


# “The influence of trust, communication and commitment on ethical behavior in universities: a case of South Africa”

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# THE INFLUENCE OF TRUST, COMMUNICATION AND COMMITMENT ON ETHICAL BEHAVIOR IN UNIVERSITIES: A CASE OF SOUTH AFRICA

## Abstract

This study examines the influence of trust, communication and commitment, that have on ethical behaviour in universities in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Three hypotheses are posited in this research. The empirical test of hypotheses based on a sample data set of 450 respondents from universities in the Gauteng province of South Africa was provided. IBM SPSS statistics 24.0 and IBM SPSS Amos 24.0 software were used to analyze the data. The results indicate that trust, communication and commitment positively influence ethical behavior in universities. Drawing from the study's findings, managerial implications are discussed and limitations and future research directions are suggested. This study contributes new knowledge to the existing body of ethical behavior literature and organizational behaviour theories in Africa.

## Keywords

trust, communication, commitment, ethical behavior

**JEL Classification** M14

## INTRODUCTION

Cultural diversities within organizational workforces are on the increase, with more individuals seeking to be part of such organizations as universities. However, many may not realize that these organizations have their respective ethical standards and interests, which may vary from what they are already accustomed to the university (Constantin, 2010). "Although universities are unique organizations, they have commonalities with other large and diverse organizations. The President or Chancellor (the title depends on the tradition of the university) is the CEO, and other administrators (vice presidents, provosts, deans) represent the dominant coalition or top management team. Faculties are the professional staff and mid-level managers (directors, department heads) found at the center of organizations. Other employees are workers that range from administrative assistants and computer experts to custodians. The similarities to other complex organizations are greater than the differences, making the findings applicable to a variety of types of large organizations" (White, Vanc & Stafford, 2010).

Ethical behavior within the university is highly significant, particularly because it is central to employee performance. It is, thus, critical that ethical environments be created within the universities so that they can provide guiding principles on how the interests and responsibilities of the employer-employee could be balanced for optimal functioning (Saeed, Shakeel & Lodhi, 2013). Three critical factors (trust, communication and commitment) will be examined in this study to know the level of influence each of these factors on the ethical behaviors of university employees. Trust is a fundamental aspect of human behavior (Choi, Law & Heo, 2016), usually assessed on the basis of a trustor's belief in a trustee (Yan, Ding, Niemi & Vasilakos, 2016) and established as crucial in resolving issues related to social discipline (Heidarabadi, 2010). Communication is being considered as a more dominant mechanism in a leader-follower relationship (Fix & Sias, 2006); it is significant in enabling personnel within organizations work together for a common purpose (Ean, 2010) and is "second only, to leadership concerns" (Barnfield, 2003; White et al., 2010). Commitment is a vital contributor to successful relationships as it allows for cooperative behaviors within organizations (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Su, Swanson, Chinchanchokchai, Hsu & Chen, 2016) and is seen as a critical factor that determines pro-relationship behaviors and motivations (Morgan et al., 1994; Li, Browne & Wetherbe, 2006; Wanga, Wang & Liu, 2016, p. 627). The objectives of the study are to examine the relationship between trust and ethical behavior, to investigate the relationship between communication and ethical behavior and to analyze the relationship between commitment and ethical behavior in the universities in the Gauteng province of South Africa.

Given this background, this study work will be mainly aimed at the influence of trust, communication and commitment on ethical behavior in universities in a case of South Africa and also provides the research model and hypotheses, which cover data collection, analysis and result interpretation.

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## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1. Trust

Trust is a significant factor that determines the quality of relationships between individuals and is especially beneficial if it permeates through all work divisions or levels (managerial down to frontline employees) within institutions (Starnes, Truhon & McCarthy, 2009). One of such benefits is the development of institutional values that promotes ethical behavior (Ross, 2003; Akker, Heres, Lasthuizen & Six, 2009). According to Valizadeha, Kawarizadehb and Shokri (2015), trust facilitates interactions and plays a crucial role in resolving complications associated with social discipline.

Trust has been well-defined by a number of studies. It is "the reliance by one person, group, or firm upon a voluntarily accepted duty on the part of another person, group, or firm to recognize and protect the rights and interests of all others engaged in a joint endeavor or economic exchange" (Hosmer, 1995, p. 393); "a

psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviors of another" (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt & Camerer, 1998, p. 395). It could also be defined as the degree of a subjective belief about the behaviors of a particular entity (Cook, 2003; Cho, Chen & Chan, 2016, p. 58). Trust can be characterized in three dimensions – ability, benevolence and integrity. Ability refers to the trust placed on individuals by the virtue of their skills or competencies, while benevolence is the degree of a trustor's belief in a trustee and integrity denotes the sense of values or principles that an individual finds satisfactory so such that can guide the behaviors of other parties (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995; Starnes et al., 2009; Choi et al., 2016; De Reuver, Nikou & Bouwman, 2015; Yan et al., 2016). Integrity is recognized as most closely associated to ethical decision making.

Organizations with high levels of cultural trust tend to produce high quality products and services at less cost, because they can recruit and retain highly motivated employees. These em-

employees are more likely to enjoy their work; take the time to do their jobs correctly; make their own decisions; take risks; innovate; embrace the organization's vision, mission, and values; and display organizational citizenship behavior, as a result, leaders are free to perform other tasks (Starnes et al. 2009, p. 6).

## 1.2. Communication

Though multifaceted, communication is a fundamental process for human interaction (Yilmaz, Kumcagiz, Balci-Celik & Eren, 2011; Lies, 2012). It is the conveyance or exchange of information, ideas, feelings and attitudes from an entity (sender) to another (receiver) with specific intentions using verbal and non-verbal approaches (Iksan, Zakaria, Meerah, Osman, Lian, Mahmud & Krish, 2012; Duta, 2015; Syarief, Genoveva, 2015). Communication is an essential skill required for virtually any profession (Duta, 2015). The process of communicating within organizations is called internal communication. It is a complicated process and consists of top management communication to employees, vertical communication between a supervisor and a subordinate, and horizontal communication among employees in the organization (Furuya, 2012, p. 2).

A significant requirement for the success of any organization is the effectiveness of its internal communication; however, it has been more often than none underestimated (Constantin & Baias, 2015) with marginal consideration given to what employees crave to be informed about (Ruck & Welch, 2012). According to Chen (2008), internal communication is a management tool that aids in the identification, establishment and maintenance of employer-employee relationships; it is thus critical for organizational survival. Furuya (2012) expressed the existence of substantial empirical evidences that show a significant relationship between internal communication and variables such as trust and organizational commitment; this was also buttressed by Constantin et al. (2015) who stressed that only an effective internal communication could aid in building employee commitment and trust in management. And as would be established in subsequent sections, trust and commitment within organizations are strongly correlated to personnel ethical behavior.

## 1.3. Commitment

Organizational commitment is the level of involvement an employee has towards their organization and its values (Zareie & Navimipour, 2016, p. 168). It is associated with the attachment and behavior of employees towards their respective institutions (Salahudin, Baharuddin, Abdullah & Osman, 2016); fundamental particularly because the interests, goals and needs of employees and their institutions must be fitted together to maximize employee efficiency (Devece, Palacios-Marqués & Alguacil, 2016) and a central source of competitive advantage (Zareie et al., 2016). Mayer and Schoorman (1992), Jung and Yoon (2016) add that organizational commitment points to the confidence individuals have in organizational goals and ethics and the readiness to put in extensive effort for their organizations.

According to several sources (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Allen & Meyer, 1996; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch & Topolnytsky, 2002; Meyer & Maltin, 2010; Devece et al., 2016; Fernandez-Lores, Gavilan, Avello & Blasco, 2016; Clements, Kinman, Leggetter, Teoh & Guppy, 2016; Salahudin et al., 2016), commitment is conceptualized in three dimensions – the affective commitment which demonstrates an individual's emotional bond with an organization; such individual is involved in and identifies with organizational goals and ethics, the employee choose to remain in the organization because he/she wants to (Chinomona & Dhurup, 2015). Normative commitment echoes an individual's sense of moral obligation or responsibility to remain in an organization while continuance commitment reflects the decision of an employee to continue to work as a result of the high cost associated with leaving the organization. Research conducted on commitment has shown that employees with higher organizational commitment engage in organizational citizenship behavior, and this, in turn, results in better performance and higher work motivation which are beneficial to the organization (Chinomona & Dhurup, 2015; Rafiee, Bahrami & Entezarian, 2015; Bahrami, Aghaei, Barati, Tafti & Ezzatabadi, 2016).

## 1.4. Ethical Behaviour

Behaviour can be referred to as any identifiable pattern in a sequence of activities or observations (Monekosso & Remagnino, 2010; Al-Mutairi,

Yahyaoui & Raafat, 2016, p. 20), while ethics are “standards that determine some frameworks for the decisions relative to behaviors of value ... It involves those cases that a person under the effect of just and unjust virtue and vice, does virtue and refuses vice” (Nakhaie & Zadeh, 2011, p. 303). Ethical behavior could, therefore, be defined as an individual behavior that is subject to or judged according to generally accepted moral norms of behavior (Treviño, Weaver & Reynolds, 2006, p. 952). There are three perspectives that could account for differences in ethical behavior. The first view is the “individual difference perspective” which posits that the determinant of ethical behavior is based on an individual’s values, motives and traits, while the second view “situational perspective” suggests that surrounding circumstances or the organization’s environment is responsible for the differences in ethical behavior. The third, “interactionist perspective”, is a combination of the two perspectives which submits that individual and situational characteristics mutually contribute to ethical behavior (Lewin, 1951; Schneider, 1983; Baker, Hunt & Andrews, 2006).

Employees within organizations have to make an immense number of decisions on a daily basis and certain aspects of these decisions, have to deal with moral issues or ethical impasses. Personnel are expected to behave ethically in accordance with laid down codes of conducts within their respective or-

ganizations which is referred to as business/corporate/organizational ethics (Constantin, 2010); and actions like delinquencies, deviances and other counterproductive or opposing behaviors are regarded as violations of the “legitimate interests” of organizations (Sackett & DeVore, 2001; Martinko, Gundlach & Douglas, 2002; Treviño et al., 2006).

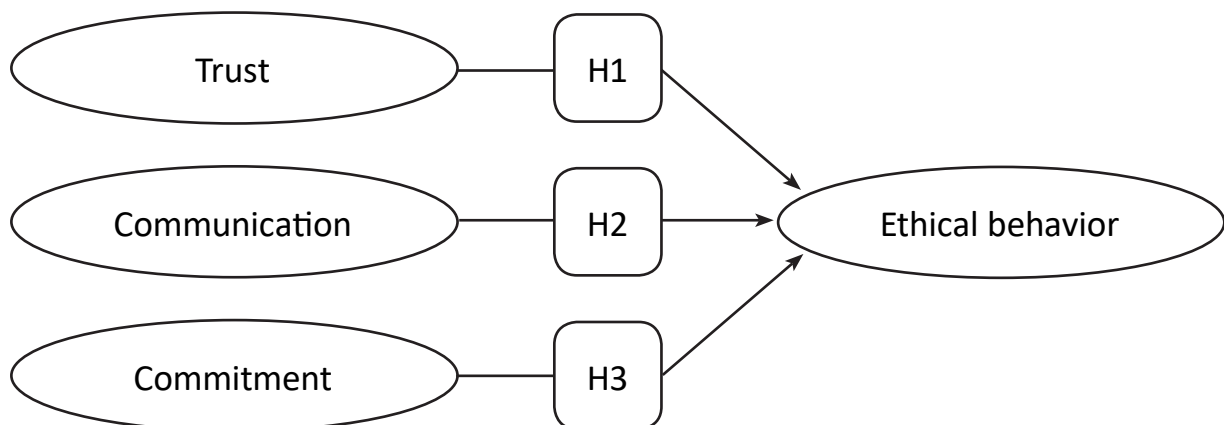
## 2. CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Based on the literature review, the framework illustrated in Figure 1 was conceptualized. In this framework, trust, communication and commitment are the predictors, whilst ethical behavior is the outcome variable. Figure below, illustrates the framework of the study. Hypothesised relationships between research constructs are developed thereafter.

## 3. RESEARCH DESIGN

### 3.1. Research approach

Taking into account the nature and strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research methods, the authors decided to employ a quantitative research tool for this study for reasons of reliability and validity of the results unlike in qualitative, where there is a lot of subjectivity in terms of the



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model

*H1: There is a positive relationship between trust and ethical behavior.*

*H2: There is a positive relationship between communication and ethical behavior.*

*H3: There is a positive relationship between commitment and ethical behavior.*

**Table 1.** Sample demographic characteristics

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	185	41%
Female	265	59%
Total	450	100%
Marital status	Frequency	Percentage
Married	107	24%
Single	343	76%
Total	450	100%
Age	Frequency	Percentage
18-25	99	23%
26-33	181	40%
34-41	97	21%
42-49	61	13%
50 years and above	12	3%
Total	450	100%
Academic Qualifications	Frequency	Percentage
Diploma/Degree	123	27%
Post-graduate	323	72%
Others	4	1%
Total	464	100%

results. Quantitative research allows researchers to provide statistical facts and estimates about relationships between constructs of research interest and to generalize inferences about the defined target population. Quantitative research is fast and can be conducted on large numbers of respondents with little cost and effort. The study made use of a non-probability sampling method. Convenience sampling method was used for usefulness reasons. Target population was the permanent staff members from universities in the Gauteng province of South Africa which include University of Johannesburg, University of Witwatersrand, Tswane University of Technology, University of Pretoria, Vaal University of Technology and Northwest University.

### 3.2. Measurement instruments

Research scales were operationalized mainly on the basis of previous work. Minor adaptations on trust were made in order to fit the current research context and purpose. Five-item scales which were adapted from the previous works of Stathopoulou and Balabanis (2016) were used to measure trust. Six questions were taken from Kim and Rhee (2011) to measure communication. A five-item scale tak-

en from Powell and Meyer (2004) scale also used by Chinomona and Dhurup (2015) was utilised to determine commitment. A sample question asked of the participants was: "I have invested too much time in this organization to consider working elsewhere". Five-item scales which were adapted from the previous works of Barker, Hunt and Andrews (2006) were used to measure ethical behavior. The instruments used refer to previous work by other authors but the procedure and the questionnaires were scientifically accepted.

### 3.3. Research procedure

The researchers obtained a letter indicating that permission had been given to conduct a study on the universities mentioned above. The researchers completed an ethical or approval form from Vaal University of Technology. The research assistants requested permission from the management of universities to conduct the research and took the questionnaires to each university at the time arranged with the top managers. Anonymity was ensured and participants were given room to withdraw at any time or any stage.

### 3.4. Descriptive statistics results

Descriptive statistics in Table 1 show the gender, age, marital status and the academic qualifications of employees in the company. The profile indicates that more females (59%) participated in the study than males (41%). The study also showed that there were more single respondents than married (24% were married and 76% single). The modal age group of respondents was between 26 and 33 years, constituting 40% of the sample. Those employees who were 50 years and older constituted about 3% of the sample. Most universities in the Gauteng province are occupied primarily by employees with a post graduate qualifications which include masters and doctorate (72%).

### 3.5. Tests of measures and accuracy analysis statistics

IBM SPSS statistics 24.0 and AMOS 24.0 software were used to carry out the statistical analysis. The reliability and validity of the measuring scales were assessed to ensure valid data analyses. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to examine the reliability, convergent and discriminant validity of the multi-item construct measures. All the factor loadings are above 0.5, which shows a good validity of the measurement instruments used. Overall acceptable CFA model fit indices used in this study included: the  $\chi^2 / df$  (Chi-Square/Degree of Freedom) value equal to or less than

**Table 2.** Accuracy analysis statistics

Research Construct	Cronbach's test		C.R. value	AVE value	Factor loading
	Item-total	$\alpha$ value			
TR1 (Trust)	0.855				0.901
TR2	0.700				0.767
TR3	0.834	0.819	0.810	0.733	0.863
TR4	0.899				0.923
TR5	0.612				0.699
CM1 (Communication)	0.745				0.865
CM2	0.633				0.709
CM3	0.815	0.865	0.865	0.793	0.854
CM4	0.916				0.950
CM5	0.589				0.641
CM6	0.908				0.967
OC1 (Commitment)	0.958				0.966
OC2	0.960	0.993	0.992	0.937	0.964
OC3	0.961				0.967
OC4	0.967				0.972
OC5	0.965				0.969
EB1 (Ethical behavior)	0.966				0.968
EB2	0.963	0.905	0.905	0.849	0.970
EB3	0.605				0.693
EB4	0.969				0.970
EB5	0.877				0.892

Note: TR: Trust; CM: Communication; OC: Commitment; EB: Ethical behavior; C.R.: Composite Reliability; AVE: Average Variance Extracted; \* Scores: 1 – Strongly Disagree; 3 – Neutral; 5 – Strongly Agree; Measurement CFA model fits:

$$\frac{\chi^2}{df} = 1.207, \quad \text{CFI} = 0.910, \quad \text{TLI} = 0.919, \quad \text{IFI} = 0.925 \quad \text{and} \quad \text{RMSEA} = 0.019.$$

**Table 3.** Correlations between constructs

Research construct	Construct Correlation			
	TR	CM	OC	EB
TR	1.000			
CM	0.599	1.000		
OC	0.395	0.552	1.000	
EB	0.344	0.472	0.559	1.000

Note: TR: Trust; CM: Communication; OC: Commitment; EB: Ethical behavior.

3.00, the CFI (Comparative Fit Index) value equal to or higher than 0.90, Tucker and Lewis Index (TLI) value equal to or higher than 0.90, the Incremental Fit Index (IFI) value equal to or higher than 0.90, and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) value equal to or less than 0.08. Recommended statistics for the final overall model assessment showed an acceptable fit of the measurement model to the data, that is:

$$\frac{\chi^2}{df} = 1.207,$$

CFI = 0.910, TLI = 0.919, IFI = 0.925 and RMSEA = 0.019.

Loadings of individual items on their respective constructs are shown in Table 2. The lowest value for individual item loadings for the research constructs is 0.641. Therefore, all the individual item loadings exceeded the recommended value of 0.50 (Hair et al., 2010). This indicates that all the measurement instruments are acceptable and reliable since all the individual

items converged well and with more than 50% of each item's variance shared with its respective construct.

As indicated from the results shown in Table 2, the lowest obtained composite reliability (CR) value of 0.810 is well above the recommended of above 0.6 (Hulland, 1999), while the lowest obtained average variance (AVE) value of 0.733 is also above the recommended 0.5. This indicates that convergent validity was achieved and also further confirms the internal consistency and reliability of the measurement instruments used (Fraering & Minor, 2006). Table 3 shows that discriminant validity was established by ensuring that the average variance extracted (AVE) for each multi-item construct was greater than the shared variance between constructs, as in Table 2 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

All pairs of constructs revealed an adequate level of discriminant validity (see Table 3), because all the correlations are less than 0.6. By and large these results provided evidence for acceptable levels of research scale reliability.

**Table 4.** Overall results of SEM hypotheses testing

Hyp	Hypothesis Statement	Path coefficients	Results
H1	Trust → Ethical behavior	0.704***	Supported
H2	Communication → Ethical behavior	0.798***	Supported
H3	Commitment → Ethical behavior	0.805***	Supported

Research structural model fits:  $\frac{\chi^2}{df} = 2.337$ , CFI= 0.902, TLI = 0.906, IFI = 0.918, and RMSEA = 0.061.

Note: 1. \*\*\*p-value < 0.001, \*\*p-value < 0.05, \*p-value < 0.1; using a significance level of 0.05, critical ratios (t-value) that exceed 1.96 would be significant.

### 3.6. Results of the hypotheses

In Table 4, all the hypotheses are significant and strong as illustrated by all the path coefficients which are greater than 0.5. The highest path coefficient is commitment and ethical behavior, at 0.805, showing statistical significance, indicating that in universities where employees' commitment is high, ethical behavior is also high. The lowest

path coefficient is trust and ethical behavior, at 0.704, slightly lower than the highest path coefficient. This shows that all the path coefficients are very significant.

Modification of the full model was done and the results generated from it. The rest of the hypotheses are supported by the data, as tabulated in Table 4.

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## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

**(H1)** There is a significant positive influence of trust on ethical behavior of universities in the Gauteng province. From the result of the path, there is a strong relationship between these two constructs because the p-value is less than 0.001. Where trust is high it means ethical behavior will be also high. The path coefficient of 0.704 shows that the relationship between these two variables is very strong.

**(H2)** There is a significant strong positive influence of communication on ethical behavior because the p-value is significant at 99 percent confidence interval. The path co-efficient of 0.798 symbolizes a strong relationship between the two variables. Research consistently finds that people behave in an ethical way if communication is smooth and efficient. Therefore, the greater the communication, the greater the ethical behavior.

**(H3)** There is a significant strong positive influence of commitment on ethical behaviour because the p-value is also less than 0.001. Research consistently finds that people who are highly committed behave in an ethical manner. The path co-efficient of 0.805 shows a very strong relationship between the two constructs. Among the three of the hypothesis, relationship between commitment and ethical behavior is the strongest and most significant. Therefore, the greater the commitment, the greater the ethical behavior.

These results can also be linked to social exchange theory (SET) which states that "feelings of personal obligation, gratitude and trust among partners, all of which lay a foundation of social solidarity and micro social order, even without binding contracts can ultimately lead to ethical behavior" (Yoon & Sur, 2003, p. 600 in Chinomona & Dhurup, 2015, p. 48). This also applies to communication and commitment which will lead to ethical behavior if they are practised in organizations in a good and equitable way.

### Practical implications: recommendations of the study

The implications on the practical side are that, first and foremost, managers should attempt to increase trust, commitment and communication in universities as a significant impact on ethical behavior of employees. Setting clear rules that are enforceable to ensure appropriate behaviors at the workplace leaves little room for turnover intention among employees. Managers need to reward those employees displaying greater ethical behaviors like organizational citizenship behaviors. If ethical behaviors are rewarded, employees will be motivated, will desire to have the company at heart and workplaces will be better places to be all the time. The owners/managers also need to inform and involve many employees in the decision making process as their participation leads to motivation, good communication and hence commitment to goal achievement. A more participative process will ensure cooperation and positive relationships among employees, therefore leading to good ethical behaviors.

## Limitations and future research directions of the study

Despite the aforementioned usefulness of this study, the research has its limitations. The study can be strengthened by increasing the sample size and including participants in other geographical areas. In addition, the current study was limited to South Africa, Gauteng province. For results comparison, subsequent researchers should contemplate replicating this study in other South African provinces and other developing countries. Finally, the present study focused purely on quantitative research, future research might focus on both quantitative and qualitative research. All in all, these suggested future avenues of study stand to immensely contribute new knowledge to the existing body of ethical behavior literature and organizational behavior theories like SET in Africa – a context that is often most neglected by researchers.

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