



The Psychology of Corruption

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Abstract

Corruption has many dimensions and is a multi-level phenomenon. Not only does it hinder investment and reduce growth, it also weakens the financial system. Corruption prevention strategies have mainly focused on regulatory framework with increased transparency. While the system approach helps to deal with some issues there is also a need to look at the psychological aspects of corruption. The paper discusses various psychological approaches with particular emphasis on cognitive approaches and self-deception which leads to a slippery slope of decision-making. The authors argue that Psychological based Interventions are also required to reduce corruption. A focus on a change in cognitions and attitude towards corruption and reinforcements and positive role modeling can be helpful in tackling this problem to some extent. A greater understanding and research into the area of psychological factors related to corruption and desistance is required.

Key Words: Corruption, Multi-level phenomena, Cognitions, Rational analytical approach, decision-making styles, Interventions.

Corruption is a complex social, economic, and political problem that affects all countries. Not only does it undermine democratic institutions, and adversely impact economic development, but it also undermines the rule of law. Many studies have presented empirical evidence to show that corruption hinders investment, reduces growth, restricts trade, distorts the size and composition of government expenditure, weakens the financial system, and strengthens the underground economy. A strong connection has been demonstrated between corruption and increasing levels of poverty and income inequality. Uneven distribution of wealth is also one of the important impacts. The World Economic Forum estimates that corruption costs 5% of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (\$2.6 trillion), and as per the World Bank estimates, both businesses and individuals pay more

than \$1 trillion in bribes yearly (United Nations, 2018). Political philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Kautilya have commented upon this unethical behaviour as a sign of moral decay in society, thus also revealing that it is not a new phenomenon. The Latin words "corruptiō" and "corrumpere" clearly indicate this is a transformational process of decay (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Corruption as an outcome of greed, has been considered as an affliction of the human state as per Buddhist Philosophy.

Although it is challenging to come up with a cogent, acceptable description for the multifaceted construct known as corruption, some attempts have been made to define corruption. The Oxford and Merriam-Webster dictionaries define it as 'dishonest or fraudulent conduct by those in power' (Oxford University Press, n.d.) and "dishonest or illegal behaviour especially by powerful people" (Merriam-Webster, 2023) respectively. The 'abuse of public power/office for private benefit/gain' is how the World Bank defines it (World Bank Group, 2020). The Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988 describes 'Corruption' basically in terms 'of taking gratification other than legal remuneration in respect of an Official act' (Department of Personnel and Training, 1988). The United Nations Convention Against Corruption, 2003 does not define corruption per se, but mentions specific acts of corruption, and urges States parties to criminalize these acts in their jurisdictions. Three main types of corrupt criminal acts, namely embezzlement, influenced transactions, and abuse of power are mentioned in the Convention. Money laundering, Concealment, and Obstruction of justice related to the offenses are also covered (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2004).

In common parlance, corruption is perceived as dishonest or illegal behaviour, especially of people in a position of power and authority. Corruption, in other words, in reference to State or Public offices can be a misuse of official position, rank, status, or property for personal benefit. Corruption in the private sphere may mean fraudulent and unethical behaviour by an individual, making unjust and undue profits by exploiting natural resources, employees, and consumers, and circumventing governmental rules & regulations by private entities. In most societies as per public perception, corruption is not a justifiable action.

India as the most populous and youngest country in the world with 65 percent of its population of working age has huge stakes in the eradication of corruption and promoting a culture of integrity in the young population who can be drivers of economic and social change (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2023). The Indian economy is growing at a fast pace and India is now the 5th largest economy in the world. In terms of the strength of the financial institutions, business sophistication, and innovation, India is among the top countries in the world (Shan, 2023), while in terms of corruption, we are ranked 85th by the Corruption Perception Index, 2022. The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) is an index that ranks countries based on how corrupt their public sector is perceived to be. The CPI generally defines corruption as an "abuse of entrusted power for private gain". The index has been published annually by the non-governmental organisation Transparency International since 1995. A country or territory's score indicates the perceived level of public sector corruption on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). India has consistently scored low on Corruption Perceptions Index. India ranked 85 out of 180 and achieved a score of 40 out of 100 for the year 2022. Then there are huge concerns regarding equity and the inclusion of large swathes of the population (Transparency International, 2023).

Being inherently a multi-level phenomenon, operating at individual, group, or industry levels, corruption has largely been viewed and dealt with as a poor governance issue in both public and private spheres. Recent efforts for a deeper level of understanding of the construct of corruption reveal that Corruption is not only just a governance issue or political problem, but a multilayered complex phenomenon having a strong psychosocial dimension as well. The objective of the paper is to study and review the various psychological processes that underlie corruption. It also attempts to find solutions to the same by altering these very processes, using psychological concepts and principles.

Ethics, morality, values, and integrity which are predominant influences in defining the individual's self and society's behavioural outcomes are deeply influenced by psychological makeup and vice versa. There is a wider perception that the general decline in values and ethics in society has not only manifested in more corrupt behaviour at the individual level but also rewarding of corrupt behaviour by society. Thus, in certain ways, it seems that corruption today

has become a part of the lifestyle and hence tackling corruption will not only require a macro-level intervention in the form of better enforcement of laws and policies, but it also will require an understanding and interventions /alteration in the psychological makeup and processes that underpin corrupt behaviour. This can help in cultivating an integrated and multidisciplinary understanding of corruption which can be used as curative or transformational strategies at the individual or group level.

Approaches and Theories to Understand Psychological Construct of Corruption

Many economic and social researchers use the basic theory of economics to discuss the causes of corruption and the occurrence of corruption crime. Economists explain the behaviour of corruption of public officials by the economic man hypothesis. They point out that "the government officials are an economic man and are motivated by the pursuit of maximizing their own interests in the specific system constraints" (Rose-Ackerman, 1996). Nobel Laureate behaviour economist Becker (1968) announced that the "cost-benefit" analysis model of crime can also be used for the interpretation of the crime of corruption, for example, public officials in the implementation of economic crimes can get three kinds of benefits: directly acquired material interests from the crime, political interests, and psychological gratification caused by the crime; simultaneously, corruption consumes three kinds of costs: the direct cost, opportunity cost, and penalty cost. Under normal circumstances, behaviour does not occur when there is a balance between the cost and income. However, when any kind of cost is reduced, it will lead to the occurrence of behaviour. The Theory of Rent Seeking explains corruption by creating an unfair advantage and reducing competition and transparency and Wu (2002) applied the theory of Rent Seeking to analyse opportunities for corruption and infer the source of corruption. Corruption occurs, as officials seek the monetary value of the lease for authority.

While the cultural approach emphasises the role of cultural orientation (collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and power distance) and social norms in explaining corruption, psychology research on unethical behaviour, finds that unethical behaviour is not always a rational choice. Emotions such as guilt and

shame may make it less likely for individuals to act corruptly. The psychological approach also brings out the individual perspective. It includes psychodynamic approaches, behaviouristic approaches, rational analytical approaches, and socio-cognitive approaches.

Many social psychology researchers discuss that from the aspect of individual psychology, there is general decision-making bias and framing effects to support and explain the whole process. Specifically, there are three paths of this psychological process: self-serving bias, inability to judge outcomes, and framing effects. It emerges that individuals are more likely to act corruptly when they stand to gain personally, have lower self-control, perceive that corruption will only cause indirect harm, and when they work in organisations where unethical behaviour is not punished.

Literature of cognitive research on corruption, the psychological processing of corrupt criminals can be divided into two types: one is the processing from inward to external, can be used to describe "morality decay". Here the criminal always begins from small unconscious corruption, gradually slipping into large illegal acts. The whole process is "impulse based". The other is the processing from external to inward, the criminal starts from the initial compliance with the standards or needs of the corrupt group and eventually has an unconscious or normal behaviour towards corruption, the whole process is the distortion or destruction of "integrity" by "obedience."

The psychodynamic approach emphasises oedipal conflict related to authority, envy, and defensive mechanism. Defense Mechanisms like denial and rationalisation exist, and the person feels no guilt for doing the corrupt act. People who indulge in corrupt practices use rationalisation to make the corrupt acts more acceptable. The behavioristic approach explains corruption as the function of reinforcement existing in the environment. The rational-analytical approach emphasises that corruption is a result of calculative-rational decision-making based on loss and benefit. The socio-cognitive approach emphasises cognitive bias (knowledge, belief, perception) working in interpersonal and intergroup settings. In the discussion of corruption and organisation attitude to corruption, Fein and Weibler (2014) used related theories of moral development of Kohlberg

(1969), proposing that corruption or unethical behaviour existed as a phased development process.

The Fraud Triangle developed by Cressey (1953) suggests that the interaction of three key factors: pressure, opportunity, and rationalisation, instigates fraudulent behaviour. According to the theory, pressures such as financial difficulties, addiction, or personal grievances, when presented with the right opportunity such as weak internal controls, lack of oversight, or inadequate monitoring systems can lead people to exploit vulnerabilities and commit fraud. This behaviour is further justified by rationalisation to convince themselves of the necessity of such actions.

According to the Rational Choice Theory, fraudsters perpetrate their schemes after evaluating the prospective benefits and costs, here in terms of being caught. They only fare through when they feel that the benefits exceed the risk wherein, they have little chance of being caught. Another factor contributing towards committing fraud is when situational pressures and opportunity are high and personal integrity is low (Cornish & Clarke, 1989).



Sutherland (1939) also proposed a social learning theory of criminal behaviour. In the process of interaction between the individual and peer, the corrupt behaviour of peers will encourage and rationalise corruption. Furthermore, there are experiments to prove that when the authority effect and peer effects work on corrupt behaviour at the same time, their influence will be amplified, in fact, this is the process of individual socialisation. These people serve as role models to the youth and are encouraged by the amount of material accruable from such corrupt behaviours. The glamorous lifestyles serve to entice people into following these corrupt practices.

As per the Cognitive theory, people acquire behaviour according to their perception of the antecedents in the environment. Thus, if corruption is seen as

the surest and easiest means of achieving one's goals or meeting one's needs, more people will prefer to adopt the route of corruption to acquire wealth in a short period of time (Dupuy & Jackson, 2018).

If one looks at research results on individual corrupt criminals, some researchers put forward specific personality traits relating to the occurrence of corruption, like such individuals tend to have selfishness, greed and lust, consciousness of strongly carving rights or power, inhibited guilt on their own corruption, and low integrity characteristics. Whether the personality trait is the core of the crime of corruption is still controversial (Dupuy & Jackson, 2018).

Many aspects of these various approaches are seen as interplaying factors in the analysis of frauds and fraudsters by researchers. These studies have revealed that there are multiple psychological factors such as motivations, cognitive processes, personality traits, vulnerability, social factors, and preventive actions which underlie the behaviour of fraudsters. Firstly, fraudsters are motivated by a need to acquire wealth or alleviate financial difficulties, to gain power and control over others for personal gain. These motivations are driven by factors such as ego, status, and a desire for recognition or validation. Secondly, they use cognitive processes to rationalize and facilitate their actions which further help to deceive others and minimise their own guilt. Thirdly, the Dark Triad traits including narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, are often found in them. They inherently also exhibit an inflated sense of self-importance, lack of empathy, and disregard for ethical standards, which makes them high-risk takers. Fourthly, many fraudsters are encouraged due to social norms and peer pressure. Especially in a group setting where there is a possibility of less accountability, they become highly motivated to perpetrate their schemes. Lastly, employing manipulation techniques such as persuasion and deception, especially on vulnerable individuals who are experiencing financial difficulties, emotional distress, or a lack of social support, helps facilitate their schemes (Dupuy & Jackson, 2018).

Understating Decision-Making Styles and underlying psychological processes:

Kahneman (1979) proposed the framing effect of the decision, namely that at uncertain conditions in income situations (positive framing) people prefer deterministic choice, while people's choice exist risk preference in loss situations (negative framing). Many empirical studies have proved that corrupt criminals tend to exhibit the characteristics of risk preference.

Lange suggested that there is an important connection between psychology and corruption. For example, a key factor is that people want to promote material gain for themselves. However, at the same time, they wish to view themselves as a moral actor. In other words, the last thing that these corrupt actors want is to look in the mirror and see themselves as immoral. Thus, there is a balance between maximising self-gain and maintaining one's view as a moral person and having a self-serving bias (Lange, n.d.).

Decision-Making vs Self Deception

Self-deception causes the moral implications of a decision to fade, allowing individuals to behave incomprehensibly and, at the same time, not realise that they are doing so. Self-deception is defined as being unaware of the processes that lead us to form our opinions and judgments (Messick & Bazerman, 1996). Such deception involves avoidance of the truth, the lies that we tell, and the secrets we keep from ourselves (Bok, 1989). We believe in our stories and thus believe that we are objective about ourselves. Self-deception is paradoxical in this sense, for to deceive oneself somehow implies that one must know that something needs to be hidden or kept secret (Bok, 1989, p. 61).

The so-called "slippery slope" of decision-making, the second enabler of self-deception, consists of at least two separate psychological mechanisms. The first of these is a psychological numbing that comes from repetition. This process of induction is very much like the process of routinization described by Kelman & Hamilton (1989). Routinization means that when a practice has become routine, it is ordinary, mundane, and acceptable. Any ethical coloration is lost. It follows

the adage that “one lie perpetuates many more.” Part of this is due to our inability to see the incremental steps we take down the road of unethical behaviour, due to the self-deception that occurs along the way.

Ritov & Baron’s (1990) work provides empirical support for this intuitive notion, demonstrating that acts of omission are viewed as more acceptable than acts of commission. Acts of omission, then, because they blur the assignment of responsibility, can create self-biased perceptions of causes, shifting blame from self to others. Self-deception helps to disguise violations of our ethical principles. Self-deception leads to coding, or framing, of decisions that either eliminate negative ethical characterizations or distort them into positive ones.

Psychoanalysis has offered the concept of the split selves as one mechanism that may help explain this paradox (Demos, 1960; Fingarette, 1969; Freud, 1957). The question of whether it is a process of which we are aware or one which exists below the surface, however, remains a debated point. Moral Disengagement Theory also explains the process of self-deception. As per the theory, there is a cognitive mechanism that reinterprets the moral in the person so that moral self-regulation is blocked and there is the use of psychological maneuvers involving moral justification and cognitive restricting (Moore, 2008).

Thus, there are various approaches and theories of corruption and the concepts can be useful not only in understanding why people tend to do corrupt acts but also help in devising interventions using key concepts and constructs.

Understanding Corruption and Interventions in India Scenario

The causes of corruption in India are varied and may include excessive regulations, discretionary powers, weak rule of law, ineffective regulatory systems, monopoly of government-controlled institutions on certain goods and services delivery, lack of culture of transparency and accountability, absence of effective internal control mechanism and challenges of poverty and issues in efficient and speedy public service delivery, etc. Nearly 20 percent of GDP is spent on public procurement which is another activity highly prone to corruption. Further, social

acceptability and tolerance for corruption are quite high. Significant levels of corruption exist in India despite the existence of a relatively strong governance structure, institutions, legal framework, and policies. Although India has a rich tradition of ethical injunctions in the form of religious doctrines including the eight-fold path of Buddhism, the absence of a formal system of inculcating the values of ethics and integrity further exacerbates the issues related to corruption.

Strategies to curb corruption have ranged from administrative and legal frameworks, systems and processes improvisation, standardization of rules and procedures, code of conduct, use of technology to reduce human interventions and bias, and increasing accountability and transparency. The complexity and sheer volume of laws in India make both compliance and enforcement needlessly difficult. For example, labour regulation, for instance, is a domain badly encumbered with onerous and excessive laws that do more to provide government officers with tools to extort businesses than to protect the rights of workers. Criminalizing Corrupt acts and penal sanctions have not given desired results due to prolonged and long-drawn administrative and judicial processes and delays in final outcomes. Severe and timely penalties are a rarity. Simplifying the legal code along with timely and speedier action. may have anti-corruption value beyond increasing enforcement capacity.

Studies in India show that increasing the level of transparency about government performance produces the greatest returns when it is accompanied by reforms that enhance the bargaining power of ordinary citizens, improve coordination and collective action, or strengthen the State's ability to punish impunity. Technology-based solutions work best with concerted institutional support, and when they decentralise enforcement, find a solution for middlemen bureaucrats, and empower ordinary citizens. For example, a technologically innovative programme in Andhra Pradesh used biometrically authenticated smart-cards to decentralise payment-making authority for the rural jobs guarantee scheme and social security pensions, resulting in a more than 40% reduction in leakage. Direct Benefit Transfer leveraging the Aadhaar unique identity number is another successful intervention to further marginalise middlemen in service delivery.

But the real solution will always lie in transformation of mindsets and psychological processes to eradicate corruption prevention and adoption of integrity as a way

of life. While the focus on the intersection of behavioural science and public policy is only recent, there have been a decent number of interventions aiming to change social norms that accept corruption. Researchers in this field are very interested in this delicate dilemma, and how to resolve it. Paucity of research especially in Indian context is another challenge. Because corruption is reinforced, many people particularly the youth learn it and stick to it to survive. The luxurious lifestyle of others makes it more attractive to fall into the pits of corruption, as it can be seen as an easy means of achieving one's goals. To modify unwanted behaviour, unlearning corrupt behaviour is imperative.

In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "Although we can choose our ends, we do not have much control over it – we cannot know in advance whether these ends will be achieved. The only thing that is completely within our control is therefore the means with which we approach our various ends" (Malhotra, 2020). It is therefore equally important to consider the ways in which money can be earned. What matters most is not how much wealth you earn, but how you earn it. People like A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, Nelson Mandela, and M.K. Gandhi who lived honest lives, left behind legacies for posterity, and impacted positively on the lives of others and society should be presented as role models for the youths to emulate. A study given by Omeje (2018) stated that from a psychological point of view, corruption could be conceptualised as a human behaviour that is pathological. This abnormal behaviour has many factors in its etiology and could be explained using many theories of human behaviour, including social learning, behavioural and cognitive. More such studies or creative endeavors like films and dramas and awareness discourses can be the way forward.

There are also learnings from experiences across the world. A sensitizing Information campaign in Paraguay took place, where a tailor created suits without pockets, calling these collections anti-corruption suits, which became sensational at that point of time. These campaigns, through nudging motivation extrinsically, produced good results only during their execution. They did not see success in creating a long-term effect. This is now a problem of how to sustain the inculcated good behaviours. Thus, evidence shows that extrinsic motivation does not seem to stick for long.

It has been scientifically demonstrated that doing good or the “right thing” can make a person feel good both psychologically and physically. So, we can narrow down our issue to embedding into one’s mind that indulging in corruption is “wrong” so that they are intrinsically motivated to do the “right” thing. Adopting the techniques of cognitive restructuring can be used to embark attitudinal change. It is a process of teaching people to think in more adaptive ways by changing their dysfunctional cognition about the world and themselves (Beck, 1991; McCullough, 1999). The goal is to substitute people's perception of wealth and its means of acquisition using logic and reason and belief in the larger public good.

Within closed bureaucratic and political groups, corruption is often driven by the obligation to reciprocate favours. In countries like India, where corruption is an alternate social order; anti-corruption laws and regulations often fail as the law enforcers are themselves corruptible. It is here that behavioural science can lend a hand to make legislation effective. However, response to behavioural interventions is heavily contextual and depends on society’s culture. Therefore, there is a need for further testing initiatives.

Traditional ethical fixes focus on the more visible formal systems (codes of conduct, ethics departments, ombudsmen), which while important, are relatively weak in comparison to the more hidden, and more difficult to correct, informal systems and accompanying organisational climates. Ethics training has been argued to be short-lived (Richards, 1999) and codes of conduct, usually part of induction training, have in some cases produced no discernible difference in behaviour (Badaracco and Webb, 1995). Implementing weak systems or focusing on only a few elements, for example the legal framework, surveillance function, flawed and long drawn disciplinary proceedings while ignoring other more embedded elements sends a mixed signal to employees. As uncertainty is linked to opportunistic actions (Fandt and Ferris, 1990) and unethical behaviour (Tenbrunsel, 1995), organisations can reduce uncertainty by sending strong, consistent messages about ethical principles at all levels of the organisation’s ethical infrastructure like vision and mission statement violation of code of conduct, value-based organisation culture, timely and stern disciplinary and criminal action on corrupt behaviour.

There are two kinds of ethics. Negative ethics is an approach where emphasis on what shall not be done. Most government conduct rules and code of ethics are narrated in the negative form. You can't do this; you can't do that. The consequence of this approach is that when employees know what not to do, they feel that rest is ok however unethical they may be. Positive ethical interventions are needed that bring pride in a job. Facilitating promotion of honesty and ethical working culture based on Trustworthiness (integrity, honesty, sincerity), Respectfulness, Responsibility, Fairness, caring (compassion, empathy), Citizenship (Compliance to Rules, care of society) is needed to be reinforced through combination of interventions.

The strength of an organization/Nation is dependent on the character of its individual employees. Such individual characters are built on individual and collective values. If India must realize its true destiny and potential, this change is to be driven by a young population guided by principles of integrity, innovations, and initiatives. To ensure that then lots of interventions especially in imparting value education are required now. Same is true for organizations also, we can have the best system, but nothing will work if the employees don't display ethical conduct.

The primary focus of these interventions is to find his or her highest potential, which may also be called creative enlightenment. In Abraham Maslow's terminology, enlightened people are referred to as 'meta-normal' beings, those who embody the concept of wholeness, truth, simplicity, effortless energy, and transcendence. Psychological based interventions can endeavor to create such individuals.

Conclusion: While corruption is a widespread phenomenon which is increasingly a normative behaviour it can be curbed through effective implementation of various schedules of reinforcements, punishments, transparency, accountability, awareness, modelling, and psychological strategies to understand and combat corruption complemented by traditional administrative and legal interventions. More research in this area is the need of time.

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