Corruption and Anti-Corruption Theory: *an introductory guide for students*

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of corruption has attracted the scrutiny of academics from a range of disciplines, leading to heated exchanges among academic and practitioners alike[1]. These disciplines have produced a large body of research on the causes and consequences of corruption, its definition, how to measure it and how it (cor)relates to broader political, social, economic and cultural phenomena. In a recent mapping of the anti-corruption field, Pozsgai-Alvarez and Pastor Sanz (2021) used machine learning to analyse over 5,000 publications listed in Matthew Stephenson's 'Global Anticorruption Blog (GAB) Anticorruption Bibliography'. Some of the findings are illustrative of the academic debate surrounding corruption: almost 95 per cent of the listed publications were produced in the past 20 years, signalling the recent 'renaissance' of anti-corruption research and practice, with a notable increase in the number of studies from social sciences other than politics and economics. The scholars identify eight distinct topics in the corpus, these include: (1) economic growth and the environment; (2) political accountability; (3) service provision; (4) ethical decision-making; (5) crime control; (6) good governance; (7) the business sector; and (8) measurement.

Given such a broad range of themes and disciplinary perspectives, it comes as no surprise that the study of corruption is marred by competing approaches, theories and definitions. One rare area of consensus within the literature concerns the contested and contentious nature of the concept (Hough 2017; Barrington *et al*. 2022; Heywood 2015, 2017, 2018; Pozsgai-Alvarez and Pastor Sanz 2021; Jancsics 2014). Unfortunately, however, as acknowledged by Jancsics (2014: 358), "there is a lack of interdisciplinary communication

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[1] https://www.corruptionjusticeandlegitimacy.org/post/three-things-matthew-stephenson-got-wrong
accessed 10th August 2022

about corruption", which ultimately results in different models and conceptualisations remaining isolated from each other. This is both cause and consequence of the problematic lack of conceptual precision which is often seen to haunt corruption and anti-corruption research (Rothstein 2011, 2014; Rothstein and Varraich 2017; Rothstein 2018; Fukuyama 2013; Hough 2017; Bussell 2015).

There is no shortage of attempts at defining corruption (for good overviews see Philp 2014; Bussell 2015; Kurer 2014) and this paper does not aim to deal – at least not directly – with this debate. Philp (2014:17) contends that a definition can have two dimensions: it can convey "the meaning and use of a word, and it can provide a tool in the construction of an explanation". Traditionally, philosophy, anthropology and history have focused on the former, while the social sciences have focused on the latter. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to critically review the main tools used to construct an explanation of corruption, fleshing out their main underlying assumptions, contributions and limitations, and how these translate into practice within anti-corruption reform.

Given the breadth of disciplines tackling the issue of corruption, some boundaries need to be set. Thus, this paper does not aim to be an exhaustive overview of all the different conceptualisations contained across the social sciences. In particular, normative debates of corruption emerging from political philosophy and law are not included, except tangentially.

It is important to note that the literature contains a plethora of typologies of corruption analysis (Graaf, Maravić, and Wagenaar 2010; Hough 2017; Bussell 2015; Karklins 2002). This paper, while drawing on several, does not intend to build a new typology, but rather attempts to examine the most influential approaches in research and practice, identifying points of convergence and crossover, as well as highlighting unresolved questions. This exercise might seem challenging in the absence of a working definition of corruption that can guide the paper. Nonetheless, not adopting a definition of corruption allows the review to uncover and identify how different disciplines have shaped current views and definitions of corruption.

The paper is structured as follows: the first section presents the main tenets of principal-agent (PA) approaches to corruption, by far the most influential framework for academia and practice alike (Ugur and Dasgupta 2011; Marquette and Peiffer 2015; Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2013; Hough 2017). The second section outlines the critique made by collective action theorists of PA approaches and identifies shared assumptions and points of divergence. Section three discusses neo-institutional approaches to corruption analysis, uncovering its added value vis-à-vis the previous approaches, namely the institutionalisation of corrupt norms and relations. Section four delves into the contribution to corruption analysis made by anthropology and ethnographic accounts, highlighting the different epistemic and ontological underpinnings. Section five presents insights from criminology and specifically relates to police corruption.

2. Principal-agent approaches

Drawing primarily from economic theory and rational choice theory, principal-agent approaches are built from the premise that people are rational, self-interested actors. Corruption is therefore considered to be the outcome of rational individual choices, and its spread within a certain organisation is influenced by the factors defining the structure of expected costs and rewards (Vannucci 2015). This approach defines corruption as a series of interactions and relationships that exist both within and outside public bodies (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016; Rose-Ackerman 1978). The model hinges upon two key assumptions: diverging interests and information asymmetry between principal and agent, whereby the principal is unable to closely monitor the agent, who in turn can pursue their own interests at the expense of the interests of the principal (Ross 1973; Harris and Raviv 1979). A major emphasis in the principal–agent literature is on the proper incentive and punishment structures and price mechanisms that are said to be able to resolve the problem of corruption (Jancsics 2014; Bardhan 2006; Becker and Stigler 1974; Rose-Ackerman 1986). Klitgaard's famous corruption formula: "corruption equals monopoly power plus discretion minus accountability (C=M+D-A)" (1988) essentially contends that corruption is considered the natural outcome of rational individual choices, and it spreads within organisations and relations depending on the factors defining the structure of expected costs and rewards. Some scholars argue that Klitgaard's formula is "is not merely trite, but affirmatively misleading"[2]. Despite these criticisms, it is accepted that such principal-agent approaches seek to provide a model which answers the question 'why does corruption take place?' by attempting to uncover the causal mechanisms underpinning the phenomenon". To quote Klitgaard:

> "[C]orruption is a crime of calculation, not passion. True, there are both saints who resist all temptations and honest officials who resist most. But when bribes are large, the chances of being caught small, and the penalties if caught meagre, many officials will succumb" (1998: 4).

Often corruption is also described as a "double principal-agent problem" since public officials can be both principal and agent. In the first instance, a political leader or higher-ranked bureaucrat is the principal and lower-ranked bureaucrats, the agents. Given the problem of information asymmetry, the principal is unable to detect when rationally-minded bureaucrats use their discretion over resources to extract rents (i.e. to further their own self-interest). The second principal-agent problem occurs when public officials (bureaucrats or politicians) are conceptualised to be the agents and the wider public the principal. Public officials can abuse their office and discretion over public services to secure private rents from members of the public, and the public is unable to monitor or hold public

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[2] https://globalanticorruptionblog.com/2014/05/27/klitgaards-misleading-corruption-formula/
(accessed 10th August 2022)

officials accountable (Ugur and Dasgupta 2011; Bardhan 2006; Klitgaard 1988; Rose-Ackerman 1978; Marquette and Peiffer 2018). Vannucci takes it one step further, contending that:

> "The exercise of public decision-making power in a democratic government can correspondingly be analytically described as a complex chain of principal-agent relationships between electorate, elected officials and bureaucrats in their functional and hierarchical attribution of roles and functions" (2015: 8).

This kind of understanding of corruption in the public sector has spurred several empirical studies exploring the role of incentives, opportunities and discretion in public bodies and their impact on corrupt practices. An area of particular interest – which unfortunately has provided mixed results – is whether higher salaries lead to lower corruption (Azfar and Nelson 2007; Van Rijckeghem and Weder 2001; Foltz and Opoku-Agyemang 2015). Of relevance here is the case of the Ugandan Revenue Authority (URA) which suffered from corruption despite the introduction of higher wages alongside greater departmental autonomy to protect it from political interference (Miller 2022). In this regard Fjeldstad, explains that:

> "The failure of reforms that stress monetary rewards and incentives have a more straightforward explanation. Because of the importance of family networks, increased pay rates may imply more extensive social obligations, and in some cases actually result in a net loss to the individual. This state of affairs can develop into a vicious circle with higher wages leading to more corruption because the tax officer has to make up for the loss caused by such obligations" (2006: 10).

The flawed assumption underpinning this type of reform is based on the idea that corruption can be reduced by policies which tackle information asymmetry (for example, by enhancing transparency) and moderate the discretion of the agent (by introducing oversight mechanisms), ultimately impacting their individual incentive calculations by making corruption a higher risk behaviour with lower returns. Both Vannucci (2015; 2017) and Hough, however, flag how the assumptions of this "rational-actor model lead many to assume that the state will be used (and abused) for private gain" (Hough 2017: 78). This, in turn, has resulted in a number of anti-corruption reforms and policies aimed at cutting back the state in favour of privatisation and market-based solutions, now widely accepted to suffer from their own corruption risks (Reinsberg et al. 2020; Biglaiser and McGauvran 2022).

In the past thirty years, principal-agent approaches to corruption analysis have dominated both research and practice, strongly shaping how corruption is understood, analysed and

discussed, both in academia and among practitioners (Ugur and Dasgupta 2011; Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2013; Marquette and Peiffer 2018; Hough 2017; DfID 2015; Disch, Vigeland, and Sundet 2009). Specifically, Ugur and Dasgupta's meta-analysis of 115 studies looking at corruption's impact on economic growth, find that all the publications "adhered to an explicitly-stated principal-agent approach to corruption, or their account was closely related to that approach" (2011: 43).

The lack of success characterising PA-inspired reforms has, over the past decade, prompted a range of critiques questioning the theoretical underpinnings of anti-corruption reforms (Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2013; Marquette and Peiffer 2015; 2018; 2019; Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2019; Heywood 2017; Hough 2017). Most notably, there has been a growing recognition that the principal-agent approach may be useful neither as an analytical tool, nor a guide for policy, in "pathological cases" where there is no clear separation between "personal enrichment and public service" (Rose-Ackerman 2010: 48). Rather, it is suggested that contexts of high levels of corruption – the majority of cases in the Global South – might more closely resemble a collective action problem (Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2013; Rothstein 2011; Mungiu-Pippidi 2011; Bauhr and Nasiritousi 2011). Furthermore some scholars have pointed out how, in these kind of settings, it is unrealistic to assume that anybody could take on the role of "principled principal" (Marquette and Peiffer 2015; Peiffer and Alvarez 2014; Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2010; 2013; 2019). One of the most prominent scholars in shaping principal-agent approaches, Susan Rose-Ackerman, has acknowledged that principal-agent approaches fail to explain the "variation across individuals who face the same structural incentives" (Rose-Ackerman 2010: 52). This lack of explanatory power has got to do with the limited analytical tools – that is, the epistemic roots – within economic theory.

In the past thirty years, PA approaches have spurred a number of reforms in the Global South – setting up oversight mechanisms, reducing discretion, increasing salaries – that have had limited impact. In light of this, some scholars contend that today anti-corruption efforts represent a "huge policy failure" (Heywood 2018), while others describe this era of anti-corruption as one of "great expectations and humble results" (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015).

Confronted with this empirical check, Rose-Ackerman concedes that "clever technical solutions might not be enough… Tough political and policy choices need to be faced squarely" (2010: 63). In this regard, Mungiu-Pippidi (2015) illustrates that the existence of key oversight mechanisms and institutions such as anti-corruption agencies, or an ombudsman office, has no statistical impact on the control of corruption.

The disappointing track record of the 'industry' has fostered scholarly research which aims to better understand and map out the many reasons underlying the failure of conventional anti-corruption interventions (Heeks and Mathisen 2012; Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2013; Walton 2018; Institute of Development Studies 2010; de Sousa 2010; Moroff and

Schmidt-Pfister 2010). While some scholars point to the Eurocentric and western-centred approach underpinning many of the interventions and reforms (Gephart 2009; Institute of Development Studies 2010; Walton 2016), others highlight the "far too few resources […] spent on learning from interventions" (Heeks and Mathisen 2012) or question the value of the anti-corruption discourse in and of itself as opposed to "corruption control" (de Sousa 2010). Some practitioners have gone further and have interrogated the adequacy of research in identifying useful theoretical frameworks that can lead to successful policy interventions[3].

Within academia, there is a growing body of work which contends that the scarcity of successful results garnered by anti-corruption reforms are borne from a theoretical mischaracterisation of the issue (Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2013, 2019; Marquette and Peiffer 2015, 2018, 2019). These scholars contend that contexts of endemic corruption are better understood as a collective action problem.

3. Collective action approaches

From a collective action perspective, all stakeholders – including rulers, bureaucrats and citizens alike – are utility-maximisers, and the way they behave to maximise their interests is highly dependent on shared expectations about the behaviour of others (Ostrom 1998). Given this premise, Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell (2013; 2019) contend that people are expected to choose to act corruptly as long as they expect most other people to be corrupt. This line of reasoning stands even if they all realise that they, as a collective, stand to lose from the ongoing corruption, and even if most agents morally condemn corrupt practices (Karklins 2005). From a collective action perspective, nobody expects others to change, and so being the first – or the only one – to opt out of corruption entails significant costs if the rest of stakeholders continue to engage in corrupt transactions (DfID 2015; Della Porta and Vannucci 1999). It follows that if all stakeholders follow this line of thought, nobody will ever opt out of corruption. Corruption, therefore, is the manifestation of free-riding, since it arises from putting personal interest ahead of the larger group's collective interests (Marquette and Peiffer 2015; Olson 2003). Nonetheless, Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell (2010) argue that the free-riding issue is not generated by an active support for corruption. Rather, corruption is pragmatically accepted to maximise efficiency in achieving objectives which would otherwise be out of bounds, or by minimising risks, such as avoiding trouble with – for instance – the police or the courts. As observed by Claudia Baez-Camargo *et al.* (2020), the policy implications of a collective-action conceptualisation of corruption are not necessarily straightforward, except for the rarely feasible route of adopting a 'big bang'

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[3] http://www.kpsrl.org/browse/browse-item/t/a-helpful-response-to-unhelpful-research-and-a-call-for-ideas) and http://cdacollaborative.org/blog/the-unhelpful-nature-of-anti-corruption-research-as-seen-by-people-trying-to-develop-solutions/ (accessed 15th August 2022)

approach (Rothstein 2011) which may realign expectations and norms, and consequently behaviours, at a systemic scale.

As mentioned in the previous section, collective action theorists critique PA approaches by questioning the presence within the model of at least one group of actors willing to act as "principals" and, as such, enforce such regimes (Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2010; 2013; 2019). The starting assumption in collective action theory is that all actors – rulers, bureaucrats and citizens alike – are maximisers of their own self-interest (Ostrom 1998; Aumann and Dreze 2005; Ernst and Fischbacher 2004; Gintis et al. 2004; Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2010). However, this is not to say that all actors are, per definition, corrupt. Rather, within the framework of collective action theory, rationality is understood as "'bounded', 'interactive' or 'reciprocal' – in the sense that it is highly dependent on shared expectations about how other individuals will act" (Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2010: 5). Rothstein (2021a) contends that the theory of collective action is central to understanding why some societies are able to establish a working social contract against corruption and others are not.

Both principal-agent and collective action approaches share at least three key assumptions and features in their conceptualisation of corruption. First, they focus on the individual as the main unit of analysis (albeit in a contextual way), overlooking other forces and dynamics at play. Methodologically, this kind of modelling has given rise to a range of innovative experimental methods shedding light on how individuals respond to different sets of monetary and non-monetary incentives (Serra and Wantchekon 2012; Abbink and Serra 2012; Lambsdorff 2012; Foltz and Opoku-Agyemang 2015). While this body of knowledge has provided important insights into some of the reasons why individuals engage in corrupt acts, it falls short in explaining the broad range of incentives at play in corrupt transactions.

Second, both approaches conceptualise the individual as a rational self-interest maximiser vulnerable to effective monitoring and punishment regimes as means to curb corruption.

Finally, these approaches seek to understand (and ultimately alter) incentives to engage in corruption from a cost-benefit or rational-choice perspective. Despite these shared assumptions, they address critically different questions: on the one hand, principal-agent approaches seek to respond to the question of why corruption takes place. On the other, collective action approaches illustrate why, in contexts of endemic corruption, anti-corruption interventions often fail.

Both principal-agent and collective action approaches highlight the critical role of economic incentives and opportunities to engage in corrupt practices (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016; Della Porta and Vannucci 2011: 13). In other words, in both approaches corruption is the outcome of rational individual choices: the combination of people's preference for gains (both monetary and non-monetary), coupled with the institutional opportunities in the system. Some researchers contend that when these approaches are translated into practice

they often tend to conflate opportunities and incentives with actual *causes* of corruption (Scharbatke-Church 2016b; 2016a).

Within this debate, Marquette and Peiffer (2015; 2018; 2019) make two important points: first, both approaches "are not at all mutually exclusive" and "each theory adds to the understanding of why corruption is …so difficult to control". Second, both theories share an important "blind spot": framing corruption exclusively as a "problem".

> "*Doing so has failed to recognize that in some contexts, corruption and patron-client networks persist because they function to provide solutions to problems that some people face*" (Marquette and Peiffer 2015:14).

It is important to note, echoing Marquette and Peiffer (2015: 18), that this "is not a call to romanticize those relationships", nor to say that citizens across the globe do not think that corruption is a problem. Rather, this functionalist critique contributes to understandings of why it is difficult to combat corruption, and calls upon researchers and practitioners alike to increase their efforts to analyse the underlying political dimensions and specific conditions of what corruption looks like and then build from there (Roll 2014). As acknowledged by Ledeneva, Bratu, and Köker:

> "[A]ssuming that corruption plays a role that is *a priori dysfunctional, can be detrimental for understanding the full range of consequences, including the latent functions that may be enabled by corrupt behaviour, and identifying possible drivers for change*" (2017).

This contention finds important echoes in the literature on local government taxation in the Global South, whereby policy reform prescriptions call for improved monitoring, less discretion for collectors, and greater collection and enforcement capacity (Prichard and van den Boogaard 2017). However, despite being intuitive in rational-legal terms, such approaches encounter significant challenges in practice as they are confronted with the reality of subnational taxation, characterised by pervasive informality and "grounded in existing social relationships and collective norms" (Prichard and van den Boogaard 2017: 172). Similarly, recent research on the political economy of anti-corruption emphasises the need to identify how anti-corruption reforms affect different interest groups within societies (Khan 2010; 2018).

Another line of criticism comes from recent post-colonial literature which, drawing on Fanon's seminal work (Fanon and Philcox 2004), calls into question the Eurocentric assumptions underlying the conceptualisation and use of the notion of corruption in Africa (Apata 2019; Akpome 2021; Etieyibo 2021; Etieyibo, Katsaura, and Musemwa 2021). Anthropologists have dealt with some of these issues extensively, and they will be reviewed in the subsequent sections. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight two key points in the

debate between collective action theorists and post-colonial literature. Rothstein (2021: 15-17) uses empirical and normative arguments to fiercely defend the universal understanding of corruption, denouncing the reluctance of post-colonial scholars to recognise corruption as a "serious problem for the countries they study". In his response, however, Rothstein misses one of the key points made by postcolonial scholars: namely that the models developed by principal-agent and collective action theorists hinge on a notion of rationality that is inherently Western-centred. Post-colonial scholars such as Apata (2019) and Akpome (2021) call for an interrogation of the contexts within which discourses are produced and circulated —historical, social, cultural, economic, political, institutional, and so forth—as a necessary condition for an understanding of the interrelationships between knowledge and power. This does not mean that academia needs to develop a "theory of corruption per country, and city, and village, not to mention per century or even decade" (Rothstein 2021b). Rather, as argued by Marquette and Peiffer (2019), "context matters" and corruption research should take on the challenge of moving beyond one single "conceptual basket" and examine a range of related concepts to corruption (Williams 1999).

4. Neo-Institutionalist approaches

When discussing rational choice frameworks to corruption, the work of neo-institutionalist scholars embodies the shift, within the dominant paradigm of institutional economics, from a focus on the individual to an understanding of corruption as an institutionalised practice (Della Porta and Vannucci 2011; Vannucci 2017, 2015; Hellmann 2017).

Olli Hellmann's (2017) analysis of corruption in East Asia builds on Johnston's (2005) "syndromes of corruption", and, while retaining a rational choice framework, it departs from the traditional approach by recognising that:

> *"[O]nly some preferences being pursued by individuals are exogenously given – such as the drive towards self-interest maximization – while other preferences may be endogenously determined by the behaviour of other individuals"* (Hellman 2017: 3).

The focus of attention, therefore, is placed on interactions between individuals which determine whether or not an individual engages in corruption. Neo-institutionalists argue that:

> *"[T]he risks of engaging in corruption behavior depends on whether interaction between individuals has led to an institutionalization of corruption, with corrupt transactions regulated by informal rules and practices"* (Hellmann 2017: 3).

The neo-institutionalist approach identifies two different variants – game-theoretic and transaction cost – which nonetheless point to the fact that corruption can become institutionalised as an informal set of norms and practices that shape individual behaviour. Neo-institutionalism, therefore, includes in its analysis both economic incentives and the endogenous dynamics of corrupt networks and exchanges, contending that their coevolution is path dependent (Della Porta and Vannucci 2011; Vannucci 2015, 2017). Hough (2017: 82) points out that neo-institutionalists, unlike other rational choice theorists, reject the idea that there can be "a single, uniform cause for a phenomenon as widespread as corruption". Neo-institutionalism seems instead to heed Marquette and Peiffer's (2018; 2019) call to the critical importance of context.

These considerations are relevant for both academia as well as policy interventions in three different, yet complementary, ways. First, as discussed in the previous section, corruption has been primarily viewed as "a problem to be solved". This framing fails to recognise that, in some contexts, various forms of corruption exist, function and thrive to provide different kinds of public goods. Hellman (2017) clearly goes beyond this blind spot, managing to identify and analyse a set of norms, networks and actors that have shaped political landscapes. Second, this approach opens up new research avenues to explore the qualitative differences in the institutionalisation of corruption, for which economic analysis might be ill-equipped (Rose-Ackerman 2010: 52). Finally, Hellman's (2017) conclusions encourage and support policy interventions to engage in qualitative analysis of how corruption markets are organised and the role of networks within those markets. New-institutionalist approaches therefore open new paths for the study of corruption by shifting the focus to an in-depth qualitative analysis of the context in which corruption unfolds, with a particular focus on the actors and networks involved. That being said, no discipline has provided richer accounts of corrupt transactions than anthropology.

5. Anthropology of corruption

The word "corruption" had not been used in the title of any anthropology books following James Scott's famous contribution (1972) until 2004 (Torsello 2011). This apparent silence was determined by several methodological, ontological, and epistemic reasons which will be discussed in the following pages. Nonetheless, this is surprising since several of the practical manifestations of corruption – such as gift exchange, reciprocity, clientelism, and nepotism – constitute prominent objects of study in the field of anthropology (Torsello 2015; Zinn 2001; Heywood 2015). From this point of view, anthropologists were the pioneers rather than the latecomers in the study of corruption (Torsello 2015: 184). However, as acknowledged by Haller and Shore (2015) and Muir and Gupta (2018), most anthropologists come to study corruption by accident rather than by design. Conversely, it is worth noting that the past twenty years have witnessed a growing trend towards more problem-oriented

interdisciplinary studies of corruption, with anthropological perspectives registering a record number of publications (Pozsgai-Alvarez and Pastor Sanz 2021).

This is a welcome shift, which compensates for the lack of attention to context provided by rational choice approaches. In this regard, anthropology contributes to the study of corruption not only by exploring the language with which (and through which) ideas about corruption are articulated. Most importantly, anthropologists provide a deeper analysis on the broader cultural contexts in which corruption and discourses of corruption take place (Haller and Shore 2015).

Anthropology's contribution to the study of corruption is highlighted by Torsello *et al.* when discussing the resistance of corruption to institutional reform:

> "*Because there are different local explanations to corruption and its related phenomena (clientelism, nepotism, trade of influence, abuse of office, illegal gift-exchanges and so on), corruption is extremely resistant to eradication and ultimately it is adaptable to institutional development and reform. Corruption may resist reforms in particularly when these are not aligned with the socio-cultural dimensions of this phenomenon*"
> (2015: 3).

It follows that understanding local constructions and meanings of corruption becomes critical to inform not only policy and institutional reform, but also to expand and deepen theoretical conceptualisations outlining corruption's socio-cultural dimensions. Nonetheless, for different conceptual and methodological reasons, this has not resulted in a cross-disciplinary fertilisation (Torsello and Venard 2016; Torsello 2015).

The dichotomy between the public and the private sphere, the emic[4] approach underpinning anthropological research, and ethical concerns with regards to the role of informants are among the main methodological and epistemic challenges confronted by anthropologists in the ethnographic study of corruption (Heywood 2015). Nonetheless, as recognised by Heywood (2017: 43-45), ethnographic methods can uncover critical insights about how corruption becomes embedded at societal level, shedding light on the interactions and social mechanisms that influence individuals to engage in corrupt exchanges. The critical contribution of anthropology, therefore does not lie in "simply offering another society's definition of corruption". Ethnographic accounts instead suggest "how understanding local experiences of corruption can point us to what really matters for the people affected" (Smith 2015: 56).

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[4] Emic approaches refer to taking an insider's view. Ethnographic studies show that what is termed 'corruption' from an outsider's (or 'etic') perspective, is often linked to a code of values and behaviour that is widely known and accepted from an insider's (or 'emic') perspective. (Haller and Shore 2015)

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Of particular relevance here are the analyses carried out by Olivier de Sardan (1999) and Giorgio Blundo *et al*. (2006) in uncovering and exploring corruption in West Africa. Blundo *et al*. (2006) carried out a two-year field and documentary study from 1999 to 2001 in Benin, Niger and Senegal. Their work explored petty corruption and the state across different sectors: transport and customs, the legal system, public procurements and health. The findings emerging from this ethnography chime with what is argued by Olivier de Sardan (1999), when he states that the core of the political and sociological problem of corruption in Western Africa is to be found in the distance between "the juridical condemnation of certain practices and their frequency, their banalisation or indeed their cultural legitimacy" (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 27).

In an effort to avoid the expression of "culture[s] of corruption" or "cultural factor[s]", Olivier de Sardan (1999: 44) identifies a number of logics (which he refers to as social norms), embedded in society that, by exerting continuous pressure on social actors, contribute to "accord a cultural acceptability to corruption". The notion of logics is suggested by the author to be more analytically operational than "culture", in that it refers to normative configurations which influence actors' strategies. These logics underlie a number of common behavioural traits and include:

1) The logics of negotiation: Bargaining beyond the pricing of commercial transactions to include a negotiation of the rules themselves. Olivier de Sardan (1999: 37) contends that this is reflected in the constant stratification of various types of law in the African state, whereby colonial and traditional law coexist "without there being any question of substitution". The practice of corruption benefits from this logic of bargaining, since the vagueness of the normative system widens the margin of negotiation.
2) The logics of gift-giving: In Sahelian countries the practice of "kola" (or "dash" in Ghana) is a formal valued aspect of tradition. Gifts may serve as informal symbols of reciprocal obligations for benevolence received or to be received (Egbue 2006). The general monetarisation of everyday life has transformed the giving of kola into the giving of money.
3)   The logics of solidarity networks: The importance of solidarity networks in African states today cannot be over-stated. These networks are not only wide, but often they cut across public and private sphere, systematically including an almost general obligation of mutual assistance, generating considerable and sustained pressure from and to all members of the network.

While the above logics concern just about everyone, the two that follow are linked to functions of authority:

4) The logic of predatory authority: "[T]he right that many persons holding positions of power accord themselves to proceed to various type of extortion" (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 41).

5) The logics of redistributive accumulation: Anybody accessing a position of power is expected to share and spread the benefits of his or her privilege with their networks (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 41).

These logics are driven by at least two kinds of "facilitators" eroding and dissolving the "separation between the legal and illegal everyday practices", namely "over-monetarisation" and "shame" (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 45-47). By over-monetarisation Olivier de Sardan refers to that process whereby personal relations take on a monetary form: giving of 'taxi fare' to a visitor, giving coins to the children of friends, and so on. This monetarisation of everyday forms of sociability is the object of much exertion of pressure and several anti-corruption activists would argue that this process has "corrupted" many customary traditions[5].

Similarly, "shame", in the majority of African cultures (but not only there), is a powerful means of social control. Olivier de Sardan (1999) defines shame as a social morality, a morality based on other people's opinions (or what social psychologists call injunctive norms), rather than one based on an individual examination of conscience. Shame relates first of all to the disapprobation of others, and above all of one's family circle. For example, reporting a relative or an acquaintance guilty of embezzlement or refusing a favour to a 'recommended' person both generate shame. However:

> "*The engrainment of corruption into social habits has the remarkable characteristic of displacing the barriers of shame. An intransigent attitude in the face of all forms of corruption would marginalise its author by reason of the shame that would inevitably befall his relatives, and which could be interpreted as his pride, his scorn for others, his lack of compassion, his rejection of family and friends, his hostility towards social norms*" (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 46-47).

Several ethnographic accounts of Sub-Saharan Africa describe citizens' experience of corruption as "an evil, or even a calamity", yet observe that it is "as frequently denounced in words as it is practised in fact" (*Ibid*: 29). The clash between formal and informal norms and structures leads to what Baez-Camargo and Ledeneva (2017) call "normative ambivalence". As argued by Smith (2015) when discussing the contradictions of corruption in Nigeria, citizens are simultaneously participants, critics and victims of corruption. The apparently contradictory discourses and practices vis-à-vis corruption are nonetheless fundamental windows into the dynamics of social change. The widespread stigmatisation of corruption,

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[5] Personal communication

both public and private, cannot be brushed off as mere superficial rhetoric (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 29), yet it has nothing to say about effective personal practice.

The logics put forward by Olivier de Sardan (1999) provide an interpretation of the reasons why corruption finds, in contemporary Africa, such favourable ground for its extension, generalisation and banalisation. Although the logics identified by the scholar refer to the *cultural embeddedness* of corruption, the intention is not to develop a determinist theory of 'culture of corruption' (Zhang 2015), rather it is "to pinpoint certain *social norms* widely represented in modern Africa which influence the practices of corruption" (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 26, emphasis in original).

While defending the contribution of anthropology to corruption studies, Torsello admits that the insights emerging from ethnographical studies "often '[disappoint]' other social science disciplines" because they do not correspond "to any single and systematised model of political action and behaviour" (2015: 430). On one hand, anthropological perspectives can provide corruption research with granular qualitative accounts of corruption. On the other, these accounts often do little more than contribute to the methodological tension suffered by corruption research between "particularism" and "universalism".

Notwithstanding these limitations, ethnography and discourse analysis can bring some critical insights by identifying how the concepts of corruption and integrity are formed, and how these in turn can be deployed in anti-corruption interventions. Anthropology, together with principal-agent, collective action and neo-institutionalist approaches, provides a distinct yet complementary explanation to the many questions surrounding corruption. One last contribution remains to be reviewed: that of criminology and its insights.

6. Insights from criminology: police corruption

Whilst criminology is a discipline that has crime as its object of study, and there are many criminal acts of corruption, this approach has never figured prominently within the field (Brooks 2016). Rather, corruption emerges somewhat tangentially within broader areas of research such as health crime (Slapper and Tombs 1999; Tombs and Whyte 2007; Gray 2009; Tombs 2009) and organised crime (Rawlinson 2012; Allum and Gilmour 2022). This is primarily due to the fact that criminology uses criminal law as the basis to define crime. The contextual nature of the definition of corruption, coupled with the lack of conceptual precision in defining it, makes the task of the criminologist a hard one – but not impossible.

There have been several studies on the specific manifestations of corruption, such as money laundering (Chaikin and Sharman 2014; Brooks 2012; Belaisha and Brooks 2014) and organised crime (Rider 1997; Ruggiero 1996; Kleemans 2008; Philip Gounev and Ruggiero 2014). For the purposes of this review however, the most relevant contributions comes

from research conducted on police corruption. This literature spans across countries and regions (Hope 2018; Norman et al. 2017; Beek 2017; Agbiboa 2015; Buttle, Graham Davies, and Meliala 2016; Quah 2006; Jackson *et al.* 2014; Gerber and Mendelson 2008) and analytical frameworks and disciplines (Punch 2009; 2000; Armstrong 2012; Agbiboa 2015; Hope 2017; Patrick 2011; Ivkovic 2003).

There are several reasons underpinning the scholarly attention towards police corruption, the most salient of which is the special role of police and law enforcement agencies in a democracy. One of the key underlying assumptions in democratic life is that law enforcement should follow the law and due process. Nevertheless, when looking at corruption perceptions reports (Transparency International 2017; Hardoon, Heinrich, and Transparency International 2013) there is a striking recurring figure: across the globe, citizens perceive the police as the most corrupt institution (together with elected representatives). Specifically, almost half of citizens of Sub-Saharan Africa believe that most or all police officers are corrupt (Transparency International 2017:5).

Scholars and practitioners working on police reform, use a broad range of metaphors to describe and explain police corruption: from the "rotten apple" focusing on individual responsibilities (Newburn 1999), to "rotten orchards" delving into organizational factors enabling corruption (Punch 2003), to the seminal distinction under the Knapp commission of "grass eaters", "meat eaters" and "birds" to distinguish among the different kind of corrupt behaviour within police ranks (Armstrong 2012; Kutnjak Ivković 2005). Similarly, other scholars refer to the "slippery slope" (Kleinig 1996) or "sticky fingers and dirty hands" (Punch 2009) to explain both the social and psychological factors at play.

There is no shortage of typologies of police deviance and corruption. Roebuck and Barker's (1974) early work identifies a range of relevant acts, including: corruption of authority, kickbacks, 'shakedowns' (bribes), protection of illegal activity, fixes (undermining criminal investigations), direct criminal activities (police crime), internal payoffs, 'flaking' or 'padding' (planting, adding to, or tampering with evidence). Punch (2000) introduces additional forms of police crime such as extreme violence, manipulating evidence, sexual harassment, racism and police involvement in drug dealing. Gerber and Mendelson (2008) put forward the notion of "predatory policing" to distinguish between the act of *accepting* bribes or kickbacks and more active *soliciting* behaviours such as extorting money from the public or from criminals (Dean, Bell, and Lauchs 2010).
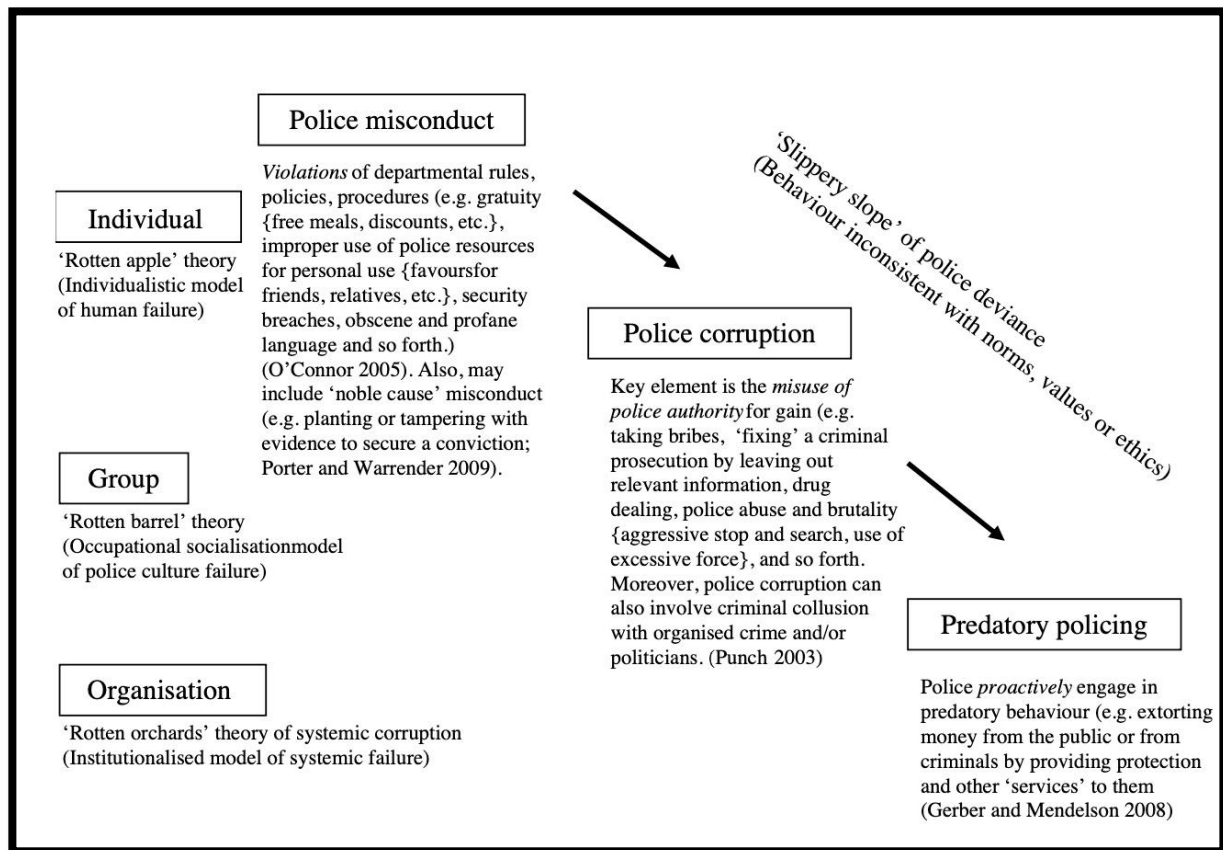
Figure 1: Police deviance in criminology. Source: adapted from Dean, Bell, and Lauchs (2010).

While it beyond the scope of this paper to provide a full review of the different literature on police corruption, Figure 1 presents the key notions and contributions put forward by criminologists when discussing police corruption. Against this backdrop it is important to highlight two critical issues linked to the study of police corruption. First, the global and resilient nature of police corruption suggests that reform and change in policing are problematic and lack clear theoretical and practical underpinnings (Walker 2005). This lack of clarity is chiefly linked to the very complex nature of policing and the ethical dilemmas it poses: the police is the state's primary legal enforcer (i.e., it has a monopoly over the use of force in any given country), it is the embodiment of the law, and as such it is expected to abide by the law. Yet this is not always the case, and therefore the perennial question posed by the roman poet Juvenal writing in the second century AD "*quis custodiet ipsos custodes*", "who controls the controllers?" remains a relevant one to this day (Punch 2000: 301).

Second, police organisations across the world are characterised by an "official paradigm" comprised of institutional values, their mission, and their code of conduct (Punch 2009: 3). Nonetheless, scratching the surface of this paradigm reveals what Punch (2009: 3) calls the "operational code", or "the way things 'really get done'": a whole set of informal norms and practices that inform police culture and behaviour. This distinction between the official paradigm and operational code flags "intricate and shifting patterns of meaning and behaviour" between formal and informal means and ends (*Ibid*). These shifts and patterns

lend themselves as an excellent site to explore the role of social norms as a determinant of corrupt behaviour vis-à-vis institutional measures to sanction corruption and misconduct.

While scholarly attention has recently broadened its focus to include policing and police corruption in developing countries (Norman *et al*. 2017; Quah 2006; Buttle, Graham Davies, and Meliala 2016; Pokoo-Aikins 1998; Jonck and Swanepoel 2016; Gerber and Mendelson 2008; Agbiboa 2015; Beek *et al*. 2017; Hinton and Newburn 2008), much of the original research and insights came primarily from the US, the UK and Canada.

7. Conclusion

The study of corruption has attracted the attention and analytical scrutiny of a broad range of disciplines. However, for different conceptual and methodological reasons, this has not always resulted in cross-disciplinary fertilisation (Torsello and Venard 2016; Torsello 2015). This paper has some of the main theoretical approaches to conceptualise corruption, outlining a range of different questions and assumptions. Despite the diversity of views emerging from the different disciplinary traditions, some broad conclusions can be drawn as to the state of corruption research and theory, and where it is headed.

First, it is prudent to take stock of the predominance of rational choice approaches to anti-corruption research and practice. The lean and seemingly intuitive principal-agent model offers powerful and immediate insights as to why corruption takes place within public bodies. However, it falls short of explaining why, given the same institutional setting, individuals behave differently. It further assumes that there is a way of setting up new institutions that are not susceptible to corruption (Heywood 2017). Collective action theorists pick up on these inconsistencies and contend that contexts of systemic corruption more closely resemble a collective action problem, or what Rothstein (2018) calls a "social trap". This shift from rational utility maximisation to the idea that human behaviour is based on reciprocity has found some support in experimental research (Ernst and Fischbacher 2004), whereby individuals are willing to not engage in corruption provided that they have reasons to expect others to do the same. It is important to highlight here that, as discussed by Marquette and Peiffer (2015; 2018; 2019) corruption might thrive in settings with weak or ineffective state institutions because it serves specific functions. Failure to properly acknowledge this dimension can be "detrimental for understanding the full range of consquences […] and identifying possible drivers for change" (Ledeneva, Bratu, and Köker 2017).

Just as the collective action critique broadens the scope of the incentives underpinning corrupt behaviour, neo-institutionalism goes one step further by redirecting attention to the institutionalisation of informal norms, practices and networks in a given setting. This in turn opens up new research avenues for the exploration of qualitative differences in the

institutionalisation of corruption, a task for which economic analyses might be ill-equipped (Rose-Ackerman 2010: 52). Moreover, this responds to the growing call from scholars and practitioners alike to pay attention to context and the function corruption might play within specific settings and sectors (Marquette and Peiffer 2015, 2018, 2019; Gephart 2009; Mungiu-Pippidi 2011; Heidenheimer 2009; Disch, Vigeland, and Sundet 2009; DfID 2015).

In this regard, anthropology has much to offer to the study of corruption by providing insights into localised meanings, perceptions and practices and how these relate to political institutions. There is a need for "nuanced, detailed and sophisticated" analyses of what practices are understood to be corrupt, how they change over time and how they manifest within public and private organisations (Heywood 2017). If there is one discipline that can provide this kind of granular insight of the socio-cultural dimension of corruption and how it becomes embedded in society, it is anthropology. Nonetheless, as recognised by Torsello and Rothstein, anthropology's contributions to understanding corruption can lead to an unhelpful cultural relativism which traps concepts and notions between two polarised opposites.

Despite Rothstein's (2018, 2021b; Rothstein and Varraich 2017) aversion for anthropologists' cultural relativism he does concede that corruption is entrenched in what he calls a society's "standard operating procedures" (Rothstein 2018: 41). These resonate with the logics put forward by anthropologists such as Olivier de Sardan (1999), and with "the operational code" discussed by criminologists. Similarly, it chimes with some of the conclusions made by Hellman (2017) when he argues that corruption can get institutionalised as an informal set of norms and practices.

What seems to emerge in this convergence of different trajectories and disciplines is the need to pay greater attention to the drivers of individual behaviour moving beyond the basic incentives-based model of instrumental rationality that has underpinned much economic analysis (Heywood 2018). Several anti-corruption scholars call for a better understanding of how corruption is experienced and understood within specific contexts, of what motivations and strategies lie behind an individual's decision to engage in a corrupt act, and how corrupt networks develop and sustain themselves (Mungiu-Pippidi 2018; Heywood 2018; Johnston 2005, 2014, 2018; Dávid-Barrett and Heywood 2018). In this regard, corruption research would benefit from paying more attention to middle-level social processes. For example, the ways in which corruption is an outcome of choices and actions, as well as of attitudes, expectations and levels of trust, arising in the course of interactions among individuals and groups (Johnston 2014). This implies that there is much to learn about "the implications of social networks, social capital, inequality and the immense range of concerns we call 'culture'" (*Ibid*).

It is in light of these reflections that some scholars have started exploring social psychology, and specifically theories of social norms and how these apply to corruption. Some of the

tools and theoretical reflections emerging from this field can be used to further analyse corruption and anti-corruption, bypassing some of the disciplinary and methodological limitations of disciplines which have traditionally analysed corruption, such as political science and anthropology.

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