©Ibadan Journal of the Social Sciences
Special Edition
Volume 23, No. 2, 2025
DOI: 10.36108/ijss/5202.32.0210

Corruption as a Survivalist Strategy in Nigeria

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Corruption remains a global phenomenon that challenges socio-economic development and erodes public trust. In Nigeria, despite the progress made in the fight against corruption as the recent improvement in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index indicates, corruption is still deeply entrenched and widespread with multi-dimensional implications for socio-economic development. This paper aims to investigate a relatively under-examined aspect of corruption in Nigeria, from the perpetrators' perspectives, as a survivalist strategy. The paper adopts rational choice and neutralisation theories by targeting participants in Abuja. The qualitative approach was used and focus group discussions as well as key informant interviews were used to generate data among the purposively selected participants. The generated data were analysed through thematic and content analysis method. Findings indicate that corruption is seen as a way of life, which motivates and supports individuals' involvement in it. The paper, therefore, recommended that specific and effective anti-corruption policies and interventions geared towards perpetrators and the social environment be implemented.

Keywords: Corruption, perpetrators, anti-corruption, neutralisation theory, Nigeria

Introduction

Globally, corruption is a critical issue that threatens the basis of societies and jeopardizes development. Corruption stands out as one of the major concerns in sub-Saharan Africa countries and the source of social ills and inequality (Messy, 2024). The problem of corruption is widespread and deeply rooted in Nigeria, as it continues to affect the country's socio-economic growth and erode public trust (Akanle & Adesina, 2025; Fiebai, Baghebo, & Nathan, 2025). Although Nigeria has recently shown some positive results in its position in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, moving five positions and settling at 145 out of 180 countries in 2023 (Transparency International, 2023), the nation continues to struggle with the detrimental effects of corruption in its different sectors, such as government finances, entrepreneurial investments and quality of life.

The financial cost of corruption in Nigeria is staggering, with estimates suggesting that the country has lost approximately $400 billion to illicit financial flows since gaining independence in 1960 (Nigerian Financial Intelligence Unit, 2023). The 2014 cost of corruption was estimated at one thousand dollars per capita, and it is estimated that the volume will be approaching almost two thousand dollars per capita by 2030 (PricewaterhouseCoopers, PWC, 2017). This translates to 37 percent of Nigeria's GDP in 2030, representing a significant loss to the country's economy (PWC, 2017). In another report, it was shown that a one-point shift in the corruption index is associated with a 1.2 percentage-point alteration in the economic growth per year, which prove the strong impact of corruption on economic growth (Transparency International, 2023).

Corruption affects various sectors in Nigeria, in the power sector alone, an estimated loss of ₦11 trillion ($64.7 billion in 2015) occurred between 1999 and 2017 due to corrupt practices (Markovska & Adams, 2015). According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) report (2016), it was found that between June 2015 and May 2016, 32.3 percent of Nigerian adults who interacted with public authorities were required to pay a bribe or were asked to do so (NBS, 2016). The tactics employed by Nigerian officials to engage in corruption are diverse, including embezzlement, extortion and bribery, theft and fraud, favouritism, procurement fraud, nepotism, misappropriation of funds and looting (Nkpe & Akanle, 2024; Zakari & Button, 2022). The scope of corruption in Nigeria is immense, with corruption opportunities unlocked across a range of sectors, including political, institutional, economic, security, educational, health, and humanitarian sectors (pp. 2018).

For example, in a study conducted by Ifejika (2024), it was revealed that there was fraud in public procurement as a form of corruption, which ranged from procurement documents falsification to inflating contract sums, which result in loss of huge amount of funds. Abioro (2021) did a comparative analysis of public procurement as a form of corruption in Nigeria and South Africa, and found that it can be perpetrated either through administrative processes or state activities. Put it differently, corruption in public procurement can happen at any stage of the procurement process ranging from needs analysis to contract finalisation or even asset disposal. In this, it was established that corruption remains to be a considerable challenge in the countries' procurement and service delivery procedures, and it was suggested that e-procurement be promoted in cases where procurement procedures are identified for close observation and violations are subject to administrative law remedies (Magakwe, 2024).

However, the conversations on fighting corruption have often been centered on strengthening institutional capacity and improving legislation (UNODC, 2006; Chimezule, 2021; The White House, 2023; Kolo, 2023). These approaches derive their roots from institutional and rational choice theories, which hold that strong institutions would improve regulation and increased cost of corruption will deter people from engaging in the action respectively (Ramadhan, 2023; Pillay, 2014). Despite the enactment of laws and enforcement of integrity systems in Nigeria for the purpose of curbing corruption, government efforts to reduce corruption has been limited (Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission, ICPC, 2019). For instance, the EFCC recovered a total of ₦70.5 billion within 100 days - between October 2023 and January 2024; however, the prevalence of corrupt practices continues with profound and detrimental effect on Nigeria's economic growth, political stability and social welfare (Okenna, 2020).

This paper hypothesized that those involved in corrupt practices employ different neutralisation techniques in order to rationalise their behaviour, thus contributing to persistence of corruption. The research seeks to provide information for targeted interventions and policy measures to effectively prevent corruption and establish a more transparent and accountable society by understanding the underlying psychological processes that motivate and enable corruption. This paper addresses this gap by looking at how those who engaged in corrupt practices in Abuja (Nigeria) justified their actions. This paper will provide insights that could potentially guide more focused and successful anti-corruption policies and initiatives by uncovering the psychological mechanisms that sustain corruption.

Overview of Corruption in Nigeria

The World Bank (2020) and Transparency International (2023) posited that corruption is the abuse of public office for personal benefit. It is a global phenomenon across both public and private sectors of the economy which is classified as grand, petty and political corruption depending on the level and sectors involved (UNODC, 2004). The Nigerian Financial Intelligence Unit (2023) added the common forms of corruption and they include bribery, embezzlement and government malpractice. The Global Corruption Barometer also showed that almost one billion people worldwide paid bribes in one single year and that corruption costs business up to 10% worldwide (Transparency International, 2023). Corruption has dire economic, social and political consequences. It can negatively affect a country's GDP due to misallocation of resources and inefficient expenditures. Socially, corruption perpetuates inequalities and the government's ability to meet services as it increases poverty (Messy, 2024). Politically, it distorts electoral processes, perverts the rule of law and impedes development (IMF, 2018).

Corruption is a complex issue that requires comprehensive knowledge and coordinated response from the people, governments and international organisations. Corruption has negative effects on the poor and the marginalised population as it raises costs of living and limits their access to essential services, such as education, health, justice and other social welfare programmes

(Akanle & Adesina, 2015; Okenna, 2020). It worsens inequality and reduces the contribution of private sector to the economy in terms of loss of investment and employment opportunities (Spyromitros, & Panagiotidis, 2022b). Corruption also makes it difficult for a country to respond to emergencies in times of natural disaster, despair, including death. Over time, corruption can destroy citizens' loyalty to their institutions and leaders, leading to social unrest and in some cases, creating the possibility of instability, conflict and violence (Diagana, & Diagne, 2023)

Corruption in Nigeria: Scale and Impact

The scale and impact of corruption in Nigeria have a long history dating back to pre-colonial periods and carried over into the post-colonial period. This set the stage for the earliest instances of uneven trade, resource exploitation, and extraction under the pretext of "official business" (Adeniran, 2019). Indeed, British structures laid the foundation of corruption in Nigeria for decades as exemplified by scandals like the 1975 "Cement Armada" affair and the 2015 arms deal scandal popularly known as Dasukigate (Human Rights Watch, 2007; Bönner, 2021).

In the early post-colonial era and as the nation approached independence, public office gradually evolved from a tool for public service to a means of personal gain. A tribunal of inquiry was established in one early high-profile case involving a regional leader who transferred government funds to his own bank (Ojiji, Ogbinyi Jr, & Pepple, 2021). Mismanagement of regional funds, electoral fraud, and abuse of import licenses are more examples of corruption. There were cases of public funds being diverted from development programmes to political patrons and party-affiliated projects through several public enterprises and regionally controlled organisations. The first military coup in 1966 was a result of political unrest and public discontent stemming from pervasive corruption in the first Republic. Indeed, one of the grounds offered by the plotters was to remove "corrupt governance" (Olaoye, 2025).

While the acclaimed military takeover was to remove corruption, the successive military dictatorships from the 1970s-1990s fostered corruption through lack of transparency and accountability. Despite the 1999 transition to civilian rule and the establishment of anti-corruption bodies, corruption remains systemic, pervasive and entrenched (Bönner, 2021). Nigeria ranked 145/180 in the 2023 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, and over 30% of Nigerians reported that they have paid bribes for public services (Transparency Index, 2022; NBS, 2017). Corruption discourages foreign direct investment. Socially, it leads to infrastructure deterioration, inadequate public services, exacerbated inequality, and limited economic opportunities, creating a poverty cycle (Shabbir, Anwar, & Adil, 2016; Muhammad & Gado, 2015). The implications are that fighting corruption involves the need to rebuild public trust through holistic reforms and cooperation between government, civil society and the private sector.

Theoretical Explanations for Understanding Corruption

This study is anchored on rational choice and neutralisation theories. The main notion of Rational Choice Theory (RCT) is that crime or corruption is a conscious, and rational decision (Wilcox & Agnew, 2022). Offenders are considered as reasonable agents who like anyone else analyse costs and rewards before behaving (Juraev, 2018). If they think that the benefits outweigh the costs, they may choose to commit the crime or perpetuate corruption. As proposed by Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham (18th century), humans have free will and act to maximize pleasures and reduce discomfort. Therefore, corruption is not explained largely by social environment, psychology or structural reasons - instead it is seen as a product of individual choice and calculation. The idea also underlines the significance of opportunity, that is, even a "motivated offender" will commit crime only if conditions (target, absence of supervision, environment) make it practical (Wilcox & Agnew, 2022).

Rational choice theory suggests that corrupt actions are the result of a deliberate cost-benefit analysis, where individuals weigh the prospective gains against the possible consequences, such as legal penalties and reputational damage (Pillay, 2014). The perceived benefits of corruption may outweigh the risks in Nigeria, where enforcement mechanisms are frequently weak (Ramadhan, 2023; Sakuntala *et al.*, 2024). This perspective highlights the necessity of supporting institutional and legal frameworks in order to change the cost-benefit equation and discourage corrupt behaviour.

While the rational choice theory concentrates on the cost-benefit analysis of corruption without focusing on justification by perpetrators, neutralisation theory was adopted to bridge the gap in theory in terms of how the individuals justify their actions. As proposed by Gresham M. Sykes and David Matza, neutralisation theory explains how people who, at any time, would typically conform to social norms may hypothetically "neutralise" their internal moral restraining forces, such that they may indulge in criminal or deviant behaviour whilst feeling that they are essentially "good" (Copes & Maruna, 2010; Wilcox & Agnew, 2022).

This implies that neutralisation theory not only delves into the methods of psychology that lead individuals to justify their corrupt actions to themselves and others, it suggests further that people use various techniques to neutralise guilt or shame felt in carrying out unethical or illegal behaviour so that positive self-image can be sustained (Offei *et al*, 2020; Aborisade, 2022). In the context of Nigerian public officials, neutralisation techniques may be employed in order to rationalise corrupt practices such as stating that corruption is needed to overcome bureaucratic hurdles or that corruption is a common practice among their peers. Understanding these psychological mechanisms is critical to formulating specific interventions which may challenge the rationalisations for corrupt behaviour.

Taken together, the two theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex nature of corruption in Nigeria. The authors highlight the relevance of taking into account individual motivations, systemic issues, cultural aspects and psychological processes in formulating effective anti-corruption strategies. This would appear to suggest that the development of focused interventions that address the causes of corruption on a number of levels requires a co-ordinated strategy that takes account of the insights provided by these theories. This theory offers useful information about the individual, systemic, cultural, and psychological elements of corrupt behaviour (Pillay, 2014; Offei et al., 2020; Aborisade, 2022; Ramadhan, 2023).

Empirical Studies on Corruption in Nigeria

There are several empirical studies, which have been done to investigate the perceptions and prevalence of corruption in Nigeria. According to a survey carried out nationwide by the Transparency International (2020), 68 percent of the Nigerians consider corruption to be an actual problem in the country. Also, the respondents of Global Corruption Barometer (2021) hold a point of 72 percent regarding the government's inaction to fight corruption as ineffective. This implies that despite the increasing positive trend and the creation of special agencies for combating corruption, a fact based on recent empirical evidence is that corruption is still widespread in most areas of the Nigerian society.

It is true that, when a nationwide survey was conducted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2024, different patterns of bribery, administrative corruption and extortions were exposed between 2019 and 2024. Items that were also reported to be particularly prevalent in the survey were petty corruption when dealing with the public utilities, police and the tax authority and the legal system. Although a few industry operators noted that corruption levels have significantly declined since the previous period covered by the report, its occurrence remains high and spontaneous with approximately one out of every three people reporting that they have been involved in at least one instance of paying bribes and/or being bribed within a year (UNODC, 2024).

Similarly, the ICPC presents corruption-specific risk analysis of the corruption situation in Nigeria through its Nigeria Corruption Index (2020). Such a rating indicates that corruption has remained deep-rooted in the collection of revenue, the procurement process, the process of licensing and land administration. These are empirically verifiable measures that corruption is not just a behavioural issue, but a structural one at different levels of administration. These findings support Okoye, Okafor and Ojimba (2024) and UNODC's (2024) reports which explained corruption as endemic deficiencies nations are facing and they include complex procedures, low wages and institutionalized incentives towards rent-seeking, among others. Such results emphasise the prevalence of corruption and the absence of trust in anti-corruption effort.

Besides, sector-specific study demonstrates the uneven spread of corruption among institutions. For instance, research in education shows that procurement fraud and bribery in admissions remain widespread (Okoye, Okafor & Ojimba, 2024). UNODC (2024) research on Judicial corruption, found that informal payments affect case prioritizing, bail decisions, and delays, contributing to diminishing public trust. Taken together, these empirical data reveal corruption as a continuous and multi-layered phenomenon.

Studies have also demonstrated that corruption has deep roots in social expectations (Duyne & Harvey, 2025; Oluku & Ene, 2024). Beiser-McGrath *et al*. (2020) in their work, establish that political office holders in Africa, including Nigeria employ different strategies to provide favours to their ethnic groups to attract more voting support during elections and to survive in power. This implies that individuals often expect successful public leaders to redistribute state resources to their constituents or kins, and by so doing, it may generate a cultural context in which misappropriation of public resources is justified as community obligation.

This finding supports Jancsics' (2025) analysis of family corruption with a fivefold typology, which include family for corruption, where kinship ties are used to reduce the transaction costs of corrupt acts; corruption for family, where corruption reinforces familial bonds; corruption for survival through family, which occur under institutional dysfunction; corruption for the family firm, where business interests are intertwined with familial advantage; and dynastic state capture, where ruling families institutionalize power and wealth accumulation.

Conversely, the approaches of enactment of law and enforcement have presented a notable gap, where the understanding of corruption from the perspectives of the perpetrators themselves and their social construction are neglected. While a few studies have constructed corruption as learned behaviour (Karimu, 2016), much has not been done on how corrupt individuals rationalise their actions. For example, a study conducted by Aborisade (2022) on internet scamming and the techniques of neutralisation by its participants. It also examined the rationalisation of children's involvement in online dating scam in Nigeria given by their parents. Offei, Andoh-Baidoo, Ayaburi and Asamoah (2020) also discussed how people justify themselves in online romance, all pointing to internet scammers. While the current literature is a good source of information on corruption in Nigeria, there are several gaps that need to be further researched. More research is needed in order to understand the interplay between individual, organisational and societal factors that contribute to the normalisation of corruption.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to examine the extent of corrupt practices in terms of survival mechanisms by the individuals in Nigeria. The method of data collection used for this research was a combination of key informant interview (KII) and focus group discussion (FGD) which were used to collect rich and contextual data from key informants and participants in the custody of EFCC in Abuja as the headquarters of the agency with high concentration of diverse cultural identities in Nigeria. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants for KIIs and FGDs. Key informants were traditional rulers, civil servants, law enforcement agencies including EFCC and Police officials and student leaders. These participants were specifically selected because of their peculiar position in the Nigerian society and to obtain different views about corruption as a survivalist strategy.

Using KII guide, the interviews were conducted with participants following a schedule in March 2020 that aimed to elicit experience, perceptions or insights regarding the theme of the study. Also, FGDs were carried out with individuals in the EFCC custody who were apprehended in corrupt practices using FGD's guide. This unique sample provided the opportunity to explore the views and justifications given by those directly involved in corruption. The FGDs were conducted separately for men and women in order to provide a comfortable atmosphere for free discussion. The discussions and interviews were held in March 2020 and were centered around the collective views, experiences and perception of corruption among participants.

Regarding the sample size, five participants were recruited to participate as key informant interviewees and 18 as participants in the focus group discussions. The sample size for each method was based on data saturation and this was achieved when no new themes or insights were being gained from the interviews and discussions. All KIIs and FGDs took place in Abuja, Nigeria and were recorded with audio-recordings with the participants' consent. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis - a method of qualitative data analysis that entails identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

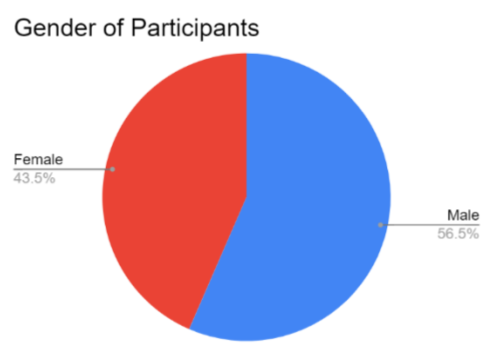
The data analysis process was guided by the research objectives and theories adopted. The analysis was focused on the identification of the neutralisation techniques that the participants employed to rationalise their corrupt practices and exploring how these neutralisation techniques were contributing to the normalisation of corruption in Nigeria. In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher used a number of strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing and thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking enabled the findings to be presented to a subset of participants to make sure that the interpretations were accurate. Peer debriefing was conducted with colleagues who had no direct involvement in the research to provide an external check on the analysis process. Thick description was applied to generate rich and detailed accounts of the context of research, and the experiences of participants, so that the reader could judge the transferability of the findings to other contexts.

It should be stated at once that the data that formed the basis of this paper were extracted from the author's broader PhD fieldwork on the Social Construction of Corruption in Nigeria. The study followed ethical principles, as gatekeepers' approval was obtained from the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, and all participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by assigning pseudonyms to participants and by removing identifiers from the transcript.

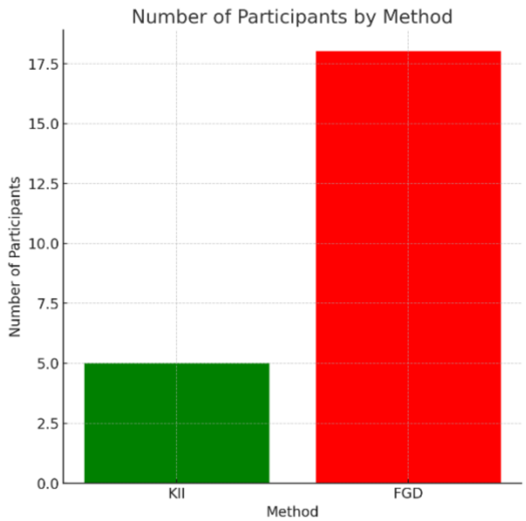
Data Analysis

Participants' Demographics

Gender of Participants: The study included both male and female participants, with a slightly higher representation of males. Out of the total 23 participants, 10(43.5%) were female, and 13(56.5%) were male.



Participant Composition: The majority of the research participants (18) were individuals in the custody of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). The remaining 5 participants were key stakeholders from various sectors, including a traditional ruler (Baale), a civil servant, an EFCC official, a police officer, and a student leader.



KIIs were conducted with the 5 key stakeholders mentioned above. FGDs were conducted with the 18 participants in EFCC custody. The FGDs were divided into two groups, one for male participants and another for female participants, to foster open discussion.

Prevalence and Acceptance of Corruption

A) Widespread nature of corruption

The data collected through focus group discussions and interviews highlight the pervasive nature of corruption in the Nigerian society. Participants emphasised the endemic and systematic character of corrupt practices, suggesting that corruption is not just prevalent but also follows a structured pattern. As one participant in the male focus group discussion stated, "*Corruption is not just big but also endemic.*" *(FGD/Detainee/Male/March 2020).* Another participant from the same group elaborated:

> Sincerely, it is a big problem, corruption is systematic, that is, it has a system, sequence, there are stages, steps, pathways that you follow and each stop and takes on by another fellow." *(FGD/Detainee/Male/March 2020)*

Corroborating the prevalence, the traditional ruler who was interviewed noted that … "*the reason why corruption is everywhere is that there are no checks and balances"* (KII/Baale/March, 2020). The assertion that corruption is everywhere further confirms its widespread nature. These statements underscore the widespread and deeply rooted nature of corruption, indicating that it has become integral to Nigeria's social fabric.

B) Corruption as a way of life

The data reveals that corruption has become so prevalent in Nigerian society that it is often perceived as a normal and expected behaviour. Participants in the focus group discussion sessions and interviews repeatedly highlighted how engaging in corrupt practices is considered a way of life, while not being corrupt is seen as abnormal or unconventional. As one participant in the male focus group discussion remarked:

> Given the realities, it is systemic and it is a way of life. I think it's not possible not to be corrupt but it is extremely difficult not to be corrupt. By definition, not being corrupt is not normal in Nigeria. Corruption is systemic and roughly speaking, it is a way of life. *(FGD/Detainee/Male/March 2020)*

To support this assertion, one of the participants painted a picture of the daily problems that drivers encounter with police officers' illegal road extortion, noting that if drivers decide to stand up to them, passengers will oppose the driver rather than the extortionist. In his discussion of daily commutes, he said:

> The driver might not want to give them but passengers will be insulting the driver to give them the money. That means it is the way of life, they made it the way of life. So, in that way now they have seen it as though it is the normal thing but by law, no policeman is supposed to collect anything from anybody. *(FGD/Detainee/Male/March 2020)*

This normalisation of corruption suggests that it has become deeply embedded in the social norms and expectations of Nigerian society, making it difficult for individuals to resist or oppose corrupt practices. Of course, even though corruption seems to be widespread and normalised in daily life, it remains a culture that erodes trust, progress and fairness.

C) Social acceptance of corruption and ostracism of non-participants

The data indicate that the social acceptance of corruption contributes to its normalisation and perpetuation in Nigerian society. When corrupt practices are widely tolerated and go unchallenged, they become embedded in social norms and expectations. As one participant, a traditional ruler (Baale), noted, "*So the reason why corruption is everywhere is because there are no checks and balances"* (/KII/Baale/March 2020). This statement suggests that the lack of effective accountability mechanisms and social disapproval allows corruption to thrive.

Participants also highlighted how corrupt behaviours are learned and reinforced through social interactions and group dynamics. As one participant in the male focus group discussion explained:

> You were talking about tips the other time, and you know the intention of you giving that money, is it to show gratitude, to appreciate the person or to manipulate the person. Also, you have a process, the actions you're taking, is it to alter the process so that you get results at a much faster rate. So that you do not allow the system to take its course. You want to make your action like the catalyst to get your result. So, my own is corruption is when you alter the process. *(FGD/Detainee/Male/March 2020)*

This quote illustrates how certain practices, such as giving tips or manipulating processes, are socially accepted and even expected, contributing to the normalisation of corruption. Furthermore, the data suggests that individuals who refuse to engage in corrupt practices may face social consequences, such as ostracism or limited opportunities. As one participant stated:

> Yes, it is. It is just that when the majority of people in the society is corrupt, so the one that is standing alone will be seen as the corrupt one. Everybody who desires to stay out of corruption must know that they will be punished; others will punish them, they may speak against them, and others will fight them for doing the right thing. (/IDI/Baale/March 2020)

This quote highlights the social pressure to conform to corrupt norms and the potential negative consequences for those who choose to shun corruption.

Justification and Social Construction of Corrupt Behaviour

A) Corruption as compelled by external factors - Denial of responsibility

The data reveals that individuals often justify their corrupt behaviour by claiming that external factors or circumstances compel them to engage in corruption. This neutralisation technique allows individuals to shift the blame for their actions onto external forces, thus minimising their personal responsibility. The research shows that some of these external factors include the pressure to be successful, poverty, peer group influence, and mirroring society's attitude. Regarding the pressures of life as a propeller, one participant stated:

> People engage in corruption to make it in life, especially when you want to prove that you are superior to other people, so you find means to gather wealth anywhere to prove that. Anywhere they can make

> money whether rightfully or not. *(KII/Civil Servant/Male/March 2020)*

Corroborating the fact that external factors propel corruption, another respondent spoke on the influence of poverty and peer pressure, saying:

> There are lot of reasons, you understand, poverty, peer group influence and what they call it, sociological reasons because for instance we were discussing when we were young, the way we were brought up is different from the way young people are brought up. What we saw that time is different from what people are seeing now. *(KII/EFCC Official/March 2020)*

The statement above indicates that while some factors responsible for corruption are external, others are internal.

B) Corruption as sometimes beneficial -Denial of harm

Participants also highlighted instances where corruption is justified by emphasising its perceived benefits to the community. This neutralisation technique involves minimising the harm caused by corrupt actions and focusing instead on the positive outcomes that may result. As one participant in the male focus group discussion explained that if one took money wrong and used it rightly, it might be beneficial:

> For instance, you stole money but your basis for stealing the money is not to put it in your pocket but to provide boreholes. Providing boreholes to a community that has not seen water and they trek 10 miles before they see water. It is beneficial because millions of people will benefit but the process of getting money from the scratch for the foundation is wrong. *(FGD/Detainee/ Male/March 2020)*

This quote illustrates how individuals may rationalise their corrupt behaviour by arguing that the ends justify the means, particularly when the corrupt actions are seen as providing essential resources or services to the community.

C) Corruption as not being entirely harmful-Denial of victim

The data also suggests that individuals engaged in corruption may deny the existence of a direct victim, thus neutralising the moral implications of their actions. As a traditional ruler (Baale) noted during a key informant interview:

> But in the case when you explain nepotism, favouritism, we can say it is beneficial to the people who are favoured as against other people or an individual who is being given favouritism or that the favouritism is done for as against his other members or society. *(/KII/Baale/ March 2020)*

This quote indicates that individuals may justify their corrupt behaviour by arguing that their actions did not entirely cause harm, favoured some people and did not directly harm anyone, as the benefits are simply distributed unequally rather than causing explicit damage.

D) Corruption as imitating others and not one's invention-Condemnation of the condemners

Participants also reported instances where individuals justify their corrupt behaviour by pointing out the corrupt actions of others, especially those in positions of authority. This neutralisation technique involves shifting the focus away from one's own wrongdoing and onto the hypocrisy or corruption of those who criticize or condemn corrupt behaviour. As one participant in the female focus group discussion noted:

> What people are doing is imitation...okay look at petrol now, you change the price of petrol from ₦145 to ₦125 and up till now, how many petrol station are selling it like that. Because when you meet them, they tell you, the ones I have, I bought it for ₦145 then. But when they move petrol from N50 to N90, they change it and they tell you that your leader… that is what they are doing. *(FGD/Detainee/ Female/March 2020)*

This quote suggests that individuals may rationalise their own corrupt behaviour by arguing that they are simply following the example set by those in leadership positions.

E) Corruption as natural and unavoidable - Appeal to higher loyalties
The data reveal that individuals may justify their corrupt behaviour by appealing to higher loyalties. As a civil servant explained during a key informant interview:

> When you talk about favouritism, it is biblical. Because it is written in the Bible when God himself said "*I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy*". This means that it is not everyone that is a candidate of mercy. There are some people that God will show mercy on. Why can't God show mercy to everyone? That is favouritism. *(KII/ Civil Servant/ March 2020)*

This quote illustrates how individuals may rationalise their corrupt behaviour by arguing that they are fulfilling a higher moral duty or obligation, even if it means violating legal or ethical norms.

Challenges in Addressing Corruption
A) Deeply entrenched nature of corruption
Data gleaned from this research highlighted the deeply entrenched nature of corruption in Nigerian society, which poses significant challenges to anti-corruption efforts. As one participant, a traditional ruler, noted during a key informant interview:

> The best thing is to fix the foundation of Nigeria. The first solution is to re-negotiate the unity of Nigeria again. You will remember that when Nigeria was practicing regionalism, development was recorded especially in the southwest here. It is because the diversity was being managed sort of, so the people are from same tribe, they can reason together, they have the same value system. *(KII/Baale/ March 2020)*

This quote suggests that corruption is so deeply embedded in the fabric of Nigerian society that addressing it may require a fundamental restructuring of the nation's political and social systems. Participants also highlighted how corruption has become internalized and normalised within various institutions and sectors. As an EFCC official explained during a key informant interview:

> Well corruption is a very big problem in Nigeria because if you look at every system, the reason our system is not growing is because of corruption, somebody somewhere will want to manipulate something. *(KII/ EFCC Official/March 2020)*

This quote underscores the pervasive nature of corruption across Nigeria's systems and institutions, suggesting that addressing it requires a holistic, systemic approach.

B) Need for transformation of social norms
The data also emphasise the need for a transformation of social norms and values in order to effectively combat corruption in Nigeria. As a police officer noted during a key informant interview:

> It is possible and it is not possible. It is possible in a way if the light that is the gospel of Jesus Christ is propagated throughout the country and it is not possible if people are not ready to heed to what God is saying about corruption. *(KII/Police Officer/March 2020)*

This quote suggests that addressing corruption requires not only legal and institutional reforms but also a fundamental shift in societal values and beliefs. Participants also highlighted the importance of individual responsibility and integrity in combating corruption. As an EFCC official stated during an interview:

> I don't believe there is nothing we can do about corruption. The issue is that if you want to do anything about corruption, you can ask yourself, are you actually corrupt? If you are corrupt, can I just find a way of rescuing myself from corruption? Because when you are discussing corruption, it is actually more individual than generally. It is human beings that exhibit corruption, that engage in corruption, it is not really a

> collective thing. *(KII/EFCC Official/ March 2020)*

This quote emphasises the role of individual agency and choice in perpetuating or resisting corruption, suggesting that a transformation of social norms must begin with personal introspection and commitment to integrity. The data presented in this section highlights the challenges of addressing corruption in Nigeria, given its deeply entrenched nature and the need for a transformation of social norms and values. Participants emphasised the importance of both systemic reforms and individual responsibility in combating corruption, recognising that effective anti-corruption efforts require a multi-faceted approach that addresses both the structural and cultural drivers of corrupt behaviour.

Discussion

The findings provide valuable insights into the normalisation of corruption in Nigerian society and the use of neutralisation techniques by individuals engaged in corrupt practices. The data reveals that corruption is not only widespread but also deeply embedded in the social fabric of Nigeria. These findings are consistent with recent studies that have highlighted the pervasive nature of corruption in Nigeria (pp. 2018; UNODC, 2019; Idris, 2019). The study also sheds light on the social acceptance of corruption and the pressure to conform to corrupt norms. This finding aligns with the work of Idris (2019), who argued that the normalisation of corruption in Nigeria creates a social environment that enables and perpetuates corrupt behaviour.

One of the key contributions of this study is its application of neutralisation theory to understand how individuals justify and rationalise their corrupt behaviour. The data reveals that participants employ various neutralisation techniques, such as denial of responsibility, denial of harm, denial of victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties. The use of the denial of responsibility technique is evident in participants' justifications of corrupt behaviour as being compelled by external factors, such as poverty, peer pressure, and societal expectations. This finding is consistent with the work of Schoultz and Flyghed (2019), which indicated that corruption does not just occur, but learned over time within the system.

It was also found that perpetrators of corruption employed the denial of harm and denial of victim techniques by emphasising the perceived benefits of corruption and arguing that their actions did not cause direct harm. This finding aligns with a recent Aborisade's (2022) work where participants in internet fraud denied the emotional harm they cause their victims, dismissing it as fun and merely helping to repatriate Africa's stolen wealth from the West while emphasising the benefit to improving their poor livelihood.

Additionally, condemnation of the condemners and appeal to higher loyalties techniques were also evident in participants' justifications of corrupt behaviour, particularly those in positions of authority. However, it is important to note that while neutralisation techniques offer a partial explanation for corruption, they do not account for all instances of corrupt behaviour. As Chugh and Kern (2016) argued, individual decision-making and moral reasoning also play a crucial role in resisting or engaging in corrupt practices, even in the face of social and institutional pressures.

The findings also highlight the challenges of addressing corruption in Nigeria, given its deeply entrenched nature and the need for transformation of social norms and values. These findings are consistent with a 2010 OECD report that emphasised the importance of a multi-faceted approach to combating corruption, especially in addressing both the structural and cultural drivers of corrupt behaviour. By applying the lens of neutralisation theory, the study provides valuable insights into how individuals rationalise their corrupt behaviour and highlights the need for anti-corruption efforts that target not only the structural and institutional drivers of corruption in Nigeria but also the social and psychological factors that sustain it.

Conclusion

This study has examined the pervasiveness of corruption in Nigeria and the social and psychological factors that facilitate its normalisation. Through a qualitative analysis of interviews and focus group discussions with individuals in EFCC custody and stakeholders from different sectors, the study sheds light on how people make use of neutralisation techniques in justifying and rationalising their corrupt behavior as a survival strategy. Some of the root causes of corruption identified are weak institutions, weak economy, excruciating poverty, rising cost of living, unemployment of youths and deepening hopelessness that continue to make citizens more frustrated.

It is recommended that, whenever feasible, the provision of basic needs, social welfare, and social security functions as effective anti-corruption measures, as their absence may allow corruption to persist as a survival strategy for numerous individuals, particularly those with opportunities to increase their earnings through illicit activities involving public funds. Consequently, a pathway to addressing Nigeria's evident corruption issues can be established through the promotion of a culture where honesty is rewarded, accountability is stringently enforced, and corruption is viewed not merely with disdain but as entirely unacceptable. To effectively combat corruption, it is essential that governmental and civil society programs are implemented to reorient Nigerian perspectives and delegitimise their methods of neutralisation. The fight against corruption should extend beyond merely apprehending offenders; it must also focus on fostering integrity, reshaping societal values, and developing resilient institutions to prevent its occurrence, as prevention is undoubtedly more effective than punishment.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, it is suggested that policymakers, the anti-corruption agencies and Civil Society organisations must develop and implement a comprehensive approach to social change. This should be stressed due to the need to attend to the social norms and values that induce and perpetuate corruption in Nigeria. Also, policymakers and anti-corruption fighters should work together to design a multi-way change approach involving education and awareness campaigns, engaging religious and traditional leaders, mainstreaming anti-corruption education into school curriculum and the use of social media and other communication channels to facilitate public discourse and a culture of integrity.

It is also imperative for the government and policymakers to design and implement specific interventions aimed at counteracting neutralisation techniques. It is advisable that targeted counter-messaging strategies, which confront these techniques and foster a sense of personal responsibility, be developed by anti-corruption agencies and civil society organizations. Such strategies may encompass public awareness campaigns highlighting the detrimental effects of corruption, training programmes for public officials to uphold personal integrity, and leveraging social media to showcase individuals demonstrating a strong anti-corruption stance.

There is a need to build stronger legal and institutional frameworks to fight corruption. Although addressing social norms and individual attitudes is important, the study also acknowledges the need to develop robust legal and institutional frameworks to combat corruption. It is recommended that policymakers are focused on strengthening anti-corruption laws and regulations, improve the capacity and independence of anti-corruption agencies, enhance the efficiency and integrity of the judiciary and strengthen mechanisms for public oversight and participation in anti-corruption efforts.

Priority should be placed on evidence-based interventions and rigorous impact evaluation to ensure that anti-corruption efforts are effective and sustainable. By this, policymakers and anti-corruption agencies give importance to the interventions that have evidence basis and rigorous impact evaluation. Finally, in implementing these recommendations, policymakers, anti-corruption agencies, and civil society organisations can collaborate by working to checkmate the practice of corruption in Nigeria.

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