

Corruption and Self-Conflict: A Sociological Approach

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Abstract. Corruption has long been recognized as one of the major obstacles to social, economic and political developments. It is certainly one of the most discussed issues in social sciences in the last few decades. Although social scientists have studied various aspects of corruption, most of their analyses examined these forms quantitatively by focusing on the macro aspects of the phenomenon. Hardly do we come across a study that pays attention to the micro level of corruption. Using grounded theory, this study analyzes corruption from the perspectives of individual actors by taking into account their meanings. The author interviewed twenty government employees who worked for public health organizations in Saudi Arabia. The research shows that participants experience "corruption of the self", i.e., the inability of the actor to orient his action toward normal organizational rules.

Keywords: corruption, subjective meaning, self-conflict, grounded theory, public sector, Saudi Arabia.

1. Introduction

Corruption is a global phenomenon that has been examined by numerous social scientists. These scholars studied its nature and how it is related to ethical, legal, economic, educational and cultural factors (Rodriguez-Dominguez and Gallego-Alvarez, 2011; Mann, 2010; Cary, 2007; Carr and Lewis; Agatiello, 2010; Goorha, 2000; Weidman and Enkhjargal, 2008; Tanaka, 2001 Hooker, 2009; Barr and Serra, 2010). However, their focus was generally on the macro side of the phenomenon of corruption using various models and methods. Although these studies provide analysts with useful knowledge, they are certainly not without limitations. One of these shortcomings is the disregard of the role of the acting individual, who is the source of all kinds of meaningful behavior whether positive or negative. Hence, this paper lays emphasis on the micro side of corruption from a sociological perspective. Following grounded theory key principles, it focuses on how actors perceive corruption in their organizational settings.

Ground theory is "a general methodology of analysis linked with data collection that uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate an inductive theory about a substantive area" (Glaser, 1992). Its roots goes Symbolic Interactionism, a sociology school tooted in the intellectual works of Gorge Herbert Mead (Aldiabat and Navenec, 2011). This methodology is concerned with the development of a social theory based on "the relationships between concepts" (Glaser, 1978: 133). These categories, which emerge from analysis of the data, are organized around a main concept that Glaser calls "the core category" (2001, 199). In his school, a social theory is "carefully ordered" concepts (Strauss, 1987: 11), i.e. "complex, conceptually woven, integrated theory" (Strauss, 1987: 23).

2. Methodology

Participants in the research are twenty government employees affiliated with different health organizations in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. They are selected from various management programs offered by the Institute of Public Administration (IPA) in its headquarter in Riyadh.

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Using the training schedules online, the researcher selected a number of programs, most of which were directed at improving managerial skills. He then contacted the programs' instructors and asked for their permissions to conduct interviews with the trainees. With the exception of one instructor, they agreed to allow him to do the interviews. Participation in the study was voluntarily. At the beginning of each selected program, the researcher asked for volunteers to conduct the interviews.

2.1. Theoretical Sampling

Theoretical sampling means that data collection is driven by the emerging of new categories. Put differently, it is the incoming data from participants that shapes the direction of the research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin 1990, 1994). Such an approach enables the researcher to select relevant source of data as the research progresses. In this study, the researcher interviewed twenty participants, who had different occupational positions in health organizations. He divided data collection into initial and main stages. In initial stage, he selected a narrow sample of six participants for the purpose of finding the most experience that matches the topic of interest. Three of them were managers whereas the rest were administrative professionals with no managerial experience. At the end of this initial stage, he discovered that managers were more knowledgeable about the subject than members of the administrative support staff. The main stage of data gathering focused on interviewing these knowledgeable participants.

2.2. Theoretical saturation

Theoretical saturation refers to the continuation of data collection until “additional analysis no longer contributes to discovering anything new about a category” (Strauss, 1987: 21). In this study, the author stopped interviewing more than twenty participants when he realized that other managers would add no significant knowledge to the emergence and construction of the theory.

2.3. Systematic coding techniques

Coding is an “emergent process” in which “unexpected ideas emerge” and “can keep emerging” as the sociologist revisits and compares codes and data to one another (Charmaz, 2006: 59). In grounded theory, open, axial and selective are three systematic coding techniques to analyze data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

2.4. Data analysis

Data collection was conducted over a five-week period during which data analysis and theoretical sampling were used concurrently. The researcher wrote up his ideas and examined the categories as they emerged. He utilized open, axial and selective coding techniques to analyze data.

A. Open coding

In **open coding**, the first step of the examination of the transcribed texts, the researcher discovered that participants expressed conflicting feelings regarding their encounter with corruption cases. These feelings include self-distress, self-blame, self-frustration, self-control, self-devotion, self-regard, self-righteous as well as other responses. In many situations, various states of feelings coexist at the same time such as self-blame and self-devotion. As an example, one manager indicated that he blamed himself for asking a relative to set aside a job for him in government. He stated that "without favoritism I would not have the job". However, the violation of official rule resulted in self-devotion to voluntary work, which is seen by him as "acts of repentance".

B. Axial coding

In **axial coding**, conflicting attitudes are manifestations of the self in its relationships with external environment at work as well as outside it. In most instances, corruption intertwines with management relations, friendship and family affiliations.

1. Corruption, management relations and self-conflict

The most difficult experience managers had is when the top management is corrupt. In these situations, the self is torn between obeying the managerial order and doing "the right thing". For

example, one manager indicated that when he first started his new job, he was under a great deal of pressure since he discovered that his boss was involved in corruption. He realized that the money of the merchandises that the local municipality confiscated from illegal buyers went to the manager's pocket instead of the government's account. He believed that it was his moral obligation to confront his manager and yet he knew that such a confrontation would result in damaging his relationship with him. Despite the risk, he decided to confront the manager and expressed his disapproval of his corrupt behavior. He said "I went to him and told him that it was wrong to sell merchandises with fifty thousands Riyals (more than thirteen thousands USD) and wrote in government records that they were sold for five thousands". The manager replied by saying "that's none of your business" and two days later offered him two thousands Riyals in cash. The employee refused to take the money, a decision that aggravated the situation. Although the employee finally transferred to a health organization, he (now a manager) still blamed himself for not doing enough to stop corruption in the local municipality. A number of participants expressed their self-frustrations regarding the management selective implementations of existing official rules and/or its deliberate effort to keep them uninformed about new rules and regulations. In their views, this kind of work environment is where corruption flourishes.

2. Corruption, friendship and self-conflict

A number of participants expressed difficulties in maintaining friendship relations and at the same time maintaining higher ethical and legal standards in their workplaces. For example, an interviewee indicated that one of his friends stopped talking to him after refusing to allow him to use his official telephone line. The manager said, "That is a *very painful experience*. I still do not understand my friend's motive to this day. I told him to use my personal cell phone but he refused and insisted on using the official line. When I said no, he stopped talking to me ... and that was simply because I did the right thing". He explained his friend's insistence on using the official line for personal purpose rather than his cell phone by indicating that he did not know for sure. He added however, that, "it was probably an ego issue since he did not expect me to say no to him". Another manager, who experienced corruption in his organization, pointed out that he decided one day to "below the weasel" by complaining to the Ministry of Health or leak what was going on in his department to a local newspaper. However, he was very discouraged by his friends and associates, all of whom assured him that his action could damage the organization's reputation and negatively affected his chances to move up in its hierarchy. Although he backed down after convincing himself that one day he would change the terrible situation once he had the sufficient managerial authority, he always blames himself for not "doing enough" to change the situation.

3. Corruption, family affiliation and self-conflict

Although the majority of participants express negative views of corruption, very few of them were able to reject nepotism. For instance, one manager indicated that the members of the hiring committee in his organization paid no attention to experience and the best credentials. Rather, each member brought with him a name or two of his family and then negotiated positions among themselves. When he expressed his disapproval of this way of hiring, he was transferred to another department. He states, "I did the right thing by stating my view clearly. But, I am still frustrated since I was unable to change the bad situation. All members of the committee are powerful managers. They run the organization. I am not as powerful as they are".

C. Selective coding

Selective coding is a grounded theory technique that involves refining and integrating categories in their final stage (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 143). It's about identifying a central category that captures the phenomena under investigation. It is the "main theme" that Strauss depicted as "central to the integration of the theory" (1987: 21).

Corruption of the self

In this study, the central category that connects other categories is "the corruption of the self". The self, seen as "a reflexively organized narrative, derived from participation in competing

discourses and various experience” (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002: 625), is a product of the individual active participations in his or her social sittings in and outside formal organizations. Corruption of the self refers to the individual inability to orient his or her actions toward formal organizational rules. This failure is a function of the misuse of authority in bureaucratic organizations as well as fusing work relationships with friendship and family relations. However, corruption of the self by no means suggests that the self is a static entity. Rather, it means that it is in a continuous state of inner conflicts, which presupposes that individual actors in organizations orient their actions towards traditional and modern ethics at the same time.

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