



The Social Psychology of Corruption: Why It Does Not Exist and Why It Should

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Abstract

In recent decades, corruption has emerged as a major cause of global inequality and an important subject of social scientific research. This article argues that social psychologists have not taken full advantage of analytical tools at their disposal to generate explanatory accounts of corruption in non-Western contexts. In the first part of the article, the author maintains that the lack of social psychological research on why people engage in corruption is due to the dearth of empirical data on corruption, the theoretical complexity of this phenomenon, and current popularity of neoliberalism in politics and academic research. In the second part of the article, the author argues that the symbolic interactionism school of social psychology has a number of tools that could be more helpful in exploring the causes of corruption in non-Western settings than rational-choice approaches that are currently en vogue. The article concludes with an argument that such analyses could generate culturally sensitive as well as policy-relevant theories of corruption.

Corruption, commonly defined as abuse of entrusted power for private gain (Transparency International, 2013), is a buzzword in political debates, popular media, and dinner table conversations. The catchall term for self-interested behavior that comes at the expense of public well being, corruption is blamed for a range of social ills, from the waste of public funds to non-democratic capture of political power, high rates of unemployment, growing income inequality, and large political clout of corporations.

This popular demonization of corruption is fully justified. Research suggests that corruption indeed has a broad range of negative consequences. Scholars find that since the fall of the Berlin wall, corruption has emerged as a major reason for the unequal success of different countries in the global marketplace (Bardhan, 1997; Laffont, 2006; Robinson, 2012). Societies, afflicted with corruption, have high rates of poverty, little social mobility, and dysfunctional institutions (Mauro, 1995; Abed and Gupta, 2002; Gupta et al., 2002; Narasaiah, 2005). Citizens of these countries trust their governments less, enjoy fewer freedoms and rights, and have a worse standard of living than citizens of countries with lower corruption levels (Schedler, 1999; Seligson, 2002; Rothstein, 2011).

Not surprisingly, the international community spends millions of dollars each year to fight corruption worldwide. The global anti-corruption movement orchestrated by international financial and development organizations (such as the World Bank and the IMF) as well as international watchdog and business risk assessment organizations (such as Business International and Transparency International), funds and coordinates a range of initiatives aimed at lowering corruption by raising public awareness, promoting accountability, and adjusting instrumental incentives of bureaucrats and governmental officials (Everett et al., 2006; Ampratwum, 2008; Rose-Sender and Goodwin, 2010).

Despite its geopolitical importance, its social costs, and its central role in political science and economics research, corruption is an uncommon topic in social psychology. Rarely do

social psychologists talk about corruption explicitly and, when they do, they tend to focus on personality characteristics of offenders rather than social and contextual determinants of corruption that can be accessed and modified through policy efforts.

This article issues a call for a social psychological study of interactions that shape people's decisions to engage in corruption. I maintain that symbolic interactionist approach offers a particularly potent tool for the study of corruption in non-Western societies, which constitute the primary geographic focus of most scholarly and policy work on development and democratization. It is precisely in the contexts that lack Western-style bureaucracies, have flexible boundaries between public and private domains, and rich legacies of gift and exchange economies, that dominant neoliberal approaches to corruption tend to yield inaccurate and culturally insensitive conclusions. It is therefore in relation to these contexts that social psychologists can make the most meaningful contribution to the study of corruption.

Below, I develop an argument that is two-fold. First, I argue that the lack of social psychological research on why people engage in corruption is due to the dearth of micro-level empirical data on actual exchanges that constitute corruption and current popularity of neoliberalism in politics and academic research. Second, I argue that the interactionist school of social psychology has a number of tools that could be more helpful for understanding corruption in non-Western societies than rational-choice approaches that are currently en vogue.

Current social psychological explanations of corruption

A brief overview of three flagship journals in social psychology – *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, and *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* – reveals that the study of corruption is not an established subfield in social psychology. A simple search shows that between the years of 1979 and 2010,¹ no articles published in these journals had such words as 'corruption', 'bribery', 'fraud', or even 'white collar crime' in their titles.²

Yet, a more involved literature review in mainstream and otherwise-specialized sociology and psychology journals reveals that scholars from other intellectual traditions have explored the social psychological determinants of corruption. For instance, several econometric studies identify which personality traits of different national populations are associated with high countrywide levels of corruption. These studies use World Values Survey and similar datasets of cultural variables to rank different countries in terms of the moral orientation, cultural features, and personality characteristics of their citizens. They find that high levels of neuroticism, future-orientation, power distance,³ masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance⁴ within a specific population are positively related to incidence of corruption, while high levels of extroversion are characteristic of societies with low corruption levels (Husted, 1999; Park, 2003; Connelly and Ones, 2008).

Experimental evidence also suggests a number of personality characteristics of individuals prone to corruption. For instance, DeCelles et al. (2012) find that people who abuse entrusted power tend to have weak moral identity, while Levine (2005) argues that they have 'primitive moral thinking' because they value personal loyalty over formal rules and do not distinguish between organizational and personal goals. By comparing personalities of imprisoned white-collar criminals and high-status employees without criminal records, Collins and Schmidt (1993) find that criminals are less dependable, less responsible, and more defiant of social norms. Building on Collins and Schmidt's research, Blickle et al. (2006) add that white-collar criminals exhibit low self-control, as well as high hedonism and narcissism.

Some social psychologists argue that moral disengagement and low ambition (low achievement orientation rather than low responsiveness to rewards)⁵ of organizational

members are associated with high propensity toward corruption (Diefendorff and Mehta, 2007; Moore, 2008). Yet, others write about the role of neutralization techniques in diminishing cognitive dissonance between the positive self-image of offenders and their engagement in illicit and stigmatized activity (Pershing, 2003; Anand et al., 2004; Rabl and Kühlmann, 2009). These studies suggest that regular people with mainstream ideas about morality and average non-deviant personalities can engage in corruption without experiencing psychological distress if they adopt certain ways of thinking about themselves and their situations.

Global implications of social psychological research on corruption: what gives?

The implications of this research on personality determinants of corruption are difficult to reconcile with cross-national comparative studies on corruption. Corruptologists have written volumes about the variation in corruption levels across different countries. Ever since international organizations like Transparency International and the World Bank began producing numeric indicators of corruption to evaluate different countries' compliance with the rules of global marketplace, corruptology⁶ has experienced an unprecedented influx of easily comparable national-level corruption measures.

Originally compiled to mark the 'danger zones' for Western businesses, international indicators of corruption are highly problematic as social scientific data. Based on ad-hoc surveys of experts and business leaders, they suffer from reductionism, inconsistent and unreliable sources, and cultural myopia (see Knack, 2006 for an overview; Lambsdorff, 2006; Zaloznaya, 2013). These indicators construe corruption as an instrumental, strategic deviation from laws and administrative regulations, driven by a self-interested pursuit of material profits and power.⁷ In adopting this conception of corruption, the indicators (and, by extension, social scientists who use them as data), make a number of unjustified and West-centric assumptions about the desirability of formal rules that are broken by informal exchanges and the motivation of people who carry them out (see Zaloznaya, 2013 for a more extended discussion). Perhaps not surprisingly, regression analyses of numeric indicators suggest that many non-Western societies are afflicted with ubiquitous corruption while Western capitalist democracies tend to be fairly non-corrupt (Montinola and Jackman 2002; Sung 2004; Treisman 2007).

When considered in light of cross-national analyses of corruption indicators, current social psychological studies of corruption suggest that some countries are populated with people whose moral profile is inferior to that of people living in Western capitalist democracies. Taken together, these two bodies of literature suggest that citizens of many non-Western countries have an underdeveloped, or in the words of Levine, 'primitive' moral identity (Harvey, 2005). In comparison to Westerners, they are irresponsible and incapable of putting social and organizational interests ahead of their own.

These tacit conclusions are likely to make most social scientists extremely uncomfortable. Decades have passed since sociologists have left behind the idea that societies can be rank-ordered based on their cultures. Moreover, the conclusion that social groups experience structural disadvantage (i.e. structural problems arising from high corruption levels), because of their negative personality traits, is profoundly non-sociological and resembles the arguments that most sociologists live to deconstruct.

In other words, something does not compute about the currently prevalent way of thinking about the causes of corruption in social psychology. In fact, to avoid the discomfort, social psychological (and, particularly, experimental) findings about corruption are rarely evoked in conversations about global differentials in corruption. These two strands of

research exist alongside each other, without interacting, because any conversation would lead to logical conclusions that, to most social scientists, sound grotesque and offensive.⁸

I argue that this misalignment of social psychological and cross-cultural research on corruption is caused by problematic assumptions that social psychologists make about the causes of corruption. While they assume that corruption is a result of instrumental calculus on behalf of strategic individuals, a growing body of research in other disciplines suggests that much of corruption, particularly in non-Western societies, is an outcome of group processes and interactions rather than a manifestation of individual-level calculus. In the rest of this article, I explain why social psychologists adopt the rational-choice models of corruption and suggest other, more culturally sensitive and policy-friendly ways to study corruption using the analytical tools of social psychology.

The roots of instrumental assumptions in the study of corruption

When social psychologists take up the subject of corruption, they assume that corruption is the abuse of entrusted power motivated by individuals' (or small groups') desire to maximize personal benefits at the expense of public, organizational, or other non-private goods. This definitional assumption makes motivation behind corruption fixed, clear, and non-problematic. In other words, instead of exploring how people arrive at the decision to engage in corruption, social psychologists accept the fact that actors' motivation is instrumental as a starting point for their research and focus their 'explanatory' efforts on uncovering various personality characteristics of the offenders.

In adopting this understanding of corruption as a purely instrumental and premeditated act, social psychologists follow a trend that is common in empirical corruptology. Other sociologists, political scientists, and economists also accept this view of corruption because of its elegance, feasibility, and political resonance.

First and foremost, alternative conceptualizations of corruption are complicated and unwieldy. Despite on-going theoretical debates about what constitutes corruption in different cultural contexts and how to distinguish practices that are based on informal norms and traditions from truly malicious acts of deviance (i.e. see Johnston, 1996 and Svensson, 2005 for an overview), empirical corruptologists have not been able to incorporate these nuanced insights into their actual analyses.

Specifically, theorists of corruption debate the applicability of the rational-choice definition of corruption (corruption as abuse of entrusted power for private gain) to non-Western practices of exchange, mutual assistance, and resistance to the state. Many argue that practices that resemble corruption are oftentimes motivated by age-old traditions and local norms (Smith, 1971; Verma, 1999; Dalton, 2005; Luo, 2008), organizational cultures (Miller et al., 2001; Ashforth and Anand, 2003; Zaloznaya, 2012), survival strategies in the contexts of dysfunctional formal institutions (Feldbrugge, 1984; Sampson, 1987; Méon and Weill, 2010), resistance to oppressive regimes (Grossman, 1998), and even etiquette considerations (Yang, 1994; Steidlmeier, 1999; Segon, 2010).

Yet, the task of finding the definition and measurement instruments that are flexible enough to accommodate the multiplicity of rationality behind corruption and its unique cultural roots is, generally, too daunting for empirical researchers (Lancaster and Montinola, 1997; Bracking, 2011). For instance, anthropologists, sensitive to cultural norms and non-Western conceptions of public and private spheres, often have a hard time with generalizations (i.e. Mandel and Humphrey, 2002; Rivkin-Fish, 2005; Hasty, 2005, etc.). While they offer rich accounts of informal economies in specific geographical and historical settings, the implications of their work for other contexts remain unclear.

Instead, most empirical corruptologists prefer to leave theory to theorists and, instead, utilize the elegant rational-choice conception of corruption as an instrumental violation of trust in a principal-agent relationship. This way of thinking about corrupt behavior, particularly in unfamiliar contexts, offers an easy way out of a complicated theoretical dilemma. By making an assumption of strategic instrumentality, students of corruption are able to assume away the debilitating complexity of this phenomenon.

Moreover, social scientists are constrained by even more basic feasibility considerations. Put simply, corruption is a difficult subject to study, and the data on motivation behind corruption are particularly inaccessible. Stigmatized, hidden, and sometimes illegal, the abuse of entrusted power for private gain is difficult to identify, observe, or discuss with perpetrators. Because it often falls into the gray space between legality and illegality, crime statistics do not capture much of this behavior. Even when researchers do get a rare chance to interview corruption perpetrators, their narratives, inevitably, consist of retrospective justifications of past behavior rather than accurate accounts of decision-making that leads to corruption.

Thirdly, the definition of corruption as a strategic and self-interested deviation from formal norms resonates with the spirit of global anti-corruption movement that currently frames most academic and policy discourse on corruption. Despite its discursive emphasis on democracy and social equality, anti-corruptionism is, first and foremost, an economic movement, deeply rooted in neoliberal ideology (Brown and Cloke, 2004; Sampson, 2005; Hankivsky, 2006). Neoliberalism is based on the ideals of individual responsibility, free choice, and maximization of social good through open economic competition. Given these intellectual roots, anti-corruptionism embraces a utilitarian model of action and assumes a cost-and benefit calculus on behalf of social actors. Due to the global scale of anti-corruptionism and the easy availability of the data that it generates (i.e. the international numeric indicators of corruption), its assumptions have infiltrated much of scholarly thinking about corruption.

Potential contribution of social psychology to the study of corruption

So far, I have argued that many empirical corruptologists accept the assumption of instrumental rationality behind corruption. The fact that political scientists and economists are among these scholars is unfortunate but not surprising: such conception of corruption aligns with the basic ideas about human nature accepted in their disciplines. In contrast, the fact that social psychologists have adopted the assumption of instrumental rationality is unexpected, given their discipline's foundational focus on the effect that interactions and other group dynamics have on cognitive and behavioral processes (Chiu and Hong 2006; Fiske 2009). In other words, the assumption that corruption happens because deviant individuals choose to break formal rules for personal gain is, in many ways, antithetical to the basic principles of social psychology, which has historically focused on interactional determinants of action.

In fact, there are strong reasons to believe that traditional social psychological approach to the study of causal processes can be more lucrative for corruptology than the assumption of instrumental rationality. The main argument for the interactionist approach to corruption is that, according to numerous studies, people's relationship with rules is often determined by the cultural schema, acquired in peer groups, families, organizations, and other interactional contexts (Hayward and Young 2004; Appelbaum et al., 2006; Harvey and Knox 2008).

Research in various disciplines shows that actors form their beliefs about rule-following through informal and formal socialization processes. People, then, enact these beliefs when they perceive tacit cues in different interactional contexts. For instance, the differential association theory in classical criminology maintains that people are prone to criminal activity

when they hold more crime-favorable than crime-unfavorable definitions. These definitions are acquired through group membership, and their effect varies by duration, priority, intensity, and of frequency of actor's exposure (Sutherland 1947). This way of thinking about the causes of criminality remains popular among criminologists studying juvenile delinquency, gender, white-collar crime, and spatial concentrations of illegality (Erickson et al., 2000; Matsueda and Heimer, 1987; Heimer, 1996; Alarid et al., 2000; Hoffmann, 2003; Piquero et al., 2005; Akers, 2009; etc.).

Scholars of organizations also find that rule-breaking of organizational members is heavily influenced by local cultures. For instance, Anand et al. (2004) write that people learn about appropriate behaviors in organizations through informal interactions, peer pressure, and social controls. In his seminal monograph, Robert Jackall writes: "...morality does not emerge from some set of internally held convictions or principles, but rather from ongoing albeit changing relationships with some person, some coterie, some social network, some clique that matters to a person. Since these relationships are always multiple, contingent, and in flux, [...] moralities are always situational, always relative" (Jackall, 1988: 101). With an institutional ethnography, Jackall shows that organizations transform individual morality of their members into shared meanings, constructed and transmitted through informal interactions.

More recently, other scholars have documented the effect of workplace ideology on deviance among organizational members through experiments (Henle et al., 2005) and case studies (see Sims, 1992 and Appelbaum et al., 2006 for an overview). In March and Olsen's (1996) words, these studies suggest that illegality is often based on logics of appropriateness rather than cost-and-benefit considerations.

Based on this research, Diane Vaughan argues that rule-breaking should be analyzed through a situated action model, whereby the means and the ends of social action are not predetermined and stable over time, but are continuously negotiated within concrete interactional contexts. Vaughan writes that "decision-making [...] cannot be disentangled from social context, which shapes preferences and thus what individual perceives as rational. The situated action paradigm acknowledges that purposive social action can regularly produce unexpected outcomes, thus challenging all rational actor accounts of social behavior" (1998: 33). By emphasizing social interaction within contextualized encounters, this behavioral model draws attention to the role of local cultures in shaping rule-breaking behavior.

Finally, social psychologists themselves have shown the effect of small-group dynamics on individuals' decision to engage in deviant and unethical behavior. For instance, an experiment, described in Gino et al. (2009), reveals that actors are more likely to cheat if they see someone else cheating, proving that situational cues often impact rule-breaking behaviors. Similarly, in a survey-based study of people's propensity to run red lights and evade taxes, Verkuyten et al. (1994) found that research subjects created shared social representations of acceptable and unacceptable behavior that shaped their decisions about rule-breaking more directly than their abstract individual ideas about legality. Developmental psychologists also show the impact of cognitive and behavioral schema acquired in peer-group interactions on the propensity of children and adolescents toward deviance (see Gifford-Smith et al., 2005 for an overview). These schema consist of ideas, meanings, and logics that, essentially, provide a lens through which individuals interpret reality (Verkuyten et al., 1994).

It is surprising and unfortunate that this strand of social psychological research does not address corruption directly. Despite the wealth of knowledge about contextual and interactional determinants of rule-breaking, scholars continue to equate corruption to strategic, self-interested behavior based on instrumental rationality. As argued above, this oversight is particularly problematic in the research on global corruption differentials as it

gives rise to a West-centric, prejudiced, and, frankly, quite dangerous vision of the world as populated by superior and inferior national groups.

What would a culturally sensitive social psychology of corruption look like?

Social psychology can bring a lot to the discussion of global differences in corruption if scholars give up the assumptions of ‘amoral calculus’ and, instead, focus on contextual determinants of corruption and interactional processes whereby people come to develop and share corruption-favorable logics. Moreover, a culturally sensitive social psychology of corruption is a highly feasible project because the tools necessary for such enterprise are well-developed and readily available. In fact, social psychology already has both – a theoretical and a methodological apparatus to uncover how group interactions in organizations, peer groups, neighborhoods, and other local contexts affect people’s propensity to abuse the relationships of trust.

The foundational idea behind symbolic interactionism is that the meanings of different social objects are negotiated collectively through symbols, managed impressions, and interactional cues in group contexts. It is via group interactions that individual actors come to understand the world and their role within it. In other words, symbolic interactionists believe that people do not impose stable categories of meaning onto events and objects in their life. Instead, the propensities, understandings, and ideas that they bring to a situation evolve into shared meanings via group interactions (Blumer, 1986; Fine, 1993; Snow, 2001). Given this focus on collective processes, symbolic interactionists favor ‘grounded observations’ – or observations of interactional encounters, rooted in a specific time and place, as their primary method of analysis (Denzin, 1974; Birkbeck and LaFree, 1993).

The application of the symbolic interactionist approach to the study of deviance and rule-breaking has a long and rich history. The foundational work in this field was carried out by Howard Becker, David Matza, Edwin Lemert, and others. Becker was particularly interested in the construction of deviance as an instrument of social control. In his work on marijuana users and jazz musicians, Becker argued that deviance was not an individual pathology but, rather, a socially constructed condition, into which individuals are socialized by fellow members of deviant subgroups (1954; 1963). David Matza was also interested in the processes of meaning creation surrounding rule-breaking and deviance, as well as its cultural transmission through group interactions (Matza, 1961; Matza, 1967; Matza and Sykes, 1961). Lemert, then, focused mainly on the societal reaction to deviance and the processes of labeling and norm evolution that ensue from this reaction. Taking symbolic interactionism to the next theoretical level, Lemert’s scholarship reveals how interactions between groups rather than individuals generate shared meanings around deviance (Lemert, 1962; Lemert, 1974; Lemert, 1967).

In 1974, Norman Denzin published a manifesto, in which he argued that to understand the causes of deviance, scholars need to observe the encounters, whereby the meaning of rule-breaking is constructed, negotiated, and performed. He then wrote that the “frequency, form, and content of these acts must be presented, analyzed, and shaped into an explanatory scheme that accounts for variations and stabilities, across personal and situations” (Denzin, 1974: 270).

A number of empirical studies of deviance responded to Denzin’s call (see Birkbeck and LaFree, 1993 for an overview). Symbolic interactionist perspective has been applied to the study of gender differences in crime (Heimer, 1996), violent crimes (Athens, 1977; Dotter, 2004), crime over the life course (Matsueda and Heimer, 1997), alcohol and drug abuse (Anderson, 1998), and victimology (Holstein and Miller, 1990). While general analytical

principles and conclusions of these studies are certainly applicable to corruption, I call for symbolic interactionist studies that are attuned to the peculiar characteristics that differentiate corruption from other rule-breaking.

What, then, makes corruption different from other types of deviance? Given the embeddedness of corruption in different cultural contexts and the multiplicity of rationalities behind it, one possible way to define corruption is in terms of acts of appropriation and exchange that undermine, subvert, or repudiate the collectively agreed-upon organizational missions or institutional roles for non-collective ends and purposes.⁹ This definition emphasizes that, more so than other types of deviance (i.e. murder, theft, or drug abuse, which are relatively immutable categories), corruption is defined in relation to its social contexts (such as collectively constructed social roles and shared meanings). Corruption is, essentially, the negation of these shared rules and norms. Thus, what constitutes corruption, how it is understood by its victims and perpetrators, and what social consequences it has is, arguably, more context-dependent than the characteristics of other deviant acts. Symbolic interactionism, with its particular emphasis on the situation embedding social action is, therefore, particularly well suited for the study of corruption. Such study would necessarily be as attuned to the social construction of the context (from which corruption is a deviation) as to the interactional processes that surround, encourage, and constitute the deviant act itself.

Yet, to my knowledge, only two studies have so far applied symbolic interactionism to the study of corruption and only one of them focuses on a non-Western context (Ashforth and Anand, 2003; Zaloznaya, 2012). Zaloznaya (2012) analyzes petty under-the-table transactions between employees and students of Ukrainian universities, whereby small financial rewards are exchanged for grades and unsanctioned assistance during tests and examinations. Her interview data reveal that ordinary Ukrainians' decisions to engage in university bribery reflect their untested assumptions rather than instrumental and strategic pursuit of profit. Thus, most people feel pressure to resort to university corruption based on hearsay, informal conversations, and observations of others within concrete organizational contexts. The author concludes that corruption is an outcome of complex interactional processes rather than a manifestation of cost-and-benefit analyses by criminally inclined individuals. The article ends with a discussion of why the informal cultures of some Ukrainian universities are more corruption-conducive than the cultures of others.

Similarly, Ashforth and Anand (2003) analyze corruption as a property of a collective that exists outside any one individual actor. They argue that initial acts of corruption become embedded and routinized in the structures and cultures of specific organizations. These organizationally rooted assumptions, values, and beliefs, then, override the ethical convictions that new members bring in from the outside. In authors' words, "an individual typically responds to a press of a given context by invoking the localized social identity and culture. [...]. In the case of corruption, this [...] means that an otherwise ethically-minded individual may forsake universalistic or dominant norms about ethical behavior in favor of particularistic behaviors..." (2003: 10).

What differentiates these two studies of corruption from most other micro-sociological research on deviance is their explicit focus on *contextualized interactions*. In other words, they do more than describe the interactional patterns whereby corruption-favorable definitions are transmitted. Rather, they also consider the ways, in which broader environments (such as organizational cultures and structures) shape the interactions whereby corruption-conducive beliefs are passed among social actors. These studies, therefore, put simultaneous emphasis on causes and outcomes of interactional processes and link the micro-level processes to their macro-structural and cultural determinants.

What kind of agenda do these studies set for an interactionist social psychology of corruption? I argue that while future work in this tradition could take a variety of forms, it would necessarily embrace the double focus on causes and outcomes of social interaction. I propose that such studies should revolve around three major research questions about the roots of corruption-favorable schema in broader cultural and structural contexts, their transmission through group interactions, and their transformation into actual corrupt behaviors.

The first major focus of social psychology of corruption would fall on the collective roots of corruption-favorable beliefs. Specifically, social psychologists would observe and analyze the emergence of shared beliefs that are favorable to corruption. As research suggests, in non-Western contexts, the micro-processes that generate these beliefs overlap with cultural rituals, traditions, and historical institutions. Such analysis, would, therefore, entail the 'microsociology of tradition' or, in other words, an interaction-focused inquiry into the genesis of established ways of thinking and acting.

The second item on this research agenda is the study of communicative processes, through which local actors acquire corruption-favorable (and corruption-unfavorable) definitions. Through ethnographic analyses of everyday interactions, social psychologists could single out corruption-relevant processes of socialization within families, peer-groups, and various institutions, through which people learn appropriate behavioral patterns in different situations.

The final focus of social psychology of corruption would fall on the interactional moments (or occasions, in the symbolic interactionism lingo) that activate corruption-favorable or corruption-unfavorable schema. Specifically, researchers could identify the contextual cues that evoke different beliefs about corruption. These cues, in all likelihood, include the observed behavior of others, gossip and hearsay, specific organizational characteristics, explicit or implicit invocation of traditional or religious principles. These analyses of contextual triggers could be based either on participant observation, interviews, or other micro-sociological research methods.

It is important to note that the outlined research agenda poses a number of sizable challenges and requires resourcefulness and ingenuity on behalf of researchers. For obvious reasons, traditional methodologies of symbolic interactionism may prove difficult to apply to the study of stigmatized, hidden, and often illegal activities that constitute corruption. Thus, ethnographic observations are likely to be inhibited by their clandestine nature. In cases of grand political and corporate corruption, the status and power of corrupt actors allow them to diminish the visibility of illicit activities by manipulating the 'rules of the game' and restricting the inner circle to elites and repeat players. Access to the contexts where informal deals are contracted may therefore require significant trust on behalf of research subjects and depend either on hefty emotional and temporal investment or on outright deception by researchers.

Ethical considerations present a major obstacle for social psychologists of corruption. Like most researchers collecting primary data on deviance, micro-corruptologists may find themselves in an ethical bind, whereby the use of their data creates potential legal and social risks for their subjects. They are also likely to face difficult choices about personal involvement in illegal transactions, facilitation and covering up of crime, and potential involvement in dangerous situations.

In-depth interviews constitute another common method of micro-sociological research that can remove a researcher from a problematic situation she is studying and minimize ensuing ethical dilemmas. Yet, interview data on corruption raise a number of additional concerns since respondents may engage in impression-management, downplaying or denying their own involvement in corruption or providing inaccurate information about the dynamics and outcomes of informal exchanges. Moreover, the interview data on

interactions that precede and embed informal exchanges as well as data on decision-making behind corruption are particularly problematic as they reflect post-factum reconstructions of thought processes and rationales. Finally, the recruitment of interview respondents presents similar difficulties as gaining access into the field for ethnographic observation of corrupt exchanges.

Given the high costs of ethnographic data on corruption, social interactionist studies on the issue are likely to be vulnerable to generalizability and verifiability critiques. Yet, despite these serious difficulties, there are multiple ways to improve the quality of micro data on corruption and facilitate its collection. For instance, scholars can avoid some ethical and access problems by searching for observable situations that do not require their physical co-presence or by collecting participants' testimonies outside conventional interview settings. Thus, in many non-Western contexts, corrupt exchanges are contracted in public spaces (i.e. through newspaper announcements or semi-formal organizational mechanisms) and discussed openly in the local media, online, political speeches, and other public forums (Karklins, 2005; Smith, 2010; Zaloznaya, 2013).

Corruptologists can also utilize the techniques that have proven useful in the study of other crimes, such as snowball-sampling and financial incentives to recruit hard-to-reach populations as well as triangulation to ensure the veracity of difficult to check data (Watters and Biernacki, 1989; Ferrell and Hamm, 1998; Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Venkatesh, 2006, 2008; etc.). All in all, while undeniably challenging, social psychology of corruption can be made possible by imagination and creativity of researchers.

The policy promise of an interactionist social psychology of corruption

In addition to generating accurate and nuanced accounts of causal processes behind corruption, an interactionist social psychology could also offer actionable and, potentially, highly effective policy recommendations. Specifically, it could shift the focus of anti-corruption policy from national cultures and individual offenders to situations and social contexts that are conducive to corruption. Thus, the research agenda, outlined in this article, could help policy-makers identify specific contextual characteristics that facilitate the transmission and enactment of corruption-favorable definitions in different social settings. Once these situational determinants of corruption are accurately identified through rigorous empirical analyses, the implementation of even moderate adjustments is likely to generate positive changes.

It is hardly a secret that problematic academic research often translates into ineffective and wasteful social policies. Unfortunately, this has been the case with many anti-corruption initiatives. Given the assumptions of instrumental rationality that currently underlie most research on corruption, anti-corruption policies tend to adjust the incentive structures of social actors by raising the costs and lowering the benefits of corrupt behavior. This is usually done through the implementation of stricter controls, stronger accountability mechanisms, harsher punishments for rule-breakers, and higher benefits for rule-followers (such as salaries, group belonging, and symbolic recognition) (The World Bank, 2011; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2013).

While some of these policies have enjoyed limited success (as in Singapore and Georgia, for example (Quah, 1994; Di Puccio 2010)), most share the fate of infamous anti-corruption reforms in the Ukrainian police. Despite the absence of hard data to support these claims, ordinary Ukrainians and the country's popular media concur that the rise in the costs of corrupt behavior associated with anti-corruption reforms did not eradicate corruption in Ukrainian police but, rather, increased the amounts that policemen were demanding in

bribes to offset the changes in their incentive structures (Zaloznaya, 2013). This popular myth goes to show that in places where corruption has deep cultural roots, modifications in cost-and-benefit considerations are likely to be insufficient as people will find ways around these obstacles without changing their corrupt behavior.

Whether or not the urban legend about the Ukrainian police is true, the fact remains that most anti-corruption reforms orchestrated by Western capitalist democracies in less developed countries are largely ineffective (Rousso and Steves 2007; Tangri and Mwenda, 2006; Quah, 2008, 2010). Given the evidence that most corrupt behavior is based on logics of appropriateness rather than logics of consequence, it is hardly surprising that adjustments in incentive structures are likely to be unsuccessful.

The only current alternative to rational-choice explanations of corruption is the anthropological case studies that are also not much help for policy-makers. In fact, the policy implications of studies that trace the historical roots of corruption and explain it in terms of traditional ways of being are not immediately obvious. What can be done to dismantle traditions and change culturally embedded practices? How can a policy address the beliefs that have formed over centuries? As scholars and policy-makers promoting the rule of law in democratizing societies have discovered in recent decades, these questions do not have easy answers.

I believe that interactionist social psychology of corruption can offer a highly effective alternative to policies based on the 'amoral calculus' model of corruption that does not involve attempts to change centuries-old national cultures. Since this approach focuses on situational determinants of emergence and transmission of corruption-favorable beliefs, it can help policy-makers identify the contextual characteristics of interactional moments that promote corruption. These characteristics are likely to be much easier to access and alter than corrupt behaviors themselves.

Previous research on rule-breaking suggests that most of these interactional moments happen in groups contexts, which, in their turn, are brought together by institutions and organizations. It is these institutions and organizations that offer particularly amenable policy targets. By changing their structural characteristics, anti-corruption activists could affect the interactional encounters within them and, potentially, impede the emergence of corruption-favorable shared meanings and their transmission to individual actors. In other words, while the current focus of policy-makers falls either on incentive structures of individual actors or on belief systems of entire cultures, social psychological theories of corruption could help reorient them towards the meso-level of organizations, neighborhoods, and other contexts where small structural adjustments are likely to effect long-lasting positive social change.

Short Biography

Marina Zaloznaya is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Iowa. Her research lies at the intersection of political and economic sociology, criminology, and comparative-historical methods. Dr. Zaloznaya's work focuses specifically on the macro-micro link between political and economic contexts of different societies and ordinary people's decisions to engage in petty economic crimes. Her findings have been published in *Population and Development Review*, *Law & Social Inquiry*, *Crime, Law, and Social Change*, an edited volume by Oxford University Press, and other outlets. Dr. Zaloznaya's professional awards include grants from the National Science Foundation, Open Society Institute, and Max Planck Institute for Study of Societies. Dr. Zaloznaya received her PhD in Sociology from Northwestern University (Evanston, IL) in 2012 and her Master's degree in Sociology from the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 2007.

Notes

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¹ 1979 is chosen as a baseline year for comparison because it marked the publication of the first issue of *Social Psychology Quarterly* in its current form (the journal had existed previously under other names and outside of the ownership of the American Sociological Association).

² It is important to note that a more nuanced survey of the flagship journals does yield some relevant findings. Thus, *Social Psychology Quarterly* has published several articles on wrongdoing in organizations and high-status deviance, while *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* has featured work on deception. Yet, an insignificant number of relevant publications and the tentative relationship between their themes and corruption yield support to the argument that the study of corruption is not an established field in social psychology.

³ Power distance refers to popular acceptance of significant status, income, and power differentials (Hofstede, 1984).

⁴ Uncertainty avoidance refers to “the extent to which members of the culture feel threatened by uncertainty and unknown situations” (Hofstede, 1984: 113).

⁵ Diefendorff and Mehta (2007) measure ambition of organizational members in terms of three constituent characteristics: desire to achieve, desire to perform better than others, and responsiveness to rewards (p. 967). They hypothesize the following: (i) that high desire to achieve is associated with low propensity towards interpersonal and organizational deviance because both of these types of workplace deviance undermine individual and organizational performance (pp. 968–969); that (ii) high desire to compete is positively related to interpersonal deviance and negatively related to workplace deviance inasmuch as this personality characteristic is associated with low desire to cooperate and help others (p. 969); and that (iii) high responsiveness to rewards is positively linked to both, interpersonal and organizational deviance because both are likely to stimulate individuals with such personality feature (p. 969–970). The empirical analyses, presented in the article, support hypotheses 1 and 3. In relation to hypothesis 2, the authors find that desire to perform better than others is not related to either type of workplace deviance (pp. 972–973).

⁶ Corruptology is a subset of social sciences, concerned with the study of corruption.

⁷ This conception of corruption is based on Transparency International’s and other international anti-corruption organizations’ definitions (“abuse of entrusted power for private gain” (Transparency International, 2013)).

⁸ To most, but not to all, in Harrison and Huntington, 2000, Lawrence, Harrison, Samuel Huntington, and a number of colleagues, published an edited volume, entitled *Culture Matters*, in which, they bring the two perspectives together in an argument that some cultures are better than others (Harrison and Huntington, 2000). Perhaps not surprisingly, this research has been criticized vigorously by sociologists and other social scientists.

⁹ This definition avoids the following: (i) the Western dichotomies of private/public and use/abuse; and (ii) the assumption of instrumentality behind corruption, allowing sufficient space for variation in regards to what rules are broken in the course of a corrupt act and for what purpose. Social psychologists can use the actual data on their specific cases to narrow down and tailor this definition.

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