically differed significantly. Figure 2 illustrates how the interaction of integrity and vulnerability affected the participants' profile attractiveness.
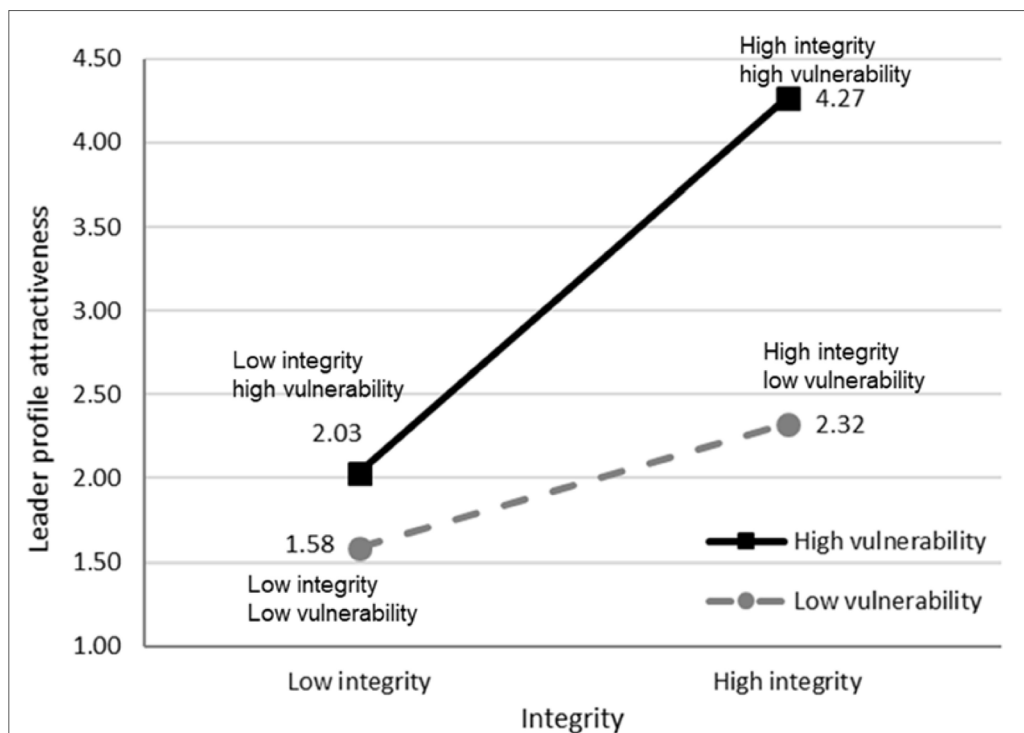

Figure 2: Leader profile attractiveness

Similar to perceived moral character, it is evident from Figure 2 that high-integrity leaders' behavioural profiles were more attractive (HILV: $M = 2.32$, and HIHV: $M = 4.27$) than low-integrity leaders, notwithstanding the level of vulnerability (LILV: $M = 1.58$ and LIHV: $M = 2.03$). These results provide support for Proposition 4: The presence of perceived integrity in a leader's profile is an attractive character trait.

However, similar to the results depicted in Figure 1, it is clear that vulnerability also had a significant role in the perception of profile attractiveness. The highest measurement for the attractiveness of a leaders' profile was achieved by the profile with high levels of both integrity and vulnerability (HIHV). Indeed, the presence of vulnerability increased the attractiveness of a leaders' behavioural profile. Even when integrity was low (LIHV: $M = 2.03$), the profile was significantly more attractive than when vulnerability was low (LILV: $M = 1.58$). This provides support for Proposition 3: The combination of integrity and vulnerability adds to the attractiveness of the leadership profile.

Similarly to perceived moral character, vulnerability was not an attractive leadership trait in isolation. This can be seen in the low-integrity profile having a significantly

lower mean than the high-integrity profile when vulnerability is low in both cases (LIHV versus HILV). The results provide support for Proposition 2: Perceived vulnerability is an important trait of moral character, but as an adjunctive trait and not in isolation.

4.6   Descriptive perspectives on 2x2 vignettes

Part of the explanation of the aforementioned results can probably be found in the descriptive perspectives on the leadership profiles. Respondents were asked eight questions about how they would view each of the four different profiles. Statistical differences on the data points were assessed through Anova, together with the Kruskal-Wallis test to confirm the Anova results ($p < 0.5$). The means of the responses on these items on each of the four leader profiles are illustrated in Figure 3.
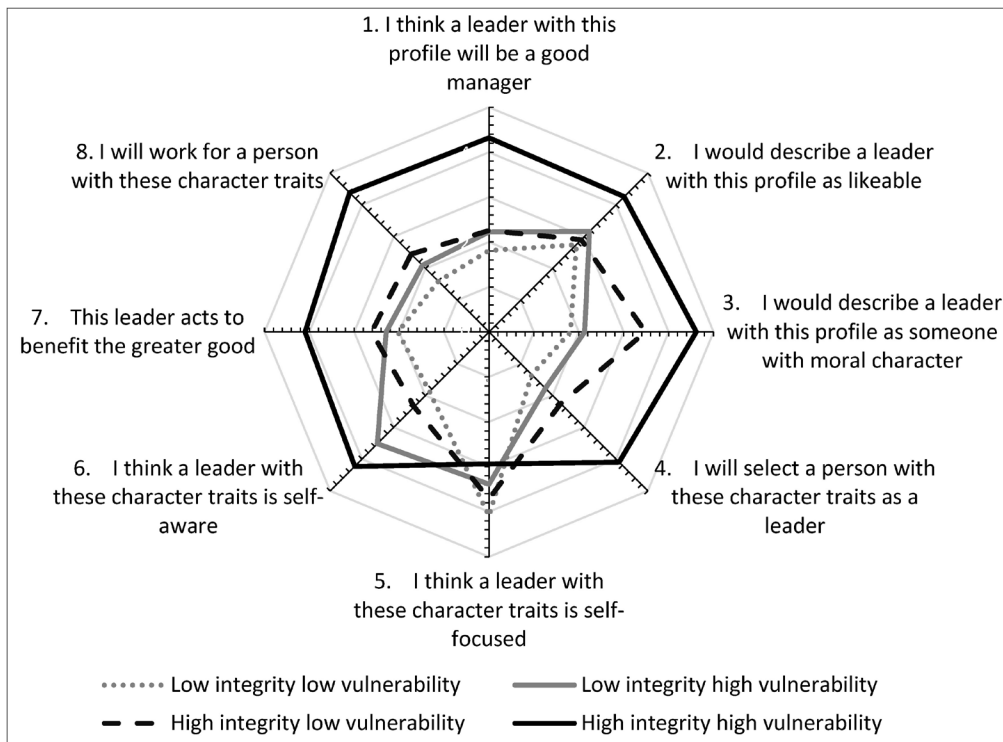
Figure 3: A descriptive comparison of profile perceptions

From Figure 3 it can be seen that the high-integrity, high-vulnerability leader scores highest by a significant margin on all items ($p < 0.01$), except on being self-focused (item 5), where this leader, once again significantly, scores the lowest ($p < 0.001$). This confirms the view that being self-focused stands opposed to self-awareness, which derives from vulnerability and self-focused leaders' tendency to overrate their morality (Leavy, 2016). These results provide further indirect support for Propositions 1, 3 and 4. However, for item 5, the low-integrity, low-vulnerability leader scores significantly higher than both high-vulnerability leader profiles ($p < 0.001$). It appears that the presence of vulnerability

reduces the perceptions of self-focus, which arguably explains much of the strength and balance that vulnerability brings to the preferred leadership profiles. These results provide further support for Proposition 2. These results strengthen the argument that vulnerability unlocks the value of integrity and that integrity unlocks the value of vulnerability.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Results confirm that leader profiles that include integrity are distinguishable from profiles where integrity is lacking. The results demonstrate the significance of perceived integrity for the perceived moral character of a leader. The results also demonstrate that integrity is not only an important part of moral character, but also promotes the attractiveness of a leader's profile. It was shown that in the absence of integrity, vulnerability could not easily be distinguished. The results further confirm that when vulnerability is not combined with integrity, it is not a significant contributor to perceived moral character or attractiveness of a leader's profile. One can speculate that some might interpret vulnerability in the absence of integrity as a weakness in a leader's profile.

This study demonstrates that vulnerability makes an important contribution to perceived moral character and attractiveness of a leader's profile in combination with integrity. It was found that the combination of integrity and vulnerability in a leader's profile yielded the perception of the strongest moral character and greatest profile attractiveness. Integrity and vulnerability can thus be considered as adjunctive traits regarding moral character and leader profile attractiveness. This study thus supports Audi and Murphy's (2006) proposition that each of the traits is vital, but that they are stronger when combined.

The findings that integrity and vulnerability have a positive impact not only on moral character, but also on the attractiveness of a leader's profile significantly contribute to the field of ethical leadership. The findings demonstrate that individuals actually want such leaders and prefer them above those who lack integrity and vulnerability. This provides empirical evidence to recalibrate assumptions about the importance of leadership integrity, which is often accepted or contested in organisations, but without empirical grounds. These results have notable implications regarding leadership selection and development. With moral character requiring both integrity and vulnerability, organisations that are serious about building ethical businesses should frame these traits in combination as a critical selection criterion when appointing leaders. In companies that promote moral character and develop integrity, adjunctive traits such as vulnerability should be promoted and developed as having equal weight.

This study makes an important theoretical contribution to the body of knowledge on moral character and leader integrity, and therefore indirectly to ethical businesses and organisations. Although vulnerability as an attractive character trait in leaders has received some attention in research, no studies could be found that explored the influence

of integrity and vulnerability on perceived moral character and the attractiveness of a leader's behavioural profile. This study, however, succeeds in demonstrating the potential important interaction between a generally recognised trait and an adjunctive one.

As with any research, this study has some limitations. Although participants were spread across various geographical locations (Africa, Australasia, the Middle East, and Asia), the sample size was relatively small and represented only one international company. Although much care was taken with the writing of the vignettes to represent the respective constructs reliably, vignettes tend to be overly simple and subjective, and are therefore prone to misinterpretation by the respondents leading to invalid responses. 'Jack' does not represent a gender-neutral person, and gender-related preconditioning and expectations of respondents could have had an effect on the responses. Because participants only viewed one vignette to control for social desirability bias, they did not experience the full suite of manipulations. It is thus possible that they responded in a demand-driven manner, which could have limited causal inferences and led to sweeping responses (Orne, 2009). One should thus take care not to make unequivocal generalisations from the findings.

The researchers suggest that the findings from this research be explored in future studies. Future research might include similar factorial vignette experiments, perhaps with larger samples and across various companies and industries, and with differently worded vignettes. Future studies are encouraged to have vignettes subjected to scrutiny by experts or a pilot study to enhance validity and realism (Steiner et al., 2016), and more robustly developed measures for moral character, integrity and vulnerability. Research that considers different adjunctive traits and different combinations of such traits will add much value to our understanding of moral character and ethical leadership. Future research that uses and further develops vignette experiments will contribute to the development of vignettes as an effective quasi-experimental methodology.

Moral character is a critical ingredient in leaders to ensure a healthy and ethical society. Although many leaders may be competent and have strong character traits, such as courage, they may yet lack a moral compass. Combining vulnerability with the much better-known construct of integrity as a complementary trait of moral character has the potential not only to unlock moral character, but also to increase the attractiveness of the leader's profile. Therefore, in the selection and development of leaders for the future, the importance of integrity and vulnerability in combination needs to be considered to improve organisations' chances of being led by individuals with moral character.

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