A MULTI-LEVEL INTEGRITY FRAMEWORK FOR THE PUBLIC SECTOR GOVERNANCE: LESSONS SYNTHESIZED FROM POLICING RESEARCH

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Abstract: Integrity is a critical foundation of ethical governance and public trust, yet existing research remains fragmented across individual, organizational, and institutional perspectives. This study addresses this gap by developing a multi-level integrity framework that conceptualizes integrity as a systemic governance capability. Guided by the PRISMA-ScR approach, a structured scoping review was conducted using Scopus and Web of Science databases, resulting in 24 eligible studies published between 2015 and 2025.The findings reveal that integrity is shaped through dynamic interactions across three interconnected levels: individual moral reasoning, organizational ethical infrastructure, and societal governance conditions. The study further identifies key mediating mechanisms, including ethical climate, leadership behaviour, accountability systems, and public trust, which enable cross-level reinforcement of ethical conduct. By explicating these linkages, the framework moves beyond descriptive models and provides a theoretically grounded basis for multilevel analysis. Importantly, the study addresses the Western-centric bias in existing literature by incorporating insights relevant to diverse governance contexts, including developing and ASEAN settings. The proposed framework offers a transferable and adaptive model to guide institutional reform, ethical leadership development, and integrity system design across public sector organizations. It also provides a foundation for future empirical validation through multilevel modelling and cross-national comparative research.

Keywords: Governance, Integrity, Multi-Level Framework, Police, Public Sector

1. Introduction

Public trust in government institutions depends significantly on the integrity of public officials and the ethical credibility of the administrative system. Integrity is widely recognized as a cornerstone of good governance, shaping the fairness, transparency, and accountability of public services (Huberts, 2018; Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016). However, despite its acknowledged importance, integrity is often conceptualized narrowly as an individual trait. Much of the existing literature examines integrity through isolated lenses, focusing separately on individual ethics, organizational culture, or institutional accountability mechanisms (Lasthuizen, Huberts & Heres, 2011). This analytical fragmentation constrains the development of governance models capable of addressing integrity as a systemic and multi-level capability.

Policing research offers a uniquely robust empirical foundation for overcoming this fragmentation. Police organizations operate in an environment characterized by high discretion, intense ethical pressures, and constant public scrutiny, where misconduct can rapidly erode institutional legitimacy (Fielding, 2023; Ivkovic & Haberfeld, 2015). Consequently, policing studies offer rich empirical evidence on how moral reasoning, leadership behaviour, organizational culture, accountability systems, and social expectations interact to shape integrity outcomes. These determinants reflect dynamics that extend beyond law enforcement and are equally relevant to other public service institutions that manage authority and discretion.

This paper addresses the analytical potential of policing research by synthesizing key determinants of integrity and translating them into a multi-level framework applicable to public sector governance. By repositioning insights from policing within a broader governance perspective, the study advances an integrated conceptualization of integrity that connects individual, organizational, and societal dimensions. Unlike prior approaches that examine these elements in isolation, this study emphasizes the interaction mechanisms through which integrity is reinforced across levels. The resulting framework provides a structured and transferable model to inform ethical leadership development, institutional reform, and the strengthening of integrity systems across public institutions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Integrity as a Foundation of Ethical Governance*

Integrity reflects the alignment between values, principles, and organizational behaviour. In public administration, integrity supports ethical decision-making, ensures compliance with legal norms, and reinforces public accountability (Huberts, 2018). Beyond individual morality, integrity is increasingly understood as institutional characteristics that shapes how public authority is exercised and justified (Lasthuizen et al., 2011). It functions as a normative anchor that guides administrative discretion, resource allocation, and policy implementation.

Studies consistently link integrity to improved service outcomes, reduced corruption risks, and enhanced societal trust (Wei et al., 2020; Sajari et al., 2023). In governance contexts, integrity contributes to legitimacy by aligning institutional behaviour with societal expectations of fairness and transparency (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016). Conversely, integrity failure, whether arising from ethical misconduct, abuse of discretion, or weak accountability systems, can destabilize institutional credibility and erode citizen confidence.

Contemporary governance research further recognizes integrity as a systemic governance capability rather than merely an individual virtue. This systemic perspective emphasizes the interaction between leadership ethics, organizational culture, regulatory frameworks, and public oversight (Moon et al., 2024). From this viewpoint, integrity is embedded within administrative structures and is sustained through coordinated ethical infrastructures that integrate policies, norms, and behavioural expectations. Therefore, understanding integrity requires moving beyond micro-level analysis toward a multi-level framework that captures its embedded and relational nature.

2.2 *Police Institution as a Strong Analytical Lens*

Policing represents a high-stakes organizational environment in which integrity is constantly tested. Police officers exercise significant discretion in interpreting laws, managing public interactions, and responding to uncertain situations (Fielding, 2023). Such discretion, often exercised under limited supervision, increases exposure to ethical dilemmas and heightens the importance of internalized moral standards (Demirkol & Nalla, 2020). In this context, integrity is not optional but fundamental to maintaining institutional legitimacy and public trust.

Ethics failure in policing, ranging from corruption to misuse of authority, leads to visible consequences for governance credibility (Ivkovic & Haberfeld, 2015). As a result, policing scholars has produced extensive empirical evidence on integrity determinants, including moral reasoning (Rest, 1986), organizational socialization (Schuck & Rabe, 2021), leadership behaviour (Brown & Trevino, 2006), accountability systems (Torrible, 2021), and cultural norms such as the "code of silence" (Westmarland & Conway, 2020). These determinants illustrate how ethical behaviour is shaped by interactions between individual cognition, institutional culture, and external oversight mechanisms.

The policing sector can thus be described as an ethically "stress-tested" environment (Prenzler et al., 2025), where governance vulnerabilities are highly visible and intensively examined. Lessons derived from this sector extend beyond law enforcement and are directly relevant to ministries, regulatory agencies, inspection bodies, and public service organizations that manage discretionary authority. Consequently, policing research offers a robust analytical foundation for conceptualizing integrity as a multi-dimensional and transferable governance construct.

2.3 *A Multi-Level Perspective on Integrity*

A multi-level analytical perspective is required to integrate insights from governance and policing scholars. Multi-level frameworks recognize that behaviour within organizations emerges from interactions across micros (individual), meso (organizational), and macro (societal) levels (Cropanzo & Greenberg, 1997). Ethical decision-making is influenced not only by personal values but also by leadership expectations, institutional norms, and broader regulatory environments.

At the micro level, moral reasoning and ethical sensitivity influence how individuals interpret dilemmas and exercise discretion (Rest, 1986). At the meso level, leadership ethics, procedural justice, and integrity climate shape behavioural norms and compliance (Huberts et al., 2007; Sabil et al., 2021). At the macro level, legal frameworks, cultural expectations, media scrutiny, and public trust condition the legitimacy and enforcement of integrity standards (Wu et al., 2018, Liu et al., 2024).

The multi-level framework aligns with institutional and governance theories, which emphasize that integrity behaviour is embedded within interconnected structures rather than driven solely by individual choice. By adopting the framework, integrity can be conceptualized as an interdependent capability emerging from coordinated influence across levels. This perspective provides the theoretical foundation for the multi-level integrity framework developed in this study.

Recent empirical studies (2020–2025) further reinforce the evolving understanding of integrity as a context-dependent and system-level construct. For instance, Makin et al. (2024) demonstrate the use of predictive analytics in identifying integrity risks, while Moon et al. (2024) highlight benchmarking approaches in public service integrity systems. Similarly, Cao et al. (2022) and Liu et al. (2024) provide contemporary evidence on the influence of organizational climate and public trust. These emerging contributions reflect a shift toward data-driven and governance-oriented approaches to integrity management.

3. Methodology

This study employs a structured scoping review guided by the PRISMA-ScR framework (Tricco et al., 2018) to ensure transparency and replicability. A systematic search was conducted using two major databases, Scopus and Web of Science, covering publications between 2015 and 2025. The search focused on peer-reviewed empirical and conceptual studies related to police integrity. Inclusion criteria comprised English-language publications addressing determinants of integrity within policing contexts, while non-academic sources and unrelated topics were excluded. The search strategy employed combinations of keywords such as "police integrity," "ethical behaviour," "accountability," and "organizational ethics," with screening conducted through title, abstract, and full-text review in accordance with PRISMA-ScR procedures. Following screening and duplication removal, a total of

24 studies were included for analysis. These studies were systematically coded and categorized into individual, organizational, and societal levels to support multi-level framework development.

3.1 *Analytical Procedure for Framework Development*

The primary focus of this paper is theoretical integration and framework construction. The development of the multi-level framework involved three analytical stages. First, recurring determinants of integrity were extracted and coded based on thematic similarity. Concepts such as moral reasoning, ethical sensitivity, leadership behaviour, integrity climate, accountability systems, public trust, and legal oversights were identified as consistently emphasized across studies.

Second, these determinants were analytically clustered into micro (individual), meso (organizational), and macro (societal) levels to reflect the structural layers within which public sector behaviour operates. This clustering was informed by multi-level organizational theory and governance literature, which emphasizes that institutional outcomes emerge from cross-level interactions.

Third, the clustered determinants were synthesized into a vertically aligned conceptual structure illustrating how integrity is cultivated, reinforced, or undermined through dynamic interactions across levels. The resulting framework emphasizes interdependence rather than linear causality, positioning integrity as a systemic capability embedded within governance systems. This analytical procedure ensures that the framework is grounded in systematically synthesized evidence while advancing a coherent and transferable model into ethical governance.

4. Findings

The structured synthesis of policing integrity literature reveals that determinants of integrity operate across three interconnected levels: individual, organizational, and societal. Rather than functioning independently, these determinants interact dynamically to shape ethical conduct within public institutions. The analysis demonstrates that integrity emerges through vertical alignment across three levels, forming the basis of the proposed multi-level integrity framework.

At the micro level, integrity originates from individual moral cognition and ethical disposition. Recurring determinants include moral reasoning (Rest, 1986), ethical sensitivity, perceived seriousness of misconduct (Hickman et al., 2016), and willingness to report misconduct (Westmarland & Rowe, 2018). Studies consistently show that individuals with higher ethical awareness and stronger internalized values demonstrate lower tolerance for misconduct and greater adherence to principled decision-making.

Professional socialization, particularly when conducted through academy ethics training, plays a formative role in shaping moral judgment (Blumberg et al., 2015; Schuck & Rabe, 2021). Additionally, factors such as gender and socio-political orientation (Prenzler et al., 2023; Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2021) indicate that integrity perceptions are influenced by broader value systems and identity constructs. These findings position individual moral capacity as the foundational layer of integrity. However, evidence also suggests that personal ethics alone cannot sustain institutional integrity without supportive organizational conditions.

At the organizational level, integrity is reinforced or weakened by institutional structure and leadership behaviour. Ethical leadership, integrity climate, procedural justice and disciplinary fairness emerge as central determinants (Huberts et al., 2007; Cao et al., 2022). Studies highlight that leadership modelling significantly influences tolerance of misconduct and reporting norms, demonstrating that ethical standards are socially reinforced within organizations.

Formal accountability system, including complaint-handling mechanisms, civilian oversight structures (Prenzler et al, 2025), and early intervention systems (Makin et al., 2024), functions as structural safeguards reinforcing ethical conduct. Moreover, the cultural norms, particularly the “code of silence”

(Westmarland & Conway, 2020), demonstrate how informal peer expectations can undermine formal accountability systems. These syntheses indicate that integrity at the organizational level depends on the alignment between formal accountability mechanisms and informal cultural norms. When these structures are coherent, moral capacity is institutionalized. If these are misaligned, the ethical standard might deteriorate.

Beyond organizational boundaries, integrity is influenced by macro-level governance and societal expectations. Legal and regulatory frameworks (Ivkovic & Haberfeld, 2015), public trust and legitimacy (Liu et al., 2024), and media scrutiny (Wu et al., 2018) shape both enforcement and perception of ethical standards. Evidence suggests that strong oversight institutions and active public engagement enhance institutional resilience, while weak regulatory environments create systemic vulnerabilities. Societal-level conditions, therefore, influence whether organizational accountability mechanisms are credible and sustainable. Hence, integrity at this level reflects the alignment between institutional conduct and broader governance legitimacy.

Across the synthesis evidence, a consistent pattern emerges. Integrity does not originate at a single level but is produced through cross-level interactions. Individual moral reasoning is reinforced or suppressed by organizational climate, while original systems operate within wider societal governance structures. This interdependence forms the foundation of the multi-level integrity framework proposed in this study. The framework conceptualized integrity as a vertically aligned capability requiring coordinated reinforcement across micro, meso, and macro domains. Disruptions at any level may weaken the overall integrity of systems, whereas alignment across levels strengthens ethical governance. The framework proposed emphasizes dynamic and reciprocal influences. Sustainable integrity, therefore, required systemic coherence between moral agency, institutional design, and governance legitimacy. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed multi-level framework.



Figure 1: Multi-Level Framework of Integrity
Source: Author's Work

Table 1: Publication Included

No	Author (s) & Years	Title/Focus	Context / Country	Main Findings / Contribution
1	Ivković et al. (2025)	The Profile of Police Integrity	Global	Comprehensive profiling of integrity dimensions serves as theoretical and measurement reference.
2	Prenzler et al. (2025)	The Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland	Northern Ireland	Demonstrates ombudsman model effectiveness for complaint handling and integrity assurance.
3	Makin et al. (2024)	Predicting Police Integrity using Support Vector Machine	USA	Applies SVM to predict integrity from survey data and introduces AI methods into integrity research.
4	Liu et al. (2024)	Croatian Immigrants' Trust in Home- and Abroad-Country Police	Croatia / Diaspora	Police integrity perceptions influence immigrants' trust and transnational legitimacy.
5	Prenzler et al. (2023)	Male and Female Differences in Integrity Indicators	Australia	Reveals gender-based variations in integrity perceptions and reporting behaviour.
6	Prenzler et al. (2022)	Advanced Strategies in Police Integrity Management	Australia	Summarizes strategic, managerial, and training interventions to strengthen integrity.
7	Cao et al. (2022)	Police Integrity in Taiwan and Its Correlates	Taiwan	Identifies correlates (ethics climate, supervision, culture) associated with integrity.
8	Van Droogenbroeck et al. (2022)	Too Right-Wing for Police Integrity?	Belgium	Finds political ideology and work experience significantly shape integrity attitudes.
9	Watson et al. (2022)	Self-Evaluating Performance and Professionalism in the South Pacific	South Pacific nations	Self-evaluation frameworks improve professionalism and perceived integrity.
10	Schuck & Rabe (2021)	Longitudinal Effects of Academy Socialization	USA	Training socialization influences recruits' ethical judgment and tolerance levels.
11	Maskaly et al. (2021)	Validity of the Police Integrity Scale in Comparative Contexts	Multi-country	Confirms cross-national reliability of the Klockars integrity scale.
12	Torrible (2021)	Police Complaints and Discipline after 2017 Reforms	UK	Examine impacts of reform on disciplinary transparency and independence.
13	Alain et al. (2020)	Measuring Police Integrity: Psychometric Assessment of Klockars Questionnaire	Canada	Validates measurement instrument and proposes refinements for HR assessment.
14	Wagner et al. (2020)	Improving Police Integrity in Uganda: Accountability Program	Uganda	Demonstrates positive reform effects on accountability and ethics.
15	Ivković (2020)	Studying Police Integrity	Global	Provides unified theoretical and methodological framework for integrity studies.

16	Ivković et al. (2020)	Police Integrity in South Africa	South Africa	Explores integrity variations among police agencies under differing governance.
17	Wu et al. (2018)	Police Integrity in China	China	Shows institutional control and cultural norms as predictors of integrity.
18	Ivković & Sauerman (2016)	Police Integrity in South Africa: Three Agency Types	South Africa	Compares agency-level integrity differences; organizational context is decisive.
19	Westmarland & Conway (2020)	Police Ethics and Integrity: Keeping the Blue Code of Silence	UK	Reinforces persistence of silence and loyalty norms inhibiting reporting.
20	Westmarland & Rowe (2016)	Can a New Code Overturn the Blue Code?	UK	Evaluates ethics code effectiveness; cultural resistance persists.
21	Hickman et al. (2016)	Expanding the Measurement of Police Integrity	USA	Broadens measurement dimensions beyond vignettes and enriches construct validity.
22	Lim & Sloan (2016)	Police Officer Integrity: Replication and Extension	USA	Confirms prior integrity scale results and highlights consistency across samples.
23	Ivković & Haberfeld (2015)	Measuring Police Integrity across the World	Global	Foundational cross-national dataset and benchmark for comparative integrity research.
24	Blumberg et al. (2015)	Impact of Police Academy Training on Recruits' Integrity	USA	Finds training content modestly improves ethical sensitivity among recruits.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study advance the understanding of integrity by conceptualizing it as a systemic governance capability rather than an isolated moral attribute. Drawing on multi-level organizational theory (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000), the proposed framework demonstrates that integrity outcomes emerge through dynamic interactions across individual, organizational, and societal domains. Unlike prior models that categorize determinants within single-level or static frameworks, this study explicitly theorizes integrity as a cross-level system governed by identifiable mediating mechanisms. This perspective shifts the analytical focus from fragmented explanations toward an integrated and process-oriented understanding of how integrity is produced and sustained within public sector governance.

A key contribution of this study lies in explicating the mechanisms through which integrity is reinforced across levels. The concept of cross-level reinforcement is operationalized through identifiable mediating variables that connect micro, meso, and macro domains. At the individual–organizational interface, ethical climate and leadership behaviour function as critical mediators that translate personal moral reasoning into consistent ethical conduct. Individuals with strong moral awareness are more likely to act ethically when supported by transparent leadership and a reinforcing integrity climate. Conversely, weak leadership signals or misaligned organizational norms may suppress ethical agency, even among individuals with high moral capacity. These mediating variables are conceptually specified as measurable constructs that can be operationalized in future empirical studies, thereby enabling the application of multilevel modelling techniques to examine cross-level interactions in integrity systems.

At the organizational–societal interface, accountability systems, transparency mechanisms, and public trust operate as institutional mediators that determine whether organizational integrity is sustained or undermined. Formal structures such as complaint-handling systems, oversight bodies, and regulatory frameworks reinforce ethical standards by aligning internal practices with external expectations. In this sense, integrity is not only internally cultivated but externally validated. These mediating variables are

conceptually specified as measurable constructs that can be operationalized in future empirical studies. This enables the application of multilevel modelling techniques to examine how interactions across levels influence integrity outcomes, thereby strengthening the framework's empirical testability.

The framework also aligns with institutional theory, particularly the three-pillar model (Scott, 1995), further strengthening its theoretical grounding. The societal level reflects the regulative pillar, where legal frameworks and governance structures define formal expectations of integrity. The organizational level corresponds to the normative pillar, where leadership, culture, and accountability systems shape acceptable conduct. The individual level represents the cultural-cognitive pillar, encompassing moral reasoning and ethical awareness. By integrating these dimensions, the framework positions integrity as institutionally embedded and socially constructed, rather than individually determined.

Importantly, this study addresses the limitation of Western-centric bias prevalent in integrity literature. While much of the foundational research originates from Western policing contexts, study extends its relevance by incorporating perspectives applicable to diverse governance environments, including ASEAN and developing regions. Emerging evidence from these contexts indicates that factors such as hierarchical organizational structures, power distance, and varying levels of institutional capacity shape integrity practices differently from Western settings. These variations highlight the importance of adapting integrity mechanisms to contextual conditions rather than assuming universal applicability. As such, the proposed framework is positioned as context-sensitive and adaptable across different administrative and cultural environments.

Furthermore, the findings reinforce the relationship between integrity and public legitimacy, a central concern in public administration literature (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Huberts, 2018). The framework demonstrates that legitimacy is sustained when alignment exists across all three levels. Ethical individuals must operate within supportive organizational systems, which in turn must be embedded within credible governance structures. Misalignment at any level, whether weak leadership, ineffective accountability mechanisms, or low public trust, can destabilize the integrity system as a whole. This reinforces the argument that integrity is not a static attribute but a continuously negotiated outcome shaped by institutional coherence.

From a governance perspective, the study makes three substantive contributions. First, it integrates fragmented strands of integrity research into a coherent multi-level framework, offering a more comprehensive explanation of how ethical behaviour is produced and sustained. Second, it repositions policing research as analytically transferable to broader public sector governance, demonstrating that high-discretion, high-scrutiny environments provide valuable insights into integrity management across public institutions. Third, it reconceptualizes integrity as a proactive governance capability, shifting the focus from reactive anti-corruption measures toward systemic institutional design, ethical leadership development, and cross-level alignment.

Collectively, these contributions extend current debates on ethical governance by offering a theoretically grounded and empirically informed framework that is both explanatory and adaptable. The proposed model provides a robust foundation for future research employing multilevel modelling, longitudinal designs, and cross-national comparisons to further examine how integrity systems operate across different administrative and cultural contexts. Unlike prior integrity models that examine determinants in isolation or within single-level frameworks, this study explicitly theorizes integrity as a cross-level system governed by identifiable mediating mechanisms linking individual, organizational, and societal domains. This distinction shifts the analytical focus from static categorization of determinants to dynamic interaction processes, thereby offering a more precise and testable explanation of how integrity is produced and sustained in public sector governance.

6. Contribution, Implications, and Limitations

This study contributes to the literature on integrity and public sector governance in three key ways. First, it advances theory by integrating fragmented strands of integrity research into a coherent multi-

level framework that explains how ethical behaviour emerges through cross-level interactions. By identifying mediating mechanisms, including ethical climate, leadership behaviour, accountability systems, and public trust, the study strengthens the explanatory capacity of integrity models and provides a foundation for multilevel empirical testing. Second, the study extends the scope of policing research by demonstrating its analytical transferability to broader public sector governance. Insights derived from high-discretion and high-scrutiny policing contexts are translated into a governance framework applicable to ministries, regulatory agencies, and public institutions, thereby bridging disciplinary boundaries.

Third, the study reconceptualizes integrity as a proactive governance capability rather than a reactive compliance outcome. This perspective shifts attention toward systemic institutional design, ethical leadership development, and alignment across governance levels, offering a more strategic approach to strengthening integrity in public administration. The findings also provide practical implications for policymakers and public sector leaders. At the individual level, recruitment, training, and professional development should prioritize moral reasoning, ethical sensitivity, and reflective decision-making. At the organizational level, integrity should be embedded within institutional structures through ethical leadership, transparent disciplinary systems, effective complaint mechanisms, and data-driven monitoring tools. Integrity, climate and procedural fairness should be treated as measurable organizational outcomes. At the societal level, strengthening integrity requires coherent governance ecosystems supported by independent oversight, consistent legal enforcement, and transparent public engagement. Public trust should be recognized as both an outcome and a reinforcing mechanism of institutional integrity. These strategies must be context-sensitive, particularly in developing and ASEAN environments where institutional conditions differ.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The framework is derived from a scoping synthesis and reflects the breadth of existing scholarship rather than primary empirical validation. The dominance of Western-based studies may also limit contextual generalizability. Furthermore, while the framework conceptualizes cross-level relationships, the proposed mechanisms require empirical testing. Future research should employ multilevel modelling, longitudinal designs, and cross-national comparative analysis to validate and refine the proposed framework.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study addresses fragmentation in integrity scholarship by synthesizing determinants identified in policing research and translating them into a coherent, multi-level framework for public sector governance. The findings demonstrate that integrity is not merely an individual moral attribute but an emergent governance capability shaped by the interaction of moral reasoning at the individual level, ethical infrastructure at the organizational level, and legitimacy structures at the societal level. Integrity is sustained when alignment exists across these interconnected domains, where personal ethical agency is reinforced by institutional design and supported by broader oversight and regulatory environments. By repositioning policing scholarship within public administration discourse, this study bridges disciplinary boundaries and highlights the transferability of integrity mechanisms across diverse public institutions. Based on these insights, public sector reform should move beyond compliance-driven approaches and instead embed integrity within recruitment, professional development, leadership modelling, transparent disciplinary systems, effective complaint mechanisms, and independent oversight structures. Policymakers should strengthen governance coherence by aligning institutional accountability with citizen engagement and regulatory safeguards. Future research should empirically test the proposed multi-level relationships through multilevel modelling and comparative cross-national analysis to further validate and refine this systemic framework.

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