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To cite this article: Toon Kerkhoff & Patrick Overeem (2020): The Fluidity of Integrity: Lessons from Dutch Scandals, Public Integrity, DOI: [10.1080/10999922.2020.1826139](https://doi.org/10.1080/10999922.2020.1826139)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999922.2020.1826139>



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Published online: 19 Oct 2020.



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The Fluidity of Integrity: Lessons from Dutch Scandals

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This article discusses how integrity scandals often amount to setting new norms besides confirming existing ones. Historical research into Dutch integrity scandals shows how integrity acquires meaning in a complex, heterogeneous, and changing environment. Far from being fixed, integrity is a moving target; rather than being simply morally wrong or illegal, actions often fit in a grey area of contestation. Based on integrity's fluidity, four possible lines of action are offered to clarify and resolve lingering difficulties in current (Dutch) integrity management. First, since integrity norms are socially constructed and changeable, they can be actively influenced. Second, there is a need for more prudence to avoid integritism. Third, it seems pertinent to revisit the common reflex to focus on compliance by adding rules. Fourth, there is a need to acknowledge the importance of proactive, democratic debate when establishing integrity norms between important stakeholders.

Keywords: integrity scandals, integrity management, integritism, historical approach, public debate

A MAYOR IS CAUGHT

In 2005, mayor Schutte of the Dutch fishing village of Urk leaked confidential information about a pending police investigation of fishing boats and the town's fish auction (Kerkhoff & Overeem, 2013 case # 2014NL04). Fishermen were suspected of circumventing EU quota by catching more fish than was allowed and logging expensive caught fish under different names. As mayor, Schutte was informed about the raid in advance. However, as chairman of the local fish auction – a position he held simultaneously – he showed loyalty to his community and sent out a warning. For his action Schutte was fined €500 but this did not constitute a final judgment on the man's public integrity. Schutte positioned himself as a scapegoat. Most of the town's residents as well as the entire municipal council rallied behind him. Only

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the interference of the Minister of the Interior eventually forced Schutte to resign. But even then, his political party and electoral base still supported him in a successful race for provincial administrator in 2007. What is more, in 2013 Schutte received honorary citizenship of Urk ‘for service to the community.’ To some, Schutte was the epitome of integrity as he had served the people’s interest against reviled EU fishing quotas and national rules imposed on Urk. To others, he had shown a lack of integrity by breaking the law, perverting the course of justice, and violating his oath. Some argued he had sought political gain by protecting the particular interests of Urk rather than the wider public interest of Dutch and wider European Union regulations.

THE FLUIDITY OF INTEGRITY

Cases of (established and supposed) integrity violations such as the one of Mayor Schutte illustrate a simple point: the meaning of integrity is far from unequivocal. A particular act – even when formally illegal – can evoke differing opinions on whether it was morally right or wrong. Such cases show that public values and the meaning of integrity are contested, dependent on context, and therefore fluid (cf., Jacobs, 1992; Van Wart, 1998). Of course, anthropological research (Torsello & Venard, 2016) and historical work (Kerkhoff, Kroeze, Wagenaar, & Hoenderboom, 2020; Kroeze, Vitória, & Geltner, 2019) into corruption has also shown how over time and within and between societies there is no such thing as a single public morality (i.e., the entirety of generally accepted values and norms; views on right and wrong). Instead, it is a volatile cocktail of multiple and sometimes conflicting public values (Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Kerkhoff, 2016a; Rutgers, 2008). This affects norms of public integrity. For example, behavior that was once unacceptable later became acceptable. Characteristics that would once have labeled public officials as ‘corrupted’ (Buchan & Hill, 2014) such as homosexuality or atheism, are nowadays – usually – no longer taken as signs of someone’s lack of integrity. The reverse is also true. Selling one’s office, for example, is now not done but was not particularly problematic for long periods of time (Swart, 1989).

While the message of integrity’s fluidity is clearly not new, its ramifications for integrity management remain under-explored. When recognized, it often leads to uncertainty about how to guard integrity and how to debate and fight integrity violations. Should integrity policy be more or less formalized? How durable is the effect of applying tools such as training or an oath of office? Is integrity absolute or relative? Can one have a little more or less of it or is it absolute?

Using case material of Dutch integrity scandals since 1945 (although concentrating mostly on the last two decades), this article addresses the link between the fluidity of integrity norms and integrity management. The question is: *What lines of action can be derived from historical Dutch integrity cases for the management of present-day public integrity?* The working definition of ‘integrity’ that we use here is the relatively intersubjective one developed by Huberts: ‘the quality of acting in accordance or harmony with relevant moral values, norms, and rules’ (Huberts, 2018, p. 20). While not sharp enough to settle the exact meaning of integrity (for instance: which values, norms, and rules are relevant?), it is sufficient for our present purposes. Consequently, ‘integrity management’ is defined as ‘the consistent

TABLE 1
A Typology of Integrity Violations (Huberts, 2018).

1. Corruption: bribing	6. Break rules/misuse power (also for the organization)
2. Corruption: favoritism	7. Misuse and manipulation of information
3. Conflict of interest (gifts, jobs, etc.)	8. Indecent treatment (intimidation, discrimination)
4. Fraud and theft of resources	9. Private time misconduct
5. Waste and abuse of resources	

(systemic) efforts of an organisation focused on promoting integrity’ (Huberts, Hoekstra, & Gaisbauer, 2016, p. 16). In addition, while mostly taking place at the meso-level of organizations, in our view integrity management can also be conducted at the micro-level amongst individuals as well as on the macro-level of policy domains and national integrity systems. The following outlines how historical research on Dutch scandals provides avenues to assess integrity’s fluidity and so-called ‘grey-area’ integrity violations. Then, the article moves from historical description to prescription for current integrity management with four concrete lines of action.

SCANDALS AND ‘GREY-AREA’ INTEGRITY VIOLATIONS

A research project ongoing since 2013 has resulted in a growing archive of Dutch integrity scandals since 1945 (Kerkhoff & Overeem, 2013). The project is the follow-up of longitudinal study of corruption in the Netherlands for an earlier period (Kerkhoff et al., 2020). The database currently contains 39 cases of integrity scandals, covering municipal, provincial, and national levels of government. The scandals are about (supposed) integrity violations of different kinds (see Table 1). The database offers full descriptions of cases and categorizes them by means of a number of relevant variables, such as period, location, government level, and (private) actors involved.

As the database grows it will allow for increasingly complex as well as quantitative cross-case analyses. Presently, however, the goal is to draw some initial practical lessons from it. Although cases are widely recognized as valuable material to learn about public policy and management (see the Harvard Kennedy School Case Program), longitudinal collections of corruption or integrity cases – either for several or single countries – are not common. And yet these are crucial to preserve the history of integrity as they aid the collective understanding of how, when, and why societal interpretations of ‘good governance’ develop. To this end, the database offers factual reconstructions of cases in their relevant legal, social-economic, and/or political and policy context. This offers intricate debates regarding specific behavior – debates in which different stakeholders in different contexts ascribe meaning to integrity.

The cases are not meant to pass moral judgment, but only to understand public debate which led to the establishment, maintenance, or change of integrity norms. From a methodological point of view (Van Eijnatten, Kennedy, Rutgers, & Wagenaar, 2008; de Graaf & Huberts, 2008; Heywood, 2015), integrity scandals are valuable because they make implicit understandings explicit, as they almost force people to voice their opinion. Scandals create moments in which norms are debated and constructed, and thus serve as tools to measure

change, continuity, and diversity in thought and practice surrounding integrity and connected concepts such as the public interest or political-administrative relations. Scandals are often even catalysts of normative change in themselves (Mancini, 2018; Moodie, 1989). In addition, they offer educational tools for ‘dilemma discussions’ in public (Cooper, 2006) and private (Van Luijk, 2000) organizations.

Integrity scandals also allow for a look at so-called ‘grey-area’ integrity violations. As mentioned, people tend to value different things and can have valid arguments to do so. Such justified disagreement is commonly the driver of integrity scandals in which public morality has supposedly but not clearly been violated. ‘Grey-area’ violations are in-between fully *unacceptable* behavior (e.g., bribery for self-enrichment) and fully acceptable behavior (e.g., being honest). A typology of integrity violations (Lasthuizen, Huberts, & Heres, 2011) is helpful to better understand how this works.

While it is certainly not exact science (nor could it be, given the contextual nature of integrity), more or less *unacceptable* behavior is found in types 1 to 4. But even here there is room for nuance, or as MacIntyre (1981, pp. 17–18) once aptly put it: ‘adjectives acquire meaning in a context of expectations associated with a public office.’ After all, actions that are legal can still be morally reprehensible, for example when public officials display supposedly ‘lavish’ behavior. Reversely, actions can be illegal but still morally sound, for example when whistleblowers leak classified information to expose a clear injustice.

Things become still more difficult as we move down the list. This concerns behavior that is by no means necessarily less harmful but that is simply more debatable. In 2010, the Dutch minister of agriculture Gerda Verburg for example had to answer to parliament when it became known her ministry had spent €400.000 on a magazine celebrating the ministry – having the minister on the cover and her first name as its title (Woede over Glossy ‘Gerda,’ 2010). To some it was a waste of resources (no. 5) or even a sign of ‘the corruption of government.’ Others believed it was harmless or even useful for public relations. Many similar discussions on ‘wastefulness’ and lacking integrity can also be found elsewhere, such as the case of in-flight reheating coffee cups purchased for no less than \$1,300 a piece by the US Air Force (Losey, 2018).

Further down the list we find our opening example of mayor Schutte leaking confidential information (no. 6 and 7) but still being hailed as a hero. Similarly, in 2007, Tilburg city council member Hans Smolders was fined for leaking confidential information (no. 7) about the way in which a local entrepreneur was treated by mayor Ruud Vreeman. While Smolders was convicted to pay a fine and was vilified by his political opponents, many people in Tilburg praised him for ‘sticking up for the people’ and ‘speaking truth to power’ (Kerkhoff & Overeem, 2013 case # 2014NL15; 2018, pp. 71–81). Such cases help to understand better why corrupt politicians often still receive (electoral) support (de Sousa & Moriconi, 2013; Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013). While Dutch examples of this phenomenon are mainly local, elsewhere national politicians are also in the same position. One can think of US President Trump, Israel’s Prime Minister Netanyahu, or Hungary’s President Orbán who arguably lack integrity but get voted into office nonetheless.

Moving further down the list, we find the category of private time misconduct (no. 9). Examples of this can be found everywhere, for instance in cases of (supposed) sexual transgressions (Alan Fine, 2019; Dagnes, 2011). One example from the Dutch context is from

2003 when Amsterdam alderman Rob Oudkerk was criticized after he revealed to a columnist that – among other things – he regularly visited prostitutes in a zone where prostitution was allowed but which had just come under public scrutiny because it attracted vulnerable, heroine-addicted prostitutes. As alderman, he had the responsibility to close down this area, while as a private individual he made use of its services. The case attracted different opinions. To some it was a private matter and not problematic as long as he did his work properly. Others argued his behavior was fundamentally unbecoming for a public official, especially given Oudkerk’s tasks as alderman, his profession as a medical doctor, and his centre-left party affiliation. Oudkerk himself believed he deserved a second chance since people can make mistakes and should be able to improve (Kerkhoff & Overeem, 2018, pp. 87–96).

These examples illustrate how, particularly lower down the list, there is more room for debate. In such cases, integrity norms are often not clear and stable, but vague and fluid. The examples also show that integrity scandals are useful as focal points of debate in which norms are re-established or changed. Still, the question remains what practical lessons they offer. If we know that integrity norms are fluid and that scandals are conducive to that process, what can professionals involved in integrity management actually do with those insights? To this practical question we will now turn.

TAKING AIM AT A MOVING TARGET: FOUR LINES OF ACTION

This section moves from theoretical and historical evidence on the fluidity of integrity to prescriptions of how this might affect current integrity management. In addition, we argue that the change of integrity norms is not an entirely autonomous process that must catch people off-guard. One should be aware that public integrity norms change *and* that this change can be actively discussed, anticipated, and influenced. To this end, and based on lessons learned from past Dutch scandals, we offer four lines of action.

Be sensitive to changes in the environment

A first line of action, particularly aimed at practitioners, is to see integrity norms as constructed within a volatile social, legal, and political context. Many public officials accused of integrity violations seem insufficiently aware of this and as a result become involved in integrity scandals. Many Dutch officials in, especially, grey-area scandals often seem to be sticking to forgone norms rather than complying with current ones, let alone being ahead of the game. They often seem taken by surprise when confronted with accusations. This could of course be a posture, but often their surprise seems genuine, if only because claiming ignorance is usually not advisable. Many seem genuinely unaware of the changing and critical public perceptions of public office holding.

One example is former alderman of the Dutch city of Venlo, Marc Verheijen (Kerkhoff & Overeem, 2018, pp. 10–13). In 2015, it became known that he had been discussing business over dinner with politician Jos van Rey (at the time suspected and later convicted of corruption) and local project-developer Piet van Pol. The reputation of Verheijen’s dinner

companions was a first problem. In addition, Verheijen had asked Van Pol to ‘invest in a better Venlo’ by donating €10.000 to his political party. This at least hinted at corruption as Van Pol was having problems to get his construction projects through the Venlo city council. Most uproar, however, was not caused by this potentially criminal aspect of the case, but by supposedly wasteful behavior. The three had enjoyed a dinner worth €2.631, including €127 bottles of wine. Verheijen paid a quarter of the bill with public money as he considered his part a ‘working dinner.’ While not illegal, this was widely condemned. By the time the scandal hit the blogs and newspapers, Verheijen had become a member of parliament. In his public statements he did not seem to realize that, particularly in times of economic difficulty, his conduct could be seen as highly inappropriate. After various attempts to downplay the issue, in the end he felt forced to resign as MP.

Assuming Verheijen had no bad intentions, the question is why he had not seen this coming? He was certainly not the first or the only public official under public scrutiny for expenses claims, in the Netherlands or abroad. Only in 2009, the UK had seen an immense scandal about the same issue (Heerde-Hudson, 2014; Kennedy, 2019). Similarly, in 2016 the German President of the *Bundestag* called for checks on MPs office expenses in a scandal dating back to 2009. Likewise, expenses by Canadian senators was a topic of heated debate in 2015 (Austen, 2015). Should Verheijen not have known that such a lavish dinner, particularly with these two men, could be problematic? Where was his awareness of societal discussions on public integrity and appropriate conduct of public officials? Did his ‘moral compass’ not function and, if so, what does this imply for his ability to be a good public official? Had his compass been better attuned, he could have avoided the scandal and saved Dutch politics a painful blow to its reputation.

Being aware of changing winds thus seems crucial to being a good public official. However, one should not go too far in this. Of course, public officials should not be weather-vanes, which lack integrity almost by definition. Still, given integrity’s fluidity, one should be able to at least look around and have the flexibility to adapt. At least a part of Verheijen’s mistake was that he did not notice the changes in popular sentiment concerning lavish dinners by public officials in economically difficult times. He also made the mistake of treating integrity not as a *moral* concept but as a *legal* one (his expenses claim was allowed after all). Of course, organizational (meso) environments also have a part to play here by helping individuals by speaking truth to power and curbing potentially harmful behavior.

Act with prudence and avoid integritism

Secondly, it seems important to act with prudence before, during, and after an integrity scandal. Prudence is the ability to judge between virtuous and vicious actions at any given time and place (Uhr, 2015). This is especially important in situations where the norm is unclear, accurate information is lacking, and one has to address, judge, and even sanction behavior of oneself and of others. After all, moral disapproval or condemnation is not always justified and jumping the gun can ruin careers. In part, prudence in integrity matters means one should not apply the term ‘integrity’ too soon or too widely. This is linked to the problem that, ironically, increased attention for integrity coupled with management efforts has led to what Huberts has called *integritism* (Huberts, 2018, p. 10; cf. Maesschalck, 2019b). That is to say:

stretching the concept of integrity beyond its limits by unjustly misconstruing all sorts of behavior as integrity violations. Simple mistakes or well-intended but failed policies are, for instance, erroneously classified as violations of integrity.

Integritism occurs partly because integrity is difficult to define and subject to change. It also follows from uncertainty about or a lack of knowledge of existing rules and regulations (Huberts, 2018, p. 10). If one is unsure what public law, for instance, means by ‘confidential information,’ then it is easy to wrongly accuse someone of breaching confidentiality. More cynically, integritism can also be motivated by political opportunism and serve as a weapon in political strife or campaigning (Bågenholm, Dahlberg, & Solevid, 2016), inspired by personal animosity, strenuous political-administrative relations, or popular discontent with policy. Increased media attention also tends to increase integritism as nuances get lost. In practice, it can be difficult to determine whether an instance of integritism has occurred and whether it was driven by malicious political motives. However, it can be argued that integritism is often a form of political opportunism and in those cases also a sign of lacking integrity. It is prudent, therefore, to always look carefully at the integrity not only of the accused but also of the accuser.

Integritism can lead to unnecessary or overly harsh punishment for minor transgressions. In the UK, for example, a British council worker was fired in 2017 for expressing her opinion on Twitter about Prince George. While her action was crude, referring to the then four-year old Prince as ‘a symbol of white privilege’ and name-calling him (Smith, 2017), one could discuss whether this was sufficient reason to be fired rather than reprimanded or otherwise corrected. Another example of integritism from the Dutch context was the alleged attempt of a civil servant in 2016 to take home an office printer from the Dutch Ministry of Defense (Kerkhoff & Overeem, 2013 case # 2019NL07). The printer was free for the taking, provided a supervisor signed off on it. When, on a bad day, the supervisor had already gone home and the civil servant could not wait for the signature, he attempted to leave the building with the printer (helped by a colleague), intending to ask for the signature – a mere formality after all – the next day. A security guard stopped both men on their way out, after which they returned the printer to its place, and attempted to forget all about it. However, the secretary-general – after consultation with the minister even – decided to set an example. In an attempt to show that the ministry valued absolute integrity absolutely, the person who had hatched the plan was fired and the one helping him demoted, even though the printer had never even left the building.

Clearly, integritism is detrimental to good governance. This is recognized in international literature (Maesschalck, 2019a; 2019b) and Dutch academia and practice (e.g., Boonstra, 2019; Buuren & Helden, 2018, pp. 21–23). A heightened awareness of integrity is good, but the balance can easily tip in the wrong direction. Integritism can create an integrity paradox where more attention for integrity leads to the flagging of more (supposed) problems and more concerns about the state of integrity (Nieuwenburg, 2007). Hyped and overstretched emphasis on integrity can be amplified by sometimes unrealistic demands for transparency and by the notion that one has to be a public official 24/7. What is more, the often immediate reflex of many to judge and condemn even before all the facts are known can lead to people leaving office unnecessarily (i.e., despite investigations proving their innocence) and may lead to fewer people willing to take on public responsibility. Integritism might lead to tense situations in which people are reluctant to speak openly and where ‘honest mistakes’ can no longer be discussed, let alone corrected.

A case in point is a scandal from 2006 involving the mayor of Maastricht, Gerd Leers (Kerkhoff & Overeem, 2013, case # 2014NL12). Leers had purchased a plot of land in the Bulgarian town of Byala in order to build a holiday villa. When the project failed due to fraud by the Bulgarian contractor, Leers attempted to reclaim his €220,000 investment. The Maastricht city council, however, started an investigation into the affair to determine whether he had complied with legal regulations. Preliminary investigations suggested the appearance of a conflict of interest, because of Leers' visit to the mayor of Byala and the Prime Minister of Bulgaria as well as his handling of the aftermath to reclaim his money, in which he supposedly used his public position to contact senior Bulgarian public officials in the Netherlands. The final investigation concluded that despite the appearance of a conflict of interest, Leers' communication had been transparent enough. In addition, Leers had not violated any legal regulations and had not abused his power for personal gain. By the time the final report was published, however, the damage to Leers' reputation had been done. During the subsequent debate in the city council, Leers asked for forgiveness, but he also professed his innocence and good intentions and his wish to continue as mayor. When it became apparent that the city council was not willing to forgive him – apparently on account of political reasons and Leers' damaged reputation – he resigned. Immediately afterwards, many council members stated they regretted Leers' resignation. When Leers walked out of the council chamber, he received a standing ovation from the entire council, so including those who had decided against him.

Although this is a complex case, it seems a good example of a lack of prudence on the side of Leers and of integritism spurred on by political opportunism on the side of the city council. It also shows how even the appearance of an integrity problem can already be enough to be 'convicted.' Precisely because of such integritism, prudence is all the more advised. Obviously, organizations have a responsibility to avoid such instances and provide a safe and protective climate for their personnel, at least until guilt is properly established.

Avoid over-emphasis on rules and regulations

A third issue arising from our longitudinal view of Dutch scandals concerns the risks of a strict compliance-based approach concentrating on rules and regulations. In the Netherlands – as undoubtedly elsewhere – more rules are often added after integrity scandals to cover additional types of immoral behavior. Of course rules and regulations are necessary, but the fluidity of integrity suggests it is imperative to reconsider their importance for integrity management. More rules can paradoxically lead to yet more scandals and unwanted behavior. One example concerns a police bureau in Amsterdam's red light district in the 1970s (Kerkhoff & Overeem, 2013, case # 2013NL02; Punch, 1982). In response to endemic transgressions by police officers (such as condoning activities of Dutch-Chinese drug gangs in return for fruit baskets and complimentary visits to brothels) more rules were implemented. Officers, however, contested them and simply found increasingly clever ways of circumventing them. This is in line with research showing how high levels of regulation can actually be associated with more, not less, corruption (Charron, Haring, & Lapuente, 2019; Holcombe & Boudreaux, 2015). More rules can also cause uncertainty and strain on a system. An example is the creation of rules concerning gift giving. Since 1999, Dutch MPs and civil

servants are not allowed to accept any gift worth more than €50. While meant to ensure fairness and neutrality, the amount itself is of course quite arbitrary and can easily lead to questions. Is a gift of €45 less problematic? And what about two gifts of €40 each? And how to determine there was no expectation of a counter gesture? As a result, much time and energy is spent creating more rules and guidelines for clarification. New and more rules can, however, be counterproductive and create less rather than more transparency.

Rules are certainly useful but they cannot cover everything that is at some point considered right or wrong by a variety of actors. Because integrity is fluid, an overemphasis on rules is ill-advised. It is simply impossible to prescribe all types of unwanted behavior, now or in the future. In addition, new norms invariably create new violations which will lead to more rules, thus creating a vicious cycle. New rules are also likely to weaken the validity of the existing regulatory framework. Subsequently, we might have to revisit the notion that integrity management ‘done right’ will one day help end all integrity problems. This is a chimera. As Bo Rothstein has phrased it, people are all too often looking for the implementation of the ‘magic key’ with which to change the institutional context to advise policy makers on anti-corruption (Rothstein, 2011, pp. 107–108). For every new integrity rule that is installed, one has to consider whether it is worth the costs, not only of ensuring compliance, but also of the new violations it creates. This is of course also, and perhaps especially, true for integrity management on the meso-level. Public managers should carefully consider whether rules and compliance are the best ways to tackle integrity problems, as they may be ineffective and even counter-productive.

Ensure proactive and democratic debate

The final line of action we wish to propose concerns the need of public debate when establishing norms. Since integrity is fluid, setting viable norms can only happen in an interplay of society at large, public organizations and professionals, the judiciary, and so-called moral authorities such as opinion-makers and academics (Eijnatten et al., 2008; Hoetjes, 1982). This means, among other things, that politicians need not necessarily simply accept changing norms without protest. They should not simply subject themselves to ‘trial by the masses’ based on the sentiment of the day (cf. Mancini, 2018). Public officials should be protected against sanctions inspired by public opinion until it is clear that a wrong has indeed been committed. In fact, public leaders have an express responsibility to avoid integritism in this way. In addition, while everyone undoubtedly has the right to question interpretations of integrity held by public officials, these opinions and perceptions can in turn be challenged all the same. An example would be to protect the Dutch system of transitional allowances for former politicians against public condemnation. This system guarantees that, since politics is fickle, politicians who have to leave office can claim an allowance as they apply for their next job. While this seems an understandable measure, many integrity cases show how public opinion tends to wrongly equate use of this practice with corruption (Kerkhoff & Overeem, 2013, compare case # 2014NL03; 2014NL08; 2013NL01; 2014NL07). This is an interpretation of integrity that should be subjected to careful debate.

Public debates about integrity can also be streamlined and institutionalized on the macro and meso levels. On the macro level, they can be democratically embedded by parliament to

regularly assess new or existing codes of conduct in open debate. This would legitimize procedures and help prevent integritism, as more clarity is provided on how public integrity is ‘managed’ by politics. Dutch parliamentary debate on public integrity is, however, surprisingly scarce, even when scandals erupt (Kerkhoff, 2016b). Also, it seems crucial that a wide array of actors is involved in any public discussion. Current Dutch discussions – as will be the case elsewhere too – about public integrity seem dominated and decided by societal elites in mainstream media, which of course only provides a part of the picture. Surveying social media platforms and blogs in the wake of integrity scandals and actively consulting the wider public will invariably reveal different and often no less legitimate views. Of course, besides such ‘national’ debates, public organizations can and should use the tools available to them to institutionalize internal debate and integrity trainings with value-based (rather than strictly compliance-oriented) forms of integrity management (Maesschalck, 2004).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article offered a view on Dutch integrity scandals concerning ‘grey-area’ violations to assess the fluidity of integrity. Integrity scandals provided cases that reveal variation and fluidity as to when, how, and by whom new norms are set. In turn, the article discussed practical consequences of this fluidity for integrity management. It showed how to deal with the concept of integrity, with integrity violations when they supposedly occur, and with the subsequent public debate. It has been stressed that integrity management is like aiming at a moving target and requires careful and flexible consideration. To this end we have suggested four lines of action that all implied that issues that are currently often seen as threats (such as lacking conceptual clarity or the difficulty of regulatory solutions), could be seen as opportunities instead. For example, it is an opportunity to take into account one’s environment or to see scandals as episodes where different but equally legitimate norms collide. Most notably, this can prevent integrity violations, increase wider societal debates on ‘good governance,’ and help avoid integritism. The article also argued that the problem of integrity violations will never be a thing of the past simply because the meaning of integrity continues to change. The latter is an argument not only against the dominant and natural reflex to set more rules, but also against unrealistic managerial ambitions to ‘solve the issue’ once and for all. A final suggestion was to promote open and democratic deliberation on public integrity on the macro and meso levels. Integrity violations and subsequent debates need not always take people by surprise. Transformation of integrity norms does not just happen but can be actively and collectively shaped in what could be considered a whole new form of ‘integrity management.’

One final caveat seems due. The cases in this article are all from the Dutch context. This is an obvious limitation, but we believe the general argument about the fluidity of integrity norms and its practical implications applies to many more contexts, as was already shown by some non-Dutch examples. Still, we recognize that the Netherlands is in the fortunate position of being a place where one can critically assess alleged breaches of public integrity. It is therefore important to acknowledge that the situation described in this article and the lines of action we offer, may be more difficult to apply elsewhere. In countries where levels of corruption tend to be higher, energy could indeed best be put to use to improve the rules first

and talk about integritism later. At the same time, current issues in Dutch integrity management are certainly also common to other places with roughly the same perceived levels of integrity. In addition, integritism and a lack of democratic debate on what is ‘proper’ behaviour for public officials will be detrimental in all countries, no matter their situation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors wish to thank the participants of the 2019 Belfast EGPA panel *The Quality and Integrity of Governance*, in particular Leonie Heres, Gjalt de Graaf, Ciarán O’Kelly and Michael Macaulay, for valuable critique on an earlier draft of this paper.

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