

Corruption: Its Representations and Psychology in Indonesia

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Abstract

Corruption has undermined the sense of justice of the society in various parts of the world, and it has to be admitted that corruption involves contested meanings. The problem is that there is no study about the meaning of corruption for Indonesians. Often the understanding of the community about “corruption” is simply assumed because we have law and regulations regarding this practice. This study aimed to show social representations of corruption, by digging answer to the main question, “If you hear the word ‘corruption’, what comes first to your mind?” This study was conducted throughout the year 2013-2015, involving people of the four provinces, namely West Kalimantan, North Sumatra, North Sulawesi, and Jakarta, with a total of 2,104 samples that were recruited through convenience sampling technique. Results of this study showed that the most fundamental meanings in society are (1) Related to others; (2) Stealing; (3) Self-interest; (4) An action; and (5) Country. This study contributes to the literature of psychology corruption and could be transformed into a psycho-social intervention to create a society that is free from corruption.

Keywords: psychology of corruption, representation, stealing, meaning, self

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Introduction

Corruption is a moral and legal issue that has caused not only financial loss but also damage to all aspects of life, including cultural and political life. The most frequent question is “What kind of corruption do we try to prevent and eradicate?” The question is concerned with a definitional issue of corruption. In fact, corruption has lots of definitions, and each of it contains its own strengths and weaknesses. Pellegrini (2011), for example, showed that (1) the definition of corruption in a moral perspective would have “a discordancy” if it turns out that it generates social benefits; (2) the definition of corruption in a legal perspective could change according to the political interests of the authority; (3) the definition of corruption in a social science perspective would be “chaotic” if interfered with moral aspect, for social science is only concerned with behavior.

Studies in corruption in the world are marked with a number of debates, for example between the moralist’s view and the revisionist’s (Farrales, 2005). The moralists condemn corruption because they believe it harms the welfare of society socially, economically, and politically. Criticism to the definition is considered as biased to the Western tendency, being insensible to cultural differences. For example, for the Western social standard, the nepotistic-relative practice is considered corruptive, but not every society sees that way. Some societies seemingly accept and implement corruptive living as rooted in implicit awareness or tacit knowledge. Particularly in Indonesia, as a historic and cultural origin, there are (1) a tribute-giving culture to the Sultanate or authorities (for the purposes of a job promotion or passing a civil servant screening test), and (2) no rigorous specialization in social roles. While the regional heads (holding political power) serve well as judges, chieftain, warlords (giving social, economic, and legal functions); it is problematic when they work in a system that stresses impersonality (Pryhantoro, 2016). For the revisionists, corruption is not necessarily harmful. Instead, it is an inevitable fact, functional in the adjustment process, and even beneficial in improving the efficiency of the bureaucracy. The perspective is still held in Indonesia, as corruption was ever mentioned by Fadli Zon, Vice Chairman of the Indonesian House of Representatives, as “the lubricant of development” (Khafifah, 2015).

A number of debates still prevail regarding the definition of corruption. One of which is that between public opinion-based definition and legal definition (Farrales, 2005). The public opinion-based definition emphasizes the fact that the definition of corruption should be determined by the public norms and opinion, as what is considered corruptive in a society is not always the same in another. The legal definition highlights the breach of law by a public official for own advantages. If the official has not breached the law, or if there is not any behavioral regulation breached, then the corruption does not occur.

In Indonesia, there is a book that describes the definition of corruption comprehensively, which is “*Memahami Untuk Membasmi: Buku Saku Untuk Memahami Tindak Pidana Korupsi*” or “*Understanding for Eradicating: A Pocket Book to Gain Insight on Criminal Act of Corruption*” (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, 2006). According to the book, based on the Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 31 Year 1999 ref. Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 20 Year 2001, there are seven categories of criminal act of corruption, namely (1) the state financial

loss; (2) bribery; (3) embezzlement in office; (4) extortion; (5) manipulation; (6) conflict of interests in procurement of goods and services; and (7) gratification. The seven categories also apply to the prevailing corruption practices at private sectors (non-public). In this context, Pope (2008) reminded that an individual or a group of individuals work at private sectors could conduct corruption by manipulating the organization's legal status or its reputation to misuse the public trust under the transactional circumstances with public institutions or public officials, which, in fact, brings adverse impacts to the public interest, but benefits their own personal interests. Wijayanto (2009) stated that the Indonesian Republic regulation includes actions like embezzlement. Although not involving public officials or institutions, it can be categorized as corruption as it indirectly harms the public by reducing the inland revenues in terms of taxes. The extended definition is critical due to the fact that although bribery at the private sectors seems irrelevant with the political system of a country and does not as well occur at the public settings, it could, however, fuel the corruption culture which is later generalized into many aspects of society. Hence, to gain insight on the corruptive behavior, it is necessary to consider first the essence or substance of the act, not only its behavior or its formal regulations.

In short, the definition of corruption is subject to criticism, evolved along with the corresponding symptoms, and contextualized according to the study field (Farrales, 2005; Pellegrini, 2011). Examining a variety of corruption definitions in the history, the author sees it necessary to conduct a particular study on corruption definitions prevailing on the minds of Indonesian people. It is important to recognize a variety of perceptions developing in the society on the definition of corruption, as through perceptions human make understanding and perceive the world in a coherent, logical, and meaningful way, as well as predict behavior in accordance with the established perception (Moskowitz, 2005). The information about these perceptions is very important to design an intervention scheme to prevent and eradicate corruption.

This present study aims to obtain a collectively definitional representation, instead of individually cognitive representation, of corruption (Verheggen & Baerveldt, 2007; Wagner & Hayes, 2005). The collective representation is important as corruption is in fact "a site for contested meaning" (Pavarala, 1993, p. 145). Theoretically, the study is also beneficial to develop a corruption-psychology theory with typical characteristics of Indonesia. The urgency of the benefits becomes prominent as there has been no study about the Indonesians' perception on corruption so far. Often, the understanding of the community about "corruption" is merely assumed because we have the law and regulations regarding this practice.

Methods

The number of participants in this study was 2,104 persons (48% males, 52% females), recruited by using the convenience sampling technique. The demographic and professional backgrounds were as follows: 42.3% were from West Kalimantan, and of Catholic High school students; 39.2% were from Greater Jakarta, and of company employees and undergraduate students (mixed religion and ethnicity); 12% were from North Sumatera, and of Catholic high school students (Catholic school); and 6.5% were from North Sulawesi, and of Preachers of Protestant Churches. The age mean of participants was 22.29 years old with the standard deviation of age was

9.91 years. The education backgrounds ranged from junior high school level to master's degree.

Instruments used were questionnaires with only one open-ended question, which is “If you hear the word ‘corruption’, what comes first to your mind?” The data of the study was calculated by using IBM SPSS for text analysis.

Results and Discussion

First of all, the author conducted an analysis of words using IBM SPSS for text analysis. Based on the frequency the word (in Indonesian) that emerged, the vast majority were (1) People (“*orang*”; but it is not yet clear, whether it referred to self or others), (2) money (“*uang*”), (3) ownself/personal (“*sendiri*” atau “*pribadi*”), (4) steal or take (“*mengambil*”), (5) harmful (“*merugikan*”), and (6) country (“*negara*”) (see Figure 1). The entire response is derived from 1,314 (or 62.45%) of the 2,104 samples; or more than half the number of samples. The first finding of the study revealed that in the minds of Indonesian people, the object of corruption is money, neither mentality nor time.

Category	Code	#Descriptors	#Responses
All Records		-	2104
Uncategorized		-	409
No concepts extracted		-	96
sendiri+<>	3 rd : ownself	13	163
uang+<>	2 nd : money	4	263
untuk+<>		9	149
korupsi+<>		2	508
yang+<>		1	668
pribadi+<>	3 rd : ownself	17	95
negara+<>	6 th : country	16	72
kita+<>		27	47
merugikan+<>	5 th : harmful	10	74
dengan+<>		23	50
rakyat+<>		24	42
dalam+<>		28	34
bukan+<>		12	39
atau+<>		19	40
tindakan+<>		7	54
orang	1 st : PEOPLE - ownself / others?	215	494
mengambil+<>	4 th : take / steal	6	153
tidak+<>		5	240
lain+<>		11	89
milik+<>		15	56
dilakukan+<>		14	32
baik+<>		26	30

Figure 1: Words extracted from research participants' responses ($n = 2,104$).

To obtain more meaningful responses, the author further analyzed the phrases. Apparently, based on the frequency response, the top five concepts of corruption for Indonesian people are (1) related to others (“harmful to others”, “the rights of others”); (2) stealing; (3) self-interest; (4) an action; and (5) country (see Figure 2).

- orang lain + . (94) 1st: others
- mengambil hak + . (84) 2nd: take/steal the right
- lain + . (64)
- korupsi + . (55)
- mengambil sesuatu yang bukan + . (51) 2nd: steal something that doesn't belong to
- hak orang lain + . (48) 1st: the right of others
- mencuri + . (47) 2nd: stealing
- miliknya + . (39) 3rd: belong to self
- sendiri + . (39)
- pribadi + . (32) 3rd: ownself/personal
- korupsi adalah tindakan yang + . (30) 4th: action
- tidak + . (27)
- korupsi adalah + . (26)
- negara + . (26) 5th: country
- orang + . (26)
- haknya + . (25)
- mencuri + . (25) 2nd: stealer
- dan merugikan orang + . (25) 1st: harmful to others
- hak kita + . (22)
- hal yang tidak + . (22)
- merugikan orang lain + . (20) 1st: harmful to others
- mengambil + . (19) 2nd: stealing
- milik kita + . (19)
- korupsi adalah suatu tindakan + . (18) 4th: action
- uang + . (18) 6th: money
- masyarakat + . (17)
- milik orang lain + . (17)
- diri sendiri + . (16)
- tidak baik + . (16)

Figure 2: Phrases extracted from research participants' responses ($n = 2,104$).

The first concept: **Corruption is related to others**. The concept might be relevant with an influential Confucian teaching in the East, in Asia, that states that “The value or importance of virtues such as truth, honesty, fairness, and rationality are subject to or depend upon the quality of human relationships” (Moon & McLean, 2003, p. 306). However, when in Korea the concept means that rationality and justice may be defeated by “the value of friendship or nepotism” causing corruption (hence corruption has a positive connotation) (Moon & McLean, 2003), this study found a different interpretation to the collectivistic Indonesian people. They view that corruption can cause degradation in others, and therefore, just based on truly consideration of others, corruption gained a negative connotation.

All this time, the most common and acceptable definition of corruption is “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain” (Transparency International, 2016). In this definition, the most notorious one is personal interest. However, this study found that the most obvious things of corruption in the minds of Indonesian people are the consideration towards others, the loss inflicted on others due to his/her actions, and the concerns over the rights of others. The finding was further also supported by research in other part of the world, in Europe, by Pisor and Gurven (2015), which showed that there is a negative correlation between one's primary geographic identity and his/her permissibility towards corruption by controlling variables of gender, age, education, household dependency, and belief in God. The stronger the geographic identity (e.g. country vs. local) held by someone, the less likely he or she becomes permissive towards corruption. The assumption is that the corruption actors consider the number of people (kin, authorities, members of his/her super-ordinate group) impacted by his/her actions. Pisor and Gurven described the finding by using evolutionary psychology, in which the history of natural selection has allowed

someone to be able to anticipate emotions of other people who shared the same identity with him or her.

The second concept: **Corruption is stealing**. The use of the term “stealing” as a synonym of corruption is also used by Wedeman (1997, “stealing from the farmers”), O’Neil (2012; “stealing from the city”), and, a bit metaphoric, Meier and Griffin (2015, “stealing the future”). In the original definition, corruption is not identical to stealing. Stealing is not corruption if not entailing the issue of public power abuse. Nevertheless, this study revealed that in the minds of Indonesian people, corruption is similar to stealing. In fact, there were others who gave a similar statement (Agbaje, as cited in Odunayo, 2015):

“Ultimately, every act of corruption is an act of stealing. There is no question about it. There is no moral or ethical difference between them. Both are criminal, immoral and anti-social acts and nobody should attempt to make one look lighter than the other. People who commit either should be dealt with seriously.”

However, stealing can be separated from corruption. Stealing is more fittingly a synonym of theft, which means “taking any property by a person with no right to it ... [e.g.] steals aid packages from a truck is committing theft but not corruption” (UNEP, 2004, p. 14). Corruption occurs if there are stealing actions over something (money, products, or other valuable items) mandated or entrusted to him or her. Hence, stealing is wider in scope than corruption, and therefore, this kind of understanding, though less accurate, is, in fact, more advantageous in practice: corruption prevention and eradication. This is because, actually, not all stealing actions are corruption, but all corruption is definitely stealing actions.

In Islamic religious laws, the difference between stealing and corruption is also highlighted. The penalty for stealing is hand cutting (if the stolen item is minimally worth 1.07 grams of gold), whereas the penalty for corruption is to pay money, or fines, or to be humiliated in public, or even to have a corporal punishment (whipping, or prison) (KonsultasiSyariah, 2012). The reasons are: (1) the experience of being stolen is very inevitable, but the experience of being betrayed for a mandate/trust given to someone is avoidable (for example, by not giving the mandate/trust); (2) Corruptors do not steal money directly from the treasury, but do it through the position granted to him or her; and (3) the corrupted money is not within the proper custody (KonsultasiSyariah, 2012). Obviously, there are still many Indonesian people who cannot clearly tell the difference between corruption and stealing, and thus, there comes an opportunity for education.

The third concept: **Corruption is associated with self-interest**. As discussed before, the most common definition of corruption at first stresses on “private gain”. However, this study found that “self-interest” is in the third concept sequence which is mostly remembered and understood by Indonesian people. One definition of “self-interested behavior” is “actions that benefit the self and come at a cost to the common good” (DeCelles, DeRue, Margolis, & Ceranic, 2012, p. 681). Based on the definition, though it prioritizes self-interest, the consequence of such priority to the loss of common good (equals to “other people” in the first concept) is emphasized as its counterpart. Machiavelli (as cited in Robet, 2015) stated that the greatest destruction caused by corruption is not at first on the law, but on the common good, as the

common good is falling, then the foundation and atmosphere for healthy and good politics is falling too; as a result, patriotism and love for motherland (as opposing to the priority of “private gain”) are weakening. It is obvious now that Indonesian people do not care about the issue of power abuse as it apparently occurs in corruption. What matters to them is the fact that corruption has harmed them, and stolen something from them.

The fourth concept: **Corruption is an action.** This means that corruption is not merely a behavior. Borrowing the concept of sociology, an action involves a sense of agency; in which the actors commit an activity based on intention, conscious process, subjective meaning, or deliberation (Blunden, 1999; van der Wal, 2012). In the recent psychology research, an action apparently can be equivalent to “motivated behavior”, in which the behavior performed by someone includes orienting attention and valuation processes (Suri & Gross, 2015). Hence, there are meaningful behaviors – called action – and mere behavior (not always being driven by a purpose or meaning) – called behavior.

Therefore, according to the study results, for Indonesian people, there is no corruption which is free from its meaning-making of the actors. There is no such a “forced corruption”. First, we need to understand what the forced corruption means. The following is the description:

“What is significant in Simis’ argument is the idea of forced corruption for both those who give bribes and those who take them Structural (both economic and cultural) forces or constraints of the Soviet over-controlling centre resulted in flourishing *blat*: life became impossible unless the rules were broken Despite the extent and frequency of *blat*, however, it received little formal acknowledgment. When publicized, it was treated as deviant acts of atypical people. In practice, the reverse seemed nearer to truth - in many jobs indeed it was often abnormal not to be involved in *blat*” (Ledeneva, 1998, p. 46).

Some theoretical positions believe that corruption is truly an institutional and political issue that requires a structural solution (Mbaku, 2010; Sandoval-Ballesteros, 2013). Related to the third concept discussion, a corrupt system can be fought by individuals by not granting a mandate or trust to the system, or by willfully establishing the system reform. Those individuals also need to be strengthened and empowered to avoid “structural imbalances of social power” (Sandoval-Ballesteros, 2013, p. 60), so that the corrupt system would undergo a disincentive or punishment, instead of positive reinforcement.

Nevertheless, the result of the present study matched perfectly with the situation in the Soviet community as described before by Ledeneva (1998). Public through its statement (either read or heard by other people) reveals that corruption is an abnormal action of someone, which cannot be attributed as a mandated thing given by its social structure. In this case, there are two possible explanations. First, when the questionnaires are filled in, there is a bias of social desirability. Whatsoever, there is no such a “forced corruption”. The statement that there is a “forced corruption” could damage somebody’s moral self-concept. An individual always has freedom to choose in joining or leaving a corrupt system. Second, Indonesian people have not fully realized the effects of structural forces to corruption. They think that an action by an

individual is still considered the only entity responsible for his or her corruption behavior, for prevention of corruption, and corruption eradication. The thing is, if we accept the fact that the prevailing corruption is due to forcing by a social structure, how to decide the appropriate method to judge a situation that there is “forcing elements”, “excessive or extreme social pressures” (Upadhyay, 2003), or “entrapment” (remember the social trap concept of Platt, 1973) to do corruption.

The fifth concept: **Corruption is associated with the country.** It can be understood as the phrase “the amount of state loss” is most frequently heard when a criminal act of corruption is publicized by the press. Corruption gives a bias to a country’s focus in its development (The World Bank, n.d.), and ruins a government’s credibility in implementing democracy (Upadhyay, 2003). The fifth concept shows that Indonesian people have an awareness that corruption is an issue that is wider at social rather than interpersonal or community levels. However, as clearly seen, the awareness is still ranked below the association of corruption with other-selves and the self, as shown from the first concept to the fourth. It may be because that “the state” is still a more abstract concept (having a higher psychological distance; see also Sneffjella & Kuperman, 2015), and “people” and “stealing” are a more concrete concept for Indonesian people who are the participants in this study.

Conclusion, Implication, and Limitation

This study concludes that there are typical concepts of corruption prevailing in the minds of Indonesian people, which are (1) related to other people; (2) stealing; (3) self-interest; (4) an action; and (5) country. This study is the first research in Indonesia to identify meanings of corruption which are mostly understood by Indonesian people. A number of parties have tried to do the mapping¹ (see Figure 3), but it was based more on logical speculations or literature reviews, rather than empirical research.



Figure 3: An example of considered concepts of corruption (Barnett, 2010).

¹ E.g., <https://artistsagainstcorruption.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/microsoft-powerpoint-apresentacao1-02032010-165719.jpg>

For the practical implication, the findings of the study can be used as the valuable material for education or anti-corruption campaign. Anti-corruption advertisements have so far emphasized at least several theme categories (see Figure 4): (1) Courage and/or honesty, for example “*Berani Jujur Itu Hebat / Being Dare to be Honest is Great*”²; (2) Crime, for example “Corruption: it’s a crime”³; (3) Disease, for example Corruption as “cancer of society”⁴; Corruption as the “worst disease”⁵; “Corruption is deadly”⁶; (4) Self-efficacy, for example “You can stop corruption”⁷; (5) Power, for example “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”⁸; and (6) Development, for example “Zero Corruption, 100% Development”⁹.



Figure 4: Themes of anti-corruption messages.

² E.g., <http://civicara.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/19/Gedung-KPK.jpg>

³ E.g., https://www.unodc.org/images/frontpage/stories/2015/February/corruption_crime.jpg

⁴ E.g., <http://image.slidesharecdn.com/stopcorruption-130131083738-phpapp02/95/stop-corruption-3-638.jpg?cb=1359621633>

⁵ E.g., <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/236x/b8/1d/4d/b81d4d9e93d7f5281973b33ed112f1ad.jpg>

⁶ E.g., http://static.tumblr.com/33a31229e94dd62b712ae8e4b3a4cca1/yw0t55y/u8qmirvjj/tumblr_static_billboard_corruption_kills_uganda.png

⁷ E.g., http://www.anticorruptionday.org/images/actagainstcorruption/Previous_campaigns/corr_logo_YOUCANSTOPCORRUPTION.jpg

⁸ E.g., <http://www.fggam.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/power-and-corrupction.jpeg>

⁹ E.g., <http://www.onuitalia.com/eng/wp-content/uploads/UNCAC2.jpg>

A number of campaign themes presented above have benefits to some extent. However, according to the present study results, the effective anti-corruption messages (being able to persuade as compatible to the minds of common people) are those that emphasize the destructive impacts of corruption towards others, for example, “With Corruption Everyone Pays”¹⁰ (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: An example of the most effective message of anti-corruption (based on this present study).

Limitations of this study is that it did not recruit the sample comes from all major islands in Indonesia, as well as more than half of the participants are young people who are educated in Catholic schools. Therefore, the generalizability of these study results might be limited. Further research could increase the number of samples and conduct multilevel analysis to the discovered representation.

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¹⁰ E.g., <http://beijingcream.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/With-corruption-everyone-pays.jpeg>

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