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Köbis, N.C.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Corruption occurs daily around the world – causing immense damages. To name a few: corruption depletes national wealth (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2006), causes over-exploitation of the environment (Ostrom, 2000; Rothstein, 2011a) and threatens democracy (Johnston, 2005). It overall disproportionately affects the most vulnerable parts of societies (Azfar, Lee, & Swamy, 2001); increasing inequality as well as poverty (Gupta, Davoodi, & Alonso-Terme, 2002; Stiglitz, 2012) and undermining general trust towards other people (Dinesen, 2012). Not just scholars recognize the importance of corruption. In 2014, a poll from the online activist network Avaaz surveyed 116,000 people in 194 countries to assess the most significant obstacle for the improvement of global well-being. On top of the list was ‘fighting political corruption’; in total 37% of the poll listed it as the primary societal problem (Merrick, 2014).

One important step to effectively fight corruption lies in evidence-based anti-corruption programs (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2017). Hence, a pressing demand exists for scientific investigation into causes and consequences of corruption. Hitherto, corruption research as well as anti-corruption efforts have largely neglected the role of psychological processes (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2017; Persson, Rothstein, & Teorell, 2012). Corruption, it has been argued, is a “crime of calculation, not passion” (Klitgaard, 1998). At the same time behavioral research has investigated various related forms of unethical behavior such as cheating or lying and emphasized the immense importance of psychological factors (Ariely, 2012; Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2013; Shalvi, Dana, Handgraaf, & De Dreu, 2011). Yet, corruption – commonly defined as the “abuse of entrusted power for private gains” (Transparency International, 2010) – and its social psychological drivers remain largely unknown.

Understanding the social psychological underpinnings of corrupt behavior bears great relevance for corruption research. Even though some questions such as the link between economic growth and corruption (Mauro, 1995) are beyond the scope of social psychology, its

theoretical and methodological toolkit enables unique contributions to crucial, and relatively unexplored, questions such as: What are the different psychological decision-making dynamics involved in the manifold forms of corrupt behavior? Given that corruption research repeatedly emphasizes the importance of social norms (Rothstein, 2000), could the social psychological distinction between social norms (Reno, Cialdini, & Kallgren, 1993) help to shed new light into how social norms shape corrupt behavior? More specifically, what type of social norm impacts corruption more strongly: is it the moral evaluation (injunctive norms) or the perception of what everybody else does (descriptive norms)?

Also, while major corruption scandals draw substantial media attention – think for example of the Madoff case – the question how severe corruption emerges over time has hardly been addressed empirically. Recent advances in behavioral research methods allow studying the question whether severe forms of corruption come about gradually, resembling a “slippery slope” process or whether they arise abruptly, rather resembling a “steep cliff”. On the brighter side, what minimal interventions can reduce corruption? Given that many attempts to curb corruption through harsher punishment regimes have failed (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2017), might psychological factors such as the presence of another person help to reduce corrupt behavior?

The present dissertation

This dissertation addresses these and further questions. By integrating insights from social psychology and behavioral ethics with the existing interdisciplinary corruption literature, it seeks to contribute to corruption research on the theoretical, methodological and empirical level. First, as a *theoretical* contribution, Chapter 2 introduces a conceptual framework that models the decision to engage in corrupt behavior as a social dilemma. It serves as a novel tool to differentiate between two distinct types of corrupt situations: individual and interpersonal corruption dilemmas. Each of the two corruption dilemmas

entails different, at times even opposing, social psychological mechanisms. Second, the *methodological* contribution of this dissertation consists of a new behavioral paradigm to experimentally study corruption, used in the studies reported in Chapter 3,4, and 5. It enables novel behavioral research on the mostly under-investigated psychological factors of corrupt behavior. Third, the dissertation presents *empirical* data on the intricate social dynamics of corrupt decision-making (Chapters 3-5).¹

These three empirical chapters illuminate the link between an individual, (corrupt) decision-maker and the social environment. The first empirical chapter (Chapter 3) focuses on how an individual perceives the social environment. Three studies explore how perceived social norms impact the willingness to engage in corruption. Chapter 4, then, investigates the opposite link running from others to the decision-maker. Two studies test how the physical presence of another person influences an individual's inclination to behave unethically. Finally, Chapter 5 scrutinizes the psychological dynamics *between* multiple corrupt agents. Four studies investigate how severe corruption emerges over time comparing a gradual to an abrupt process. These chapters are outlined in more detail below.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 2: Corruption Dilemmas

Chapter 2 (Köbis, van Prooijen, Righetti, & Van Lange, 2016) addresses the lack of theoretical frameworks to distinguish and study the psychological decision-making processes involved in different forms of corruption. With an emphasis on the role of mental forecasting (prospection), this chapter differentiates between two broad categories of corrupt acts: (1) individual corrupt acts, which refer to a power holder individually abusing entrusted power; and (2) interpersonal corrupt acts, which refer to a power holder abusing entrusted power in

¹ Data for each of the empirical studies and the material for the corruption game are openly accessibly on the Open Science Framework via [DOI 10.17605/OSF.IO/6GZU8](https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/6GZU8).

collaboration with other corrupt agents. The new theoretical framework models the decision structure as two inherently different social dilemmas: individual corruption requires a power holder to prospect own and collective consequences, whereas interpersonal corruption requires a prospection of self-interest, the interest of corrupt partner(s) conflict and collective interests (nested social dilemma). Individual and interpersonal corruption dilemmas rest on different prospective decision-making processes, which are illustrated along intrapersonal factors (expected costs and benefits, self-control, guilt) and interpersonal factors (social norms, trust). Closing the chapter, the discussion addresses the advantages of this novel distinction for theory development, experimental corruption research, as well as anti-corruption efforts.

Chapter 3: Descriptive Norms of Corruption

As one of the most important factors that influences corrupt behavior, Chapter 3 (Köbis, van Prooijen, Righetti, & Van Lange, 2015) investigates the influence of perceived social norms on the inclination to behave corruptly. Considerable advances have been made in understanding corruption on a macro level, yet the psychological antecedents of corrupt behavior remain largely unknown. To explain why some people engage in corruption while others do not, Chapter 3 explores the impact of descriptive social norms on corrupt behavior by using a novel behavioral measure of corruption. Three studies test whether perceived descriptive norms of corruption (i.e. the belief about the prevalence of corruption in a specific context) influence corrupt behavior. The results indicate that descriptive norms highly correlate with corrupt behavior – both when measured before (Study 3.1) or after (Study 3.2) the behavioral measure of corruption. Finally, an experiment investigated the causal effect of descriptive norms on corruption (Study 3.3). Corrupt behavior in the corruption game significantly drops when participants receive short anti-corruption descriptive norm primes

prior to the game. These findings indicate that perceived descriptive norms can impact corrupt behavior and, possibly, could explain inter-personal and inter-cultural variation in corrupt behavior in the around the world. The discussion of this chapter addresses implications of these findings and draws avenues for future research on social norms and corruption.

Chapter 4: The Presence of the Other Effect

Chapter 4 (Köbis, van Prooijen, Righetti & Van Lange, forthcoming) seeks to answer a basic and highly relevant question: Does the presence of another person curb unethical behaviour? The growing literature on behavioural ethics has repeatedly emphasized that “others” crucially influence individual unethical behaviour. Yet, in the vast majority of studies participants made decisions in isolation with no other person physically present. Two experiments examine whether the presence of another person, who has no formal means to sanction, suffices to reduce unethical behaviour. In both studies a second person was present with the participant in the lab. Study 4.1 also investigated the quality of the relationship towards that second person, either being a stranger or a well-known friend. Study 4.2 tested if the stakes of the other person influenced the participant’s behaviour, by manipulating whether the other person benefitted from cheating or not. Using different behavioural paradigms, two main results become apparent: first, the presence of another person curbs levels of corruption and cheating, and second, neither the relationship towards that other nor the payoff structure for the other person matters for this effect to occur. The discussion of this chapter outlines the implications of this “presence of another person effect” for research and policy.

Chapter 5: The Road to Bribery and Corruption – Steep Cliff or Slippery Slope

Chapter 5 (Köbis, van Prooijen, Righetti, & Van Lange, 2017) tackles the emergence of severe corruption between two corrupt agents because major forms of corruption constitute a

strong threat to the functioning of societies. The most frequent explanation of how severe corruption emerges is the slippery-slope metaphor—the notion that corruption occurs gradually. While having widespread theoretical and intuitive appeal, this notion has barely been tested empirically. Four experimental studies tested whether severely corrupt acts happen gradually or abruptly. The results reveal a higher likelihood of severe corruption when participants face the opportunity to engage in it (abrupt) compared to when they had previously engaged in minor forms of corruption (gradual). Neither the size of the payoffs, which were kept constant, nor evaluations of the actions could account for these differences. Contrary to widely shared beliefs, sometimes the route to corruption leads over a steep cliff rather than a slippery slope.

In closing, it is worthy to note that all chapters are based on separate scientific articles that have been published or are currently under review at academic journals – the summaries above draw on the abstracts of the respective articles. Hence, some theoretical overlap between the chapters is unavoidable. Each chapter may be read independently yet at the same time deals with different aspects of the social psychology of corruption.