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Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Corruption

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Abstract

Corruption has become one of the most popular topics in the social scientific disciplines. However, there is a lack of interdisciplinary communication about corruption. Models developed by different academic disciplines are often isolated from each other. The purpose of this paper is to review several major approaches to corruption and draw them closer to each other. Most studies of corruption fall into three major categories: (i) rational-actor models where corruption is viewed as resulting from cost/benefit analysis of individual actors; (ii) structural models that focus on external forces that determine corruption; and (iii) relational models that emphasize social interactions and networks among corrupt actors. Focusing on actors' behavior and the social context, this article explains corruption concepts taken from sociology, economics, organization studies, political science, social anthropology, and social psychology.

Introduction

Corruption is an elusive phenomenon conceptually. Its literature is enormous, and most disciplines in the social sciences attempt to say something about it. Unfortunately, there is a lack of interdisciplinary communication about corruption, such that models developed by different academic disciplines are often isolated from each other. However, each social science has revealed interesting and important features of corruption, so it is worth drawing them closer to each other. Hence, this paper reviews corruption concepts taken from social anthropology, economics, political science, social psychology, sociology, and organization studies.

Many studies of corruption fall into three major categories: (i) a micro-level perspective where corruption is viewed as resulting from rational decisions of individual actors; (ii) a macro perspective that focuses on social norms and the structural arrangements that facilitate corruption; and (iii) a relational approach that examines social interactions and networks among corrupt actors. This paper brings some coherence to the extensive literature on corruption. It provides an interdisciplinary overview of the three major approaches to corruption, focusing on actors' behavior and the social context. The article tries to reflect the broader social scientific context and theoretical background related to each approach. Finally, it argues that relational approach has the potential to integrate the other two paradigms and link rational actors with structural elements.

Conceptualization of corruption

We can find dozens of competing and sometimes contradictory definitions of corruption in the literature. Some studies offer interesting overviews of such definitions (Kurer 2005; Pellegrini 2011; Williams 1999). Rather than try to resolve the definitional problem, this paper will provide a framework for comparing and contrasting the predominant approaches in corruption studies. Here, I will use corruption as a broad umbrella term based on four minimal, sometimes implicit, conceptual elements that one finds across most disciplines.

First, there seems to be a consensus that corruption is an informal/illegal and secret exchange of formally allocated resources. In other words, money, goods, or other resources, which are considered to belong to an organization or collectivity, are instead handled or exchanged covertly in ways that benefit one or more persons who are not the formal owner. Some scholars define corruption in a way that rules out non-governmental foci (Friedrich 1993; Rose-Ackerman 1996; Shleifer and Vishny 1993; World Bank 1997). Others claim that corruption can be found in private firms or in NGOs as well (Aguilera and Vadera 2008; Argandona 2003; Ashforth and Anand 2003; Bayar 2005; Pellegrini 2011, 19; Shore and Haller 2005, 18). Without trying to resolve this debate, we can say at minimum that corruption occurs in a formal organizational context.

Second, at least one corrupt party has to have formal membership/affiliation or at least a contractual relation with the organization from which the resources are extracted (Della Porta and Vannucci 2012, 2–3). This distinguishes corruption from other criminal activities where the criminals do not have a formal affiliation to the organization from where the resources are illegally extracted. A robber who breaks into an office and steals its resources is not classified as corrupt.

Third, corruption happens between two or more corrupt parties (Pellegrini 2011, 20; Varese 2000). There is one party who “sells” the resources and another party who compensates that individual for them. It might seem like a commonplace, but the existence of the second corrupt party distinguishes corruption from other organizational misdeeds such as embezzlement, fraud, or theft when the actor illegally acquires his/her organizational resources; however, in these cases, there is no second party, a “buyer” of such resources involved (Della Porta and Vannucci 2012, 7; Varese 2000).

Fourth, a corrupt act is always a deviation from social rules or expectations of some kind (Friedrich 1993, 15; Huntington 1968, 59; Lovell 2005, 67–68; Serra and Wantchekon 2012). These rules vary greatly in form: sometimes corruption involves the violation of written contracts; sometimes legal codes are broken; and sometimes moral codes are transgressed but not laws. Given these four common elements, scholars have built several different models for understanding corruption that can be classified into three major categories. I summarize these approaches next.

Corruption as utility maximization: a rational-actor approach

In the micro-level rational-actor approach, corruption is treated as if it is a strict market transaction despite being an illegal one. In its pure form, this model of corruption is closely linked to neoclassical economics in which atomized individuals pursue utility maximization in their exchanges under the conditions of scarcity (Smith 1776). Thus, actors engage in corruption because according to their personal cost/benefit analysis, acting in a corrupt manner seems to be the most rational decision that will maximize their personal profit. This utilitarian tradition in the social sciences views people as atomized or “undersocialized” actors who are minimally affected by social relations (Granovetter 1985). In rational-actor analyses, only two corrupt actors, an agent, and a client are involved, while their identities and past relations are typically neglected factors because they are thought to be unimportant.

In rational-actor models of corruption, core concepts include an idea of the dysfunctionality of state institutions. One common argument is that there is a clear division between the public and private spheres (Lennerfors 2009; Williams 1999) and that corruption happens only in government institutions that constitute a “foreign body within the market sphere” (Van Klaveren 1989, 25). The extension of government and its authority into the economic sphere distorts the functioning of the market and creates new incentives for

corrupt public officers and opportunities for rent seeking private firms (Acemoglu and Verdier 2000; Banfield 1975; Krueger 1974; Tanzi and Davoodi 1997; Treisman 2000; Tullock 1996).

However, the relationship between state intervention and corruption is not straightforward. Empirical studies found that a higher level of public intervention, for example in Scandinavian and Northern European countries, may even be associated with a very low level of corruption (Della Porta and Vannucci 2012, 11–12; Hopkin and Rodriguez-Pose 2007). Such results suggest that variables other than the level of government intervention might also have a significant influence on the level of corruption.

The principal–agent dilemma

There are many scholars in economics and political science who view corruption as a particular instance of a more general principal–agent dilemma (Banfield 1975; Klitgaard 1988; Rose–Ackerman 1978; Shleifer and Vishny 1993). According to this approach, an agent is a manager or a public officer who, due to his/her employment contract, is under an obligation to act on behalf of his/her principal and serve the principal's interest as if it were his or her own. The principal may be a ruler or an owner or may represent the general public. In order to serve the principal's interest, an agent must exercise some discretion in their own decision-making and work but the desires and goals of the principal and the agent may be different or may diverge over time. Moreover, it may be difficult or expensive for the principal to monitor what the agent is actually doing (Eisenhardt 1989; Jensen and Meckling 1976). An agent becomes corrupt and collects bribes when he intentionally sacrifices his principal's or his organization's interest to his own and betrays his trust (Banfield 1975; Rose–Ackerman 1975; Shleifer and Vishny 1993).

A major emphasis in the principal–agent literature is on the proper incentive and punishment structures and price mechanisms that can resolve the problem of corruption (Bardhan 2006; Becker and Stigler 1974; Rose–Ackerman 1986). Empirical studies suggest that higher salaries of civil servants lead to lower corruption (Azfar and Nelson 2007; Van Rijckeghem and Weder 2001). The principal should also make corrupt acts costly to the rule-violating agent. Using laboratory experiments, economic researchers and social psychologists conclude that the possibility of detection and of negative sanctions in fact discourage individuals from taking bribe or paying kickback (Abbink 2005; Abbink 2006; Abbink et al. 2002; Hegarty and Sims 1978; Laczniak and Inderrieden 1987; Trevino 1986).

Critics of the principal–agent approach have noted that this framework, especially in public organizations where the principal represents the interest of the general public, might be useless as an analytical tool in circumstances where the principal becomes corrupt as well, and does not act in the interest of the organization or the public good (Persson et al. 2010; Rothstein 2011, 99–104). In that case, there will be no actors able to monitor and punish corrupt behavior.

Bad apples in formal organizations

Much of the literature in organization studies has focused on whether corruption is an individual or an organizational issue (Coleman 1987; Sherman 1980; Wheeler and Rothman 1982). This problem is sometimes called, the 'bad apples vs. bad barrels dichotomy' (Ashforth et al. 2008; Brass et al. 1998; Kish-Gephart et al. 2010; Pinto et al. 2008; Trevino and Youngblood 1990). Both 'principal–agent' and 'bad apple' concepts view corrupt

participants in an organization as rational actors; however, principal–agent models tend to view all employees as potentially bad apples (corrupt) if incentives are poorly structured, while ‘bad apples’ theorists tend to claim that most employees are not corrupt. A ‘bad apple’ is an exceptional and problematic person, in the latter view. However, if a few negative group members poison otherwise ‘good apples’, the contagion of personal corruption may reach a critical threshold, when the organization becomes a ‘bad barrel’ and can be considered corrupt as a whole (Andersson and Pearson 1999; Felps et al. 2006; Misangyi et al. 2008; Trevino and Youngblood 1990). Psychologists have examined why bad apples are psychologically different from normal organizational actors. These studies have identified several personality traits, such as high irresponsibility, hedonism, and narcissism, as well as low self control, integrity, and conscientiousness, that substantially correlate with white-collar criminal activities (Blickle et al. 2006; Collins and Schmidt 1993; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, 15; Simpson 2013).

Corruption as social constraint: a structural approach

According to the structural approach, corruption is not viewed as an individual act or decision but rather as a phenomenon that is institutionalized and embedded into larger social structure (Anders and Nuijten 2008). Here, social factors beyond the individual determine ways of acting. In contrast to the rational-actor approach that focuses on micro-level face-to-face transactions, the structural approach provides explanations of corruption at macrostructural or organizational levels.

The literature distinguishes between two structural elements in corruption. The first one is related to social norms and culture that mainly represent the symbolic and often unconscious realm of social life. The second type refers to a more visible and material structure. These types also reflect the long-standing debate in macro sociology that distinguishes between ideational and material structural forces (Adler and Borys 1993; Collins 2005, 133; Hinings and Tolbert 2008, 475–476).

Normative explanations

The “oversocialized view of man” in social theory treats human behavior as totally shaped by common social norms (Wrong 1961). A ‘social norm’ is understood as a socially acceptable behavior and deviations from that behavior are usually sanctioned by society (Varese 2000). Actors seek a favorable self-image and the approval of others and hence, through socialization, they “internalize” consensually developed social norms and values of a given society. As a result of this internalization, people do not perceive obedience as a burden but as something totally normal (Granovetter 1985).

Empirical studies suggest that the willingness of actors to engage in corruption reflects the universalistic social norms and values that people internalized in the countries where they grew up. People from highly corrupt countries show more willingness of rule breaking (Barr and Serra 2010; Fisman and Miguel 2008, 82–94). One common normative explanation of corruption is related to religious norms and beliefs. Cross-national comparative studies have argued that corruption is higher in countries where more hierarchical forms of religion such as Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Islam are prevailing, whereas the level of corruption tends to be lower in countries with a larger proportion of Protestant population (Della Porta and Vannucci 2012, 62–63; La Porta et al. 1997; Paldam 2001; Sandholtz and Koetzle 2000; Treisman 2000). In cultures with hierarchical and strongly centralized religions and a general acceptance of power differences between people are more likely to engage in corruption

because of paternalism, autocracy, and reduced trust caused by the high power inequality (Banuri and Eckel 2012; Husted 1999). Another empirical study confirmed significant norm-related gender differences in corruption (Steffensmeier et al. 2013). Universalistic social norms, which disapprove female deviance and encourage male competitiveness, decisiveness, and risk-taking, significantly contribute to low-level female involvement in serious illegal corporate activities and conspiracy networks.

Other normative explanations of corruption focus on the small group-level of the phenomenon. Some early sociological and anthropological studies recognized that subgroups in a society regulate their relations with their members by their own legal or normative system (Ehrlich 1936; Moore 1973; Pospisil 1958, 272; Simmel 1955, 163–165). The main argument here is that *particularistic norms* that regulate the behavior of small groups (friends, kin, classmates, or colleagues) may become dominant over society-wide *universalistic formal norms* (Parsons 1937, 455; Schweitzer 2004). Particularistic norms imply that people should share limited resources in a particular way, very often with their closest family members and friends and not with everyone else (Mungiu-Pippidi 2011). Therefore, subgroup membership and its insider norm system can explain corruption.

The concept of the subgroup norm system is especially applicable in a formal organizational context where artificially created local groups, “work-related subcultures,” provide an even sharper distinction between the organization and the “mainstream social life and its construction of reality” (Blau 1955, 179–180; Holzner 1968, 95). Scholars have recognized that the enforcement of external regulations within an organization is often difficult because the organization may create an insider norm, a culture of silence and cover-up where even honest members show solidarity with their deviant and corrupt colleagues (Katz 1977).

Corruption may become institutionalized in organizations when stable and repetitive patterns of illegal activity emerge as everyday mechanical actions that are carried out by members without much thought or reflection about the nature of their actions (Ashforth and Anand 2003). In these cases, otherwise, morally normal persons can routinely engage in corrupt practices in organizations without seeing their acts as wrong. Finally, organizations produce a culture in which deviation from formal rules and procedures is normal and acceptable (Vaughan 1996).

Scholars in a school known as “New Institutional Economics” (NIE) analyze corruption from inside the corrupt relationship and examine how corrupt actors design institutions that reduce uncertainties and protect themselves from opportunistic behavior (e.g. betrayal) of the corrupt partner (Della Porta and Vannucci 2012, 2–3; Lambsdorff 2002; Lambsdorff et al. 2004). NIE scholars argue that, contrary to legal agreements, corrupt contracts cannot be enforced through legal ways (e.g. by the courts). Corrupt deals are made secretly, and therefore the transaction costs – transaction-specific investments such as money, time, or energy – to keep activities such as partner searching, negotiating, and agreement-enforcement hidden are significantly higher than in business relations in normal markets. Repeated corrupt transactions automatically lead to a higher level of trust between the agent and the recipient. Such social institution structures the corrupt situation, stabilizes the prices for a particular action, and reduces the transaction costs of corruption (Della Porta and Vannucci 2004). In the economic literature, this type of trust-based corruption is often called parochial corruption (Bunker and Cohen 1983; Husted 1994; Scott 1972, 89).

Material structural explanations

Material structural concepts explain corruption with “more materially constrained levels and imperatives of the social system” (Alexander and Smith 1993). A number of survey researchers seek to identify macro-level structural factors responsible for the level of corruption in a

country. Research based on analyses of corruption indices across countries suggests that increased economic competition and economic growth are negatively related to corruption (Treisman 2000). This approach finds that formal democratic institutions reduce corruption but only over the long term, while emergent democratization may even increase the level of corruption (Montinola and Jackman 2002; Treisman 2000). Structural factors and corruption may also mutually reinforce each other. For example, greater inequality fosters higher levels of corruption, while a higher level of corruption increases social inequality (You and Khagram 2005). Corruption also has substantial impact on other macrostructural factors such as economic growth, public expenditures, tax collection, gender equality, “brain drain”, and so on (Mauro 2004; Mungiu-Pippidi 2013).

In contrast to the findings that economic competition reduces corruption at the country level, the literature in organization studies emphasizes that an intensely competitive environment can drive organizational members to engage in misconduct, rule-breaking, and corrupt activities (Baucus 1994; Baucus and Near 1991, MacLean 2001; Szwajkowski 1985; Zahra et al. 2005). Here, the competition for customers, contracts, and other limited resources lures organizations to pressure their employees to behave illegally by setting unrealistic financial and sales goals (Ashforth and Anand 2003; Brief et al. 2001; Vaughan 1983, 59, 1996).

There is a possible explanation of the contradictory impacts of competition on corruption at national and organization levels. Cross-country measures reflect the degree of competition and corruption in highly aggregated, and often, indirect ways while organization-level data provides more precise information on the competitive and institutional environment of particular organizations (Alexeev and Song 2013). National data does not reflect firm-level variation. Corruption may be very high in certain economic sectors with fierce competition but low at general national level.

Some scholars found other organizational structural features responsible for illegal activities. For example, large firm size, plentiful slack resources, firms with more complex organizational structures, activity remote from supervision, frequent interaction with costumers, lower dividend payments, and higher executive compensation in the form of salary and bonuses provide opportunity structures to conduct corrupt practices (Baucus and Near 1991; Graycar and Sidebottom 2012; Prechel and Zheng 2012; Vaughan 1996).

Corruption as social exchange: a relational approach

This approach focuses on webs of social relations. The main premise of the relational perspective on corruption is that individuals associate with one another because they profit from their associations (Blau 1964, 12–32). This leads to an interest in sustaining informal exchange relationships that parallel formal organizational and legal structures.

Two main corruption models have emerged from the literature of the relational approach: horizontally and vertically structured corrupt networks. The first one focuses on corrupt exchanges when there is a trust-based and intimate relationship among the actors. In the second model, corruption happens between unequal actors and power dynamics are important components of exchanges.

Relational models examine illegal activities by focusing on interpersonal connections such as non-monetary forms of exchange, reciprocity, favors, and other interactions between corrupt actors at the small group level. The relational approach is derived from anthropological traditions such as studies of Mauss's (1954), Malinowski's (1922), and Lévi-Strauss' (1969) on social exchange and reciprocity.

Relational approach argues that a strictly economic analysis of corrupt exchanges is not sufficient to understand the logic of corruption (Lomnitz 1988). Corrupt transactions, as well as gift giving, do not always require immediate return; thus, there is a gap between transfer and counter-transfer and therefore most corrupt practices cannot be characterized strictly as market transactions (Blundo 2008; Davies et al. 2009; Morris and Polese ; Smart 1993). Gift-giving creates gift-debt that has to be repaid in the future (Bourdieu 1997; Gouldner 1960; Mauss 1954). When corrupt exchanges are separated in time and the transfer and counter-transfer have different forms actors can easily blur the corrupt nature of their transaction (Hipp and Lawler 2010). There is also one important difference between the rational-actor and relational approaches: in rational-actor models, corrupt exchange happens between only two actors, an agent and a client, while the relational approach considers a wider network of participants. Moreover, in contrast to economic theories that treat corruption as a pathology, the relational approach suggests that phenomena such as informal personal networks, personal trust, patronage, loyalty, and gift-giving may be complementary and necessary arrangements for maintaining social stability (Shore and Haller 2005). Interactions that look like corruption to outside observers might serve crucial social and symbolic functions from the inside or in a local context (Smith 2007, 10).

Horizontal networks

Personal social networks that are based on long term social relationships allow individuals to deal with inadequate formal institutions, the imperfections of state or market-dominated socioeconomic systems. Members in these kinds of networks often see their informal acts as just helping a friend or a friend's friend (Ledeneva 1998). Such networks can be found all around the world: they are known as *pull* in America, *blat* in Russia, *compadrazgo* in Latin America, *protexia* in Israel, *palanca* in Mexico, *guanxi* in China, and so on (Lomnitz 1988).

Network members circulate resources such as inside information, political support, admission to a good school, and bureaucratic favors such as acquiring certificates, licenses, between and within public and private sector organizations (Lomnitz and Sheinbaum 2004). One specific form of horizontal networks is nepotism when people provide organizational positions for kin members and thus violate the impersonal meritocratic recruitment standards of the organization (Jaskiewicz et al. 2013). Another adaptation to the inadequacy of formal institutions is *guanxi* – the expanded network of friends in China. *Guanxi* is based on the obligatory norm of reciprocity (Smart and Hsu 2008). A person has to respond to a gift with greater munificence (Yang 1994, 143). Indeed, *guanxi* is an instrumental friendship system. Similar to *guanxi*, in the former Soviet Union, ordinary people used *blat* as a personal informal network to obtain goods and services in short supply and to find a way around formal procedures (Ledeneva 1998). Russian people used *blat* as a special form of barter, a non-monetary exchange because, in the socialist planned economy, money did not function as the main tool of economic transactions. *Blat* was a “survival kit” that helped to reduce uncertainty in conditions of shortage, exigency and perpetual emergency when formal rights were insufficient.

Vertical networks

Informal networks are dynamic. Although individuals are generally interested in maintaining balanced social exchanges there are also aspirations to establish superiority over others (Blau 1964, 26). A symmetrical, horizontal reciprocity relationship may become unbalanced, for example, when one party becomes superior to the other, and transform into an asymmetrical power relationship (Granovetter 2007; Lomnitz 1982). This form is often called a

patron–client relationship (Boissevain 1989; Wolf 1966). Although patronage is still a very personal and informal relationship based on the norm of reciprocity, the lower-status individual cannot reciprocate with favors or cash, so he/she has to balance the account with more intangible assets by providing respect, admiration, loyalty, or subordination to the person with superior status (Campbell 1989; Wolf 1966). Although there is often a formal hierarchical boss–subordinate relationship between them, beyond this formality, the partners may engage in intricate conspiracies when the client does the “dirty work” for his/her boss/patron and in return is rewarded with formal organizational resources, for example, by extra bonuses (Jackall 2010, 18–44). In some cases, the entire governmental systems are based on patronage when politicians appoint their clients to positions in state administrations to illegally extract organizational resources from the system (Kopecký and Mair 2012).

Conclusion

In this article, I reviewed three major approaches to corruption. Each of them has revealed important dimensions and key features of corruption. Table 1 shows a summary of the differences between these main categories.

This paper argues that future research on corruption may usefully revisit the relational paradigm because it has strong but idle explanatory potential, and yet the current it lacks of satisfactory theoretical and empirical results. There are three main reasons why the relational approach may be an important framework for future research. First, it focuses on real-life transactions instead of secondary and non-direct measurement of corruption. Second, it offers a more dynamic perspective on corruption than the static and substantialist rational-actor and structural models. Finally, the relational approach provides a suitable conceptual framework to integrate the other two approaches.

Structural and rational-actor models typically use secondary data sources such as perception-based indexes, survey results (attitudes) or laboratory experiments to examine corruption. Such studies have some merits, but they cannot provide us insight into deep structural and dynamical characters of the phenomenon. This paper argues that innovative

Table 1. Major corruption approaches

	Rational-actor approach	Structural approach	Relational approach
Level of analysis	Micro	Macro, and middle	Middle
Motivation/constraint to participate in corruption	Maximize monetary rewards and minimize costs	Forced by structural constraints	Profit from the associations with others
Exchange form	Economic/market	Driven by norms and material structural constraints	Reciprocal, often non-material
Relationship form	Impersonal, short term	Relationship between individual and collective entities	Interpersonal, long term
Corruption from an organizational perspective	Corruption is an exceptional problem within the organization: bad apple	Corruption is systematic products of collective processes: bad barrel	Corruption is an informal exchange network behind formal organizational structures

corruption research should analyze real-life cases. Since the main focus of relational approach is on actual transactions, this view provides a perfect starting point for the examination of corrupt exchanges.

Both rational and structural models provide static and substantialist descriptions of social reality (Crossley 2004, 265–273). The concepts of norms and material structures that influence individual behavior are rather mechanical (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994). Once we know the normative or structural factors related to an individual “everything else in behavior is automatic, since they are so well socialized” (Granovetter 1985). For example, following this logic and based on the actor’s Protestant or Catholic religious preference, one might clearly determine his/her motivation to be corrupt. However, in the real world, even actors’ religious beliefs as well as other external normative phenomena are not always once-and-for-all influences but rather constant processes, continuously constructed, reconstructed, and altered during interactions with other people. The rational models were also regarded as substantialist, because once certain aspects of the transaction are given, the actor’s underlying interests remain unaltered (Emirbayer 1997). In such cases, the rather passive rational actor can choose between only a very few strategies at a time. However, in reality, even in seemingly pure market-type corrupt transactions, when partners do not know each other in advance and probably will not meet again in the future, a wide variety of possible transaction patterns may occur. External structural factors such as time constraints and the physical environment determine the actors’ opportunity structure and participants with different social backgrounds may follow different strategies. For example, middle-class and elite members may try to avoid making corrupt deals with low-level agents while working-class and small entrepreneur clients more often participate in such transactions (Jancsics 2013).

There is a long-standing debate in the social sciences about how cultural, normative, or material structures interrelate with actual social action, and with individual decisions involving human agency. The relational approach to understanding corruption has the potential to link rational actors with structural elements, or in other words, to bridge agency with structure in corruption research. Interactions and relationships shape both the individual and society and thus relational models have the sufficient theoretical and analytical framework to uncover micro-level face-to-face interactions of individuals while also considering macro-level institutional embeddedness (Bandelj 2012; Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994). For example, social networks can be viewed as “pipelines” of social influence that contribute to the adoption and diffusion of normative and cultural elements (Mische 2011). The analysis of micro-level individual decisions of human agency cannot avoid social networks either. Agency is always agency-in-relation. Social networks have strong impact upon agency, individual decisions and strategies because actors enter into transactions with surrounding persons, places, meanings, and events (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

Future research directions

The relational literature on corruption is outdated, and we can find only a few systematic pieces of research with a primary focus on corruption. In many cases, corruption-related findings were only byproducts of earlier anthropological projects with rather broader research goals. Analyses of concrete corrupt transactions within relational contexts may be based on quantitative as well as qualitative research techniques. One possible direction would involve quantitative research, examining corrupt social networks by analyzing, for example, public procurement statistics, business registers, and other official archival data. Due to the technological revolution of the 21st century, such data have become available as digitized organizational records. There are also new quantitative techniques and programs for analyzing

and discovering patterns in huge amount of digital data (Attewell and Monaghan). This kind of analysis may reveal systematic patterns, network dynamics, historical trends, communication structures, hiding techniques, organizational features, ties between business people and political officeholders, the concentration of public procurement market, and highlight typical clusters of winners in different types of tenders and economic sectors (Aven 2012; Baker and Faulkner 1993; Fazekas et al. 2013).

Another option for research is to obtain rich descriptions of ‘real world’ corrupt transactions based upon qualitative fieldwork that looks at corrupt relationships or details the ways that corrupt rackets operate. Snowball sampling, a process in which each interviewed person suggests other respondents who may have knowledge relevant to the research topic, would be especially suitable in corruption research when the target population is hidden, and it is hard to identify and contact potential subjects (Becker 1966; Lindesmith 1968). Based on in-depth interviews or other qualitative techniques, this type of research might reveal important information about human agency such as the corrupt actor’s strategies and motivations, negotiating, timing and decision-making processes, the role of other actors, and different forms of resources allocated between them (Jancsics 2013; Rivkin-Fish 2005). However qualitative methods are also effective in identifying systemic elements, the symbolic and material patterns embedded into relational structures (Rubin and Rubin 1995). Based on the systematic analysis of such narratives, the researcher can integrate the pieces of the complex puzzle of corruption. I believe that research projects following the relational framework may be useful for testing pre-existing models of rational-actor, structural, and relational approaches. Yet, they are also viable tools for revealing new patterns that emerge from the “black box” of corrupt practices.

Short Biography

David Jancsics’ major fields of interest are organization studies, corruption, white-collar crime, and studies of the social and economic transformations in the post-communist countries. He has authored and co-authored papers on corruption for *International Public Management Journal*, *Crime, Law and Social Change*, and *Administration & Society*. He is at the beginning of a new research project that seeks to identify corruption in public procurement tenders and state contracts, by analyzing the combination quantitative and qualitative data on bids and contracts using Data Mining techniques. He recently completed his PhD program in sociology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He previously received an M.Phil degree in sociology at CUNY and also received an MA in sociology in Hungary at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest.

Note

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