The Motivations behind and Conditioning of Corruption

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Introduction: India is ranked 87th out of 178 countries in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index and 55% of Indians had first-hand experience with corruption.

Corruption can refer to a wide variety of actions and/or behaviours, referring to a dynamic process as well as the outcome of it. Corruption is an inherently multi-level phenomenon. It can operate at Individual, group, organizational and industry level. This study defines corruption as "a process which perverts the original nature of an individual or group from a more pure state to a less pure state". As corrupt firm behaviour is necessarily underpinned by the actions of individuals, individual-level corruption is the focus of the study. In order to standardize the notion of morality, we'd consider 'appropriate' as what is 'appropriate' as under law and unethical, vice versa.

Method

Aim:

To theoretically analyze individual level motivation and conditioning to corruption, and apply the principles to formulate anti-corruption strategies.

Research Design:

Application of classical motivation theories and learning principles of various schools of thought and collection, along with review and qualitative analysis of secondary data.

What motivates individuals to be corrupt?

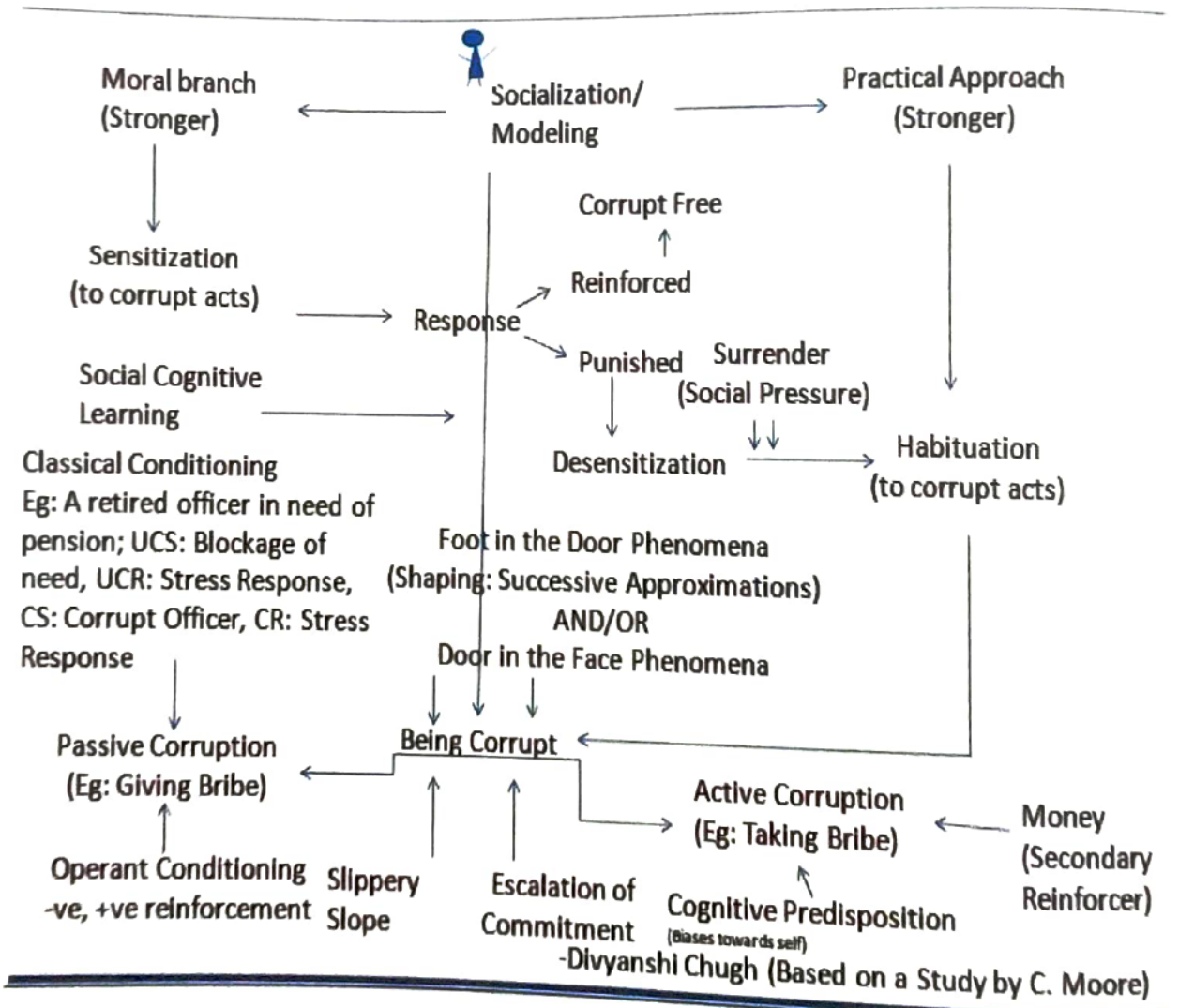
Individual level motivation is a key to understanding why corruption occurs in the first place, i.e. why people are willing to engage in illegal or immoral behavior. Structural reasons can only be secondary causes of corruption for people are hard-wired to believe that corrupt behavior is normal or beneficial.

William Mc Dougall's one of the 18 instincts: "Acquisition or gathering possessions" presents a basis for motivation behind acquisition of wealth. The Need for Power (nPow, given by McClelland) (to have control or influence over others) and the desire to prevail may motivate people to actively engage in corruption. While power and money act as external incentives for engaging in corruption, according to expectancy value theory, anticipation of success by engaging in the corrupt act based on the past experience of having observed a successful corrupt act will lead to adjustment of one's actions according to the cognitive expectancies.

Dr Sam Vaknin (Author, Researcher on Narcissistic Personality Disorder) psychological need motivates politicians to binge on endless quantities of lucre, accumulated through corrupt acts. The balances in their bulging bank accounts were of no practical import or intent. They merely cater to their psychopathology

Causes of Corruption: Application of Learning Principles

Figure 1.



A Model: How is 'Corruption' learnt by the individuals?

The authority figures as well as the peers act as important socializing agent in the individual's environment. There are two contradictory behaviours present in the child's environment. At one level, the child is given moral teachings. And at the same time, s/he observes various forms of corruption in his/her environment. He may have a strong moral branch or may learn that corruption is a natural human tendency to search out normative behaviours in groups. Both authority figures and peers have separate coercive effects on the corruption of individuals. Experimental evidence indicates that when the authority figures and peers both exert an influence towards corruptive behaviour, their effect is amplified. This may shape the minds of people into expecting that corruption is acceptable. People who have a strong moral branch get sensitized to corrupt acts. But, upon responding, if their resistance is not reinforced or rather punished, they will tend to get desensitized.

Also, although people decry corruption in government, they also find acts such as paying off fixers to expedite transactions as more acceptable. The problem with this is where one draws the line between small and large acts? Big acts start with small ones. People become habituated to corrupt acts. Through Socialization, they learn that corruption is a widespread behaviour and that there is an approval of this problem behaviour, thus they get habituated to corrupt acts.

Compliance Tactic, Foot in the Door Phenomena operates as the individual gradually complies with relatively bigger acts. Door in the Face Phenomena operates as people deny employment in extremely large corrupt act; accede to a more reasonable second request. Individuals first cross their morally ambiguous zone, and as behaviour within the zone becomes more acceptable, they slide down the slippery slope i.e. it then becomes easier to extend the boundaries of moral ambiguity out farther into previously unconsidered territory, leading to escalation of commitment. People who engage in negative behaviors will typically seek to justify their behaviours by denial of responsibility or denial of injury so they do not feel conflicted.

Through association, certain stimuli cause patterns of behavior to be expressed as developed reactions. Example: For a retired old man who is in need of pension, is denied of the pension by the corrupt official, unless he pays an exorbitant amount as bribe. The blockage of the motive of the old man will elicit a stress response in him. In order to lessen his stress, he agrees to give bribe (thus, passively engaging in corruption). Through such experiences, he gets classically conditioned and starts associating people in authority with corruption.

One explanation for the differences in attitudes toward corruption between socioeconomic classes is reinforcement. For those with higher income, the cost of corruption is minor compared with its benefits. The amount paid to a cop is inconsequential in comparison with the hassle of retrieving a confiscated license.

The responses of the middle and lower classes suggest that what is salient to them is how they are being victimized by corruption, seeing how their tax money is being squandered on poor service or official's personal gain. For actively engaging in corruption, money acts as a secondary reinforcer. Bribe giving is positively reinforced by the work that is timely done and negatively reinforced by the removal of threat by the corrupt official. If the individual refuses to comply to the demands of the corrupt official, s/he may be threatened to be given

positive/negative punishment (by misusing ones authority). Thus this behaviour of resistance is suppressed.

Humans have a tendency towards self-serving biases, leading to unethical behaviour. (Johns, 1999; Moore and Loewernstein, 2004). When people fail to escape from corrupt acts repeatedly, they develop 'learned helplessness'. Their past experiences of repeated failure inhibit escape from an unpleasant situation. Thus, despite such anger toward corruption, there also appears to be a sense of helplessness in doing something about it.

Anti Corruption Strategies (Offering solutions by applying learning principles)

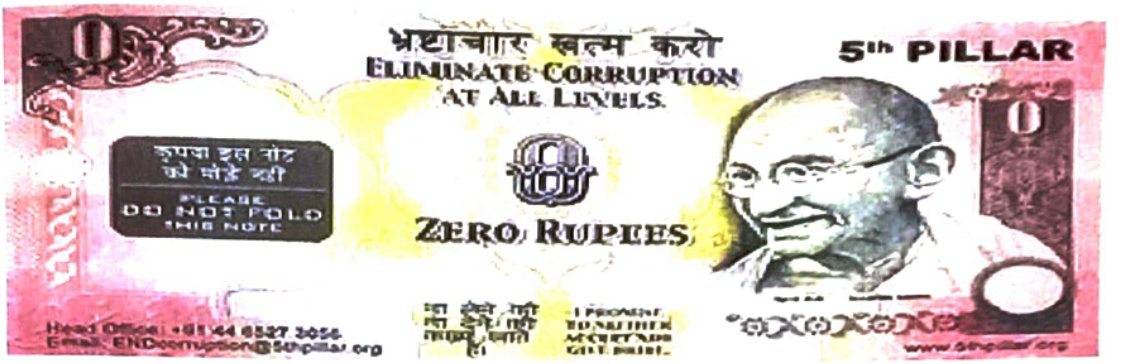
The corrupt-free government officials should be rewarded so as to positively reinforce their moral and loyal behaviour. Increments in Salary based on performance should be given following 'Partial Fixed Ratio Interval Schedule of Reinforcement'. Example: the official gets a coupon (token) for every successful completion, and at the collection of 30 such coupons he can redeem. (Token Economy)

"Rewards/Special Recognition" should be given following 'Partial Variable Ratio Interval Schedule of Reinforcement' implying better quality of responses (Performance). A Transparent System to be put in place where there are adequate checks on the behaviour of the officials. Doing so will ensure that officials don't most of the time engage in corrupt practices. And if they do, citizens have an easy access to reporting the corrupt act. The response of 'reporting the corrupt practice' will increase as it will provide a negative reinforcement by the removal of an aversive stimulus (threatened by the corrupt official/being asked for bribe by the corrupt official). Besides, Stringent aversive punishments should be formulated for corrupt officials and Whistleblowers should be rewarded at each and every step. Like first, when they approach the Anti-corruption Authority; Second, when they narrate the instances; Third, when they provide the evidence, so on and so forth.

Also, the Official should be charged a fine/punished for not performing the task on time. Example: If the Official doesn't issue a license within the stipulated time/on the stated date of issuance, then he should be charged a fine which will act as a negative punishment as it involves taking a part of salary as a consequence of an undesirable response. Suspension of the officer for few days, as a punishment for committing a corrupt act will act as Time Out.

Effective and Popular use of the 'ZERO RUPEE NOTE', fantasy money paid in protest by angry citizens to government functionaries who solicit bribes in return for services which are supposed to be free, as a means of helping to fight systemic political corruption, will act as a Positive Punisher as seldom do the officials encounter resistance by ordinary people that they become scared when people have the courage to show their Zero Rupee Notes, effectively making a strong statement condemning bribery.

Figure 2.



Zero Rupee Note

Vicarious Learning, learning through observation, powerful socializing agents like Anna Hazare and Awareness Campaigns like Tata Tea's Jaago Re takes the issue of corruption, urges citizens to awaken and fight against it and acts as a powerful vehicle of change.

Non Governmental Organizations like Association for Social Transparency, Rights and Action (ASTRA) that fights corruption at a grass-roots level in Karnataka, India by working directly with villagers and factory labourers should be set up. The villagers and the factory labourers learn by observing and acquiring the belief that they can actively stand against corruption.

Results and Discussion

The objective of the paper was to study the various psychological processes that underlie corruption and attempts to find solutions to the same by altering these very processes, using the principles of learning. The various Approaches to Motivation and Classical, Operant, Social and Cognitive Schools of Learning were applied so as to understand the underlying causes of corruption. Various Psychological Processes, like Anchoring, Framing, Compliance Phenomena, Self Serving Biases, Inability to Judge Outcomes, Escalation of Commitment, Surrender, Seduction, that operate to determine corrupt behaviour have been captured through the course of research. Corruption today has become a lifestyle and it not only requires a macro level change in the system, it also requires an alteration in the psychological processes that underpin corruption. The Application-based research is solution centric and proposes various Anti-Corruption Strategies, based on learning principles, which can be implemented in India.

Conclusion

A theoretical analysis, backed by observations of corruption at the individual level indicates that corruption is a widespread phenomenon which is increasingly a normative behaviour and can be curbed through effective implementation of various schedules of reinforcements, punishments, transparency, accountability, awareness, modelling, and psychological strategies to understand and combat corruption. One of the single largest deterrents of the speed at which public and private investment and sectoral and social reforms can impact the life of the Aam Admi (common man) is corruption. Our real problem in India is not political; it is psychosocial