

RUTGERS SPAA RESEARCH BRIEF

FEBRUARY 2020

Yahong Zhang, PhD

Associate Professor,
School of Public Affairs and
Administration (SPAA),
Rutgers University–Newark

Ming-feng Kuo

National Taiwan University

Jinyun Guo

Sichuan University, China

Chun-yuan Wang

Central Police University of Taiwan

How Do Intrinsic Motivations, Work-Related Opportunities, and Well-Being Shape Bureaucratic Corruptibility?

A large body of research focuses on country-level corruption with institutional factors and the effectiveness of the macro-level anti-corruption measures; however, corruption at the individual level remains understudied and, thus, poorly understood. This study examines the potential underlying causes of, and mechanisms through which, individual government bureaucrats engage in corruption. The researchers developed a framework that incorporates intrinsic motivations, work-related opportunities, and work-related well-being to test the ways in which these micro-level factors shape bureaucrats' propensity to engage in corrupt behaviors (or corruptibility).

Antecedents of Corruption in the Literature

Antecedents of bureaucratic corruption differ at the individual-level compared to the institutional-level. At the institutional-level, scholars have identified many factors that shape corruption including the maturity of democracy in a country, whether the country has a centralized or decentralized power structure, free market regulations, government transparency, oversight by civil society, and freedom of the press. It is argued that these institutional factors inhibit corruption and explain variations in levels of corruption across countries.

This study departs from the focus on institutional-level factors to examine the individual-level factors that shape bureaucrats' motivations to engage in corrupt behavior, which is defined as bribery and embezzlement in this particular study. Although analyses of the individual-level factors have received much less attention in the literature than macro-level institutional factors, a handful of studies have identified important individual-level determinants of corruption. Factors identified in prior studies include a bureaucrats' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and how much discretion they have as well as the influence of the micro-level context including cultural norms, politicization, and the structure of networks and social pressures within those networks.

A Framework of Corruptibility

Building on previous research, this study draws from multiple veins of literature to include self-determination theory, public service motivation theory, and person-organization fit (P-O fit) theory while also considering extrinsic organizational factors in order to develop a framework to advance understanding of the individual-level determinants of corruption. The framework is illustrated below.

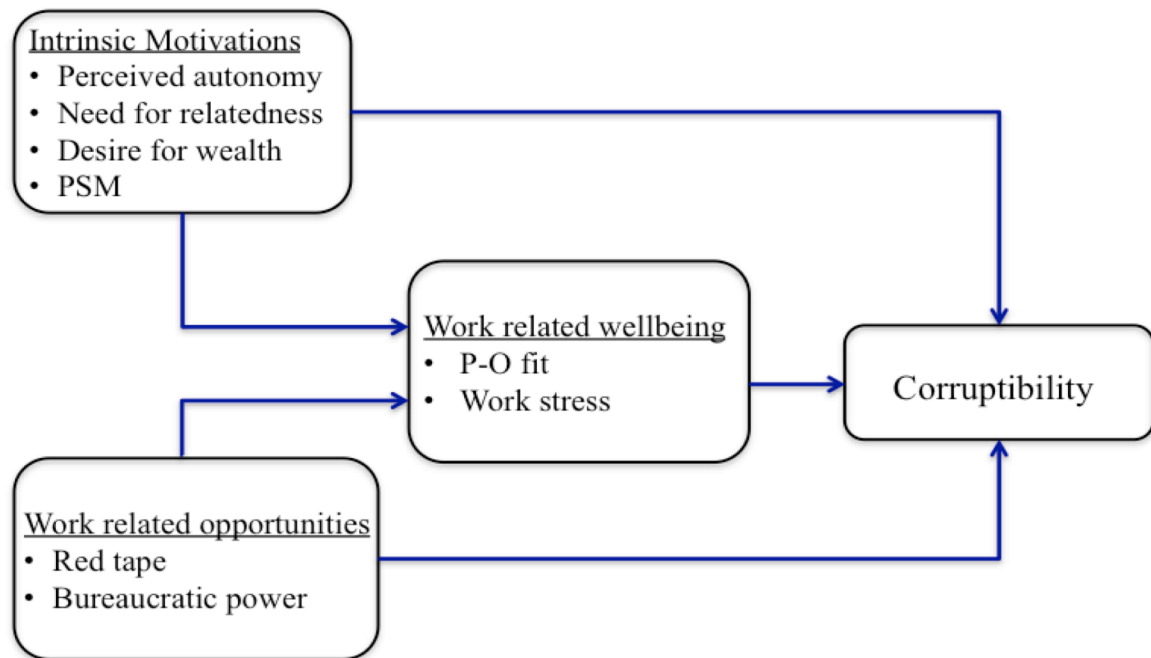


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of Corruptibility

Research Design

The research question of what motivates individual public employees to commit corruption was examined in the Chinese context where corruption in the form of bribery and embezzlement is most dominant. Government employees in China were administered a survey designed to collect data on the characteristics of their organizations, their intrinsic motivations and their attitudes about corruption. The final sample consists of 1,303 valid responses from public servants, which represents largely low-level bureaucrats in China.

It is challenging to directly measure corruption because people typically conceal their unethical behaviors. The authors innovatively developed five survey items with a five point Likert scale to measure the dependent variable *corruptibility*. The five items capture the extent to which public employees justify corrupt behaviors on the one hand and their general attitudes toward governmental corruption on the other hand. Overall, they reflect the propensity for a government employee to engage in corruption.

As shown in Figure 1, the three groups of factors, intrinsic motivations, work-related opportunities and work-related well-being, were broken down into eight independent variables which were constructed from the survey items as well. The independent variables used to measure intrinsic motivations were *perceived autonomy*, *need for relatedness*, *desire for wealth*, *public service motivation*. For work-related opportunities, *organizational red tape* and *bureaucratic power* were used. Lastly, work related well-being looked at *P-O fit* and *work stress*. Structural equation modeling was used to analyze the direct and indirect effects of each of the factors on corruptibility.

Findings

The findings reveal some of the causes of and mechanisms for corruption on the part of individual public employees. The need for relatedness exerts the strongest influence. When public employees' need for relatedness goes unfulfilled, they may engage in corruption to create access to networks or maintain friendships with others. Moreover, a lack of relatedness will also indirectly deteriorate corruptibility by reducing P-O fit and exacerbating work stress. As anticipated, the desire for wealth predicts corruptibility to a significant degree. Greedy bureaucrats are more likely to commit corruption than those who are less greedy.

Previous researchers have proposed that PSM associates negatively with corruption while there has been little systematic investigation of the relation between PSM and corruption. However, this study finds no empirical evidence of such direct effect. Instead, PSM may enhance P-O fit significantly, thereby indirectly reducing corruptibility.

Both red tape and bureaucratic power may significantly increase corruptibility. The difference between these two variables is that a greater level of red tape has purely harmful consequences, while supervisory power is a double-edged sword – greater power directly increases the risk of corruption, but it may indirectly reduce corruptibility as well by increasing P-O fit.

What Do These Findings Mean for Practice?

This study contributes to the current literature on public corruption by extending our knowledge of its causes and mechanisms at the individual level. It also offers meaningful implications for the practice of anti-corruption.

First, previous research has suggested that, to improve public performance, government agencies should make public service motivation a necessary criterion when hiring new employees. While it remains a valid recommendation, this study also recommends paying more attention to people's relatedness and desire for wealth in the process of hiring to minimize corruption. Meanwhile, organizational training and culture development may also nurture a positive work environment that may, in turn, improve employees' relatedness and shape their view toward wealth.

Second, this study once again underscores organizational red tape as a vital factor in corruption. It is imperative to minimize red tape within governmental units to achieve success in anti-corruption efforts.

Additionally, increasing P-O fit and decreasing work stress will contribute to corruption control. These findings suggest that public organizations' training programs should address value sharing and work stress management as well.

This brief is based on the full article:

Zhang, Yahong, Ming-feng Kuo, Jinyun Guo, and Chun-yuan Wang. "How Do Intrinsic Motivations, Work-Related Opportunities, and Well-Being Shape Bureaucratic Corruptibility?" *Public Administration Review* 79, no. 4 (2019): 552-564.

About Rutgers SPAA

The School of Public Affairs and Administration (SPAA) at Rutgers University–Newark, highly ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* and nationally and internationally accredited, motivates students to choose careers in public service and administration through its innovative degree and certificate programs. Rutgers SPAA generates knowledge and best practices in public affairs and administration while promoting accountability, transparency, and performance in the public and nonprofit sectors.



111 Washington Street
Newark, NJ 07102
973-353-5093

spaa.newark.rutgers.edu