# The Dilemma of Conceptualizing Corruption: A Critical Review

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## Abstract:

Perhaps the most common introductory phrase in any piece of writing on corruption refers to the difficulty of defining the phenomenon, highlighting the failure of academic and policy circles to find clear demarcation of the boundaries of what constitutes corrupt behaviour. Dedicated to unravelling the conceptual and theoretical complexities of corruption, this paper seeks to answer two key questions: how can corruption be conceptualized? And how do different theoretical lenses contribute to our understanding of it? This paper argues that the concept of corruption is an essentially contested one, facing at least four key philosophical dilemmas. These relate to whether corruption is primarily an economic issue, whether it is associated exclusively with the public sector, whether its definition is universal or culturally specific, and whether it is considered a question of morality or legality. The paper further argues that an inter-disciplinary approach to the study of this phenomenon is essential. The paper aims to first discuss the issue of defining corruption, highlighting the various philosophical dilemmas associated with conceptualizing it. Second, it aims to identify the main types and forms it may take, reflecting how complex and multifaceted the phenomenon is. Finally, the paper intends to give a general overview of the existing corruption analysis paradigms, shedding light on their strengths and limitations in guiding our understanding of the phenomenon.

**Keywords:** Corruption, Anti-corruption, Defining Corruption, Types of Corruption, Corruption Analysis Paradigms.

## معضلة مفهوم الفساد: مراجعة نقدية

**الملخص:**

ربما تُعد الإشارة إلى صعوبة تعريف الفساد من أكثر العبارات الافتتاحية شيوعًا في أي عمل أكاديمي يتناول هذه الظاهرة، الأمر الذي يُبرز عدم قدرة الأوساط الأكاديمية وصنّاع السياسات العامة على التوصل إلى فهم واضح لحدود ما يُشكّل سلوكًا فاسدًا. وانطلاقًا من السعي لفهم التعقيدات المفاهيمية والنظرية المرتبطة بالفساد، تسعى هذه الورقة البحثية للإجابة على سؤالين محوريين: كيف يمكن تعريف الفساد؟ وكيف تسهم العدسات النظرية المختلفة في فهمنا له؟ يجادل هذا البحث بأن مفهوم الفساد هو مفهوم موضع خلاف جوهري، فهو يواجه ما لا يقل عن أربعة إشكالات فلسفية رئيسية. تتمثل هذه الإشكالات في ما إذا كان الفساد قضية اقتصادية

بالأساس، وما إذا كان مقتصرًا على القطاع العام، وما إذا كان تعريفه عالميًا أو مرتبطًا بالثقافة والسياق المحلي، وما إذا كان يُنظر إليه كمسألة أخلاقية أم قانونية. كما يؤكد البحث على أن تبنّي مقاربة بينية في دراسة هذه الظاهرة هو أمر ضروري لفهم أبعادها المختلفة. يهدف البحث أولًا إلى مناقشة إشكالية تعريف الفساد، مع تسليط الضوء على المعضلات الفلسفية المرتبطة بتصوره. ثانيًا، يسعى إلى تحديد الأنماط والأشكال الرئيسة التي قد يتخذها الفساد، بما يعكس مدى تعقيد الظاهرة وتعدد أبعادها. وأخيرًا، يقدم البحث لمحة عامة عن أبرز النماذج التحليلية المستخدمة في دراسة الفساد، مع إبراز نقاط القوة والقصور في كل منها، ومدى قدرتها على المساهمة في فهم أعمق للظاهرة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:**
الفساد، مكافحة الفساد، تعريف الفساد، أنواع الفساد، أنماط تحليل الفساد.

## Introduction

It is estimated that one out of four service users globally engage in the corrupt act of paying a bribe[1]. Annually, trillions of dollars, estimated to be more than 5% of the Global GDP[2], and close to 17% of a single country's GDP[3], are lost due to corruption. Figures about the prevalence of corruption globally has put the issue on the top of the research agenda of scholars from several backgrounds, ranging from Political Science, to Economics, Law, Sociology, and Criminology.

Perhaps the most common introductory phrase in any piece of writing on corruption refers to the difficulty of defining the phenomenon, highlighting the failure of academic and policy circles to find clear demarcation of the boundaries of what constitutes corrupt behaviour. Adding to the complexity, the issue of what causes corruption remains vague, leading to the emergence of several theoretical analysis paradigms that are rich, yet conflicting in nature.

## Research Problem

According to William B. Gallie, who introduced the term "essentially contested concepts", evaluative concepts are usually contested, as their proper use inevitably involves disputes[4]. In line with this perspective, corruption is widely acknowledged to be a fluid concept, which may characterise different activities across various sectors in multiple contexts. It is defined by official laws, and by public opinion of those who are both affected by it and are the ones who might contribute to it[5]. Yet, there is no single universally agreed-upon definition for it. It is a value-laden concept with a range of rival uses that are sometimes incompatible, with no clear way of settling the debate between them[6]. These four criteria are the ones set by Gallie for a concept to qualify as "essentially contested", which makes it reasonable to argue that corruption is one stark example of such concepts. Thus, it requires more in-depth analysis and further deconstruction.

Despite the difficulties, defining corruption and its causes remains one of the most heavily researched and discussed issues among academics, policy professionals and activists. This is particularly the case because the discussion of anti-corruption measures and enforcement mechanisms would seem insignificant, if a clear definition of what constitutes corruption is unavailable. Some scholars even believe that the lack of systematic anti-corruption policy changes is causally related to the fractured understanding of the phenomenon on the conceptual level[7].

## Research Question

Dedicated to unravelling the conceptual and theoretical complexities of corruption, this paper seeks to answer two key questions: how can corruption be conceptualized? And how do different theoretical lenses contribute to our understanding of it?

## Research Argument

This paper argues that the concept of corruption is an essentially contested one, facing at least four key philosophical dilemmas. These relate to whether corruption is primarily an economic issue, whether it is associated exclusively with the public sector, whether its definition is universal or culturally specific, and whether it is considered a question of morality or legality. The paper further argues that an inter-disciplinary approach to the study of this phenomenon is essential. Openness to integrating different theoretical paradigms is necessary for a proper analysis of corruption, and accordingly its related dynamics; as they complement one another in presenting an understanding of corruption as a normative value-laden phenomenon, operating within the context of formal and informal institutional rules.

## Research Objectives

The paper aims to first discuss the issue of defining corruption, highlighting the various philosophical dilemmas associated with conceptualizing it. Second, it aims to identify the main types and forms it may take, reflecting how complex and multifaceted the phenomenon is. Finally, the paper intends to give a general overview of the existing corruption analysis paradigms, shedding light on their strengths and limitations in guiding our understanding of the phenomenon.

## Research Methodology

This paper adopts a narrative and critical literature review approach, focusing on examining how corruption has been conceptualized in academic and policy discourses. Although the paper has not employed strict inclusion criteria for sources, reviewed pieces of literature were selected based on their theoretical relevance, aiming to cover key definitions and frameworks. The review includes journal articles, theoretical contributions, and policy-oriented publications, with a focus on literature from the fields of Political Science, Public Policy, and Public Administration.

By combining narrative synthesis with critical investigation, the paper seeks not only to map the dominant conceptualizations of corruption but also to question their underlying assumptions. This method enables a deeper reflection on how corruption is framed and the potential need for reconceptualization in different contexts and according to the targeted purpose.

## Research Division

This paper's discussion is divided into three main sections. The first focuses on competing definitions of corruption, highlighting the major open questions pertaining to its conceptualization. The second section presents the different types and forms of corruption, while the final section gives a brief overview of corruption analysis paradigms, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses.

## A. Conceptualising Corruption

Etymologically and conceptually, corruption has usually been connoted by decay, disintegration, breakage, impurity, and distortion[8]. Apart from definitional disputes, corruption is associated with a change from a natural sound condition to something impure and infected[9]. While this general overarching agreement seems logical, it still fails to help any serious effort dealing with corruption with the aim of identifying what it really is. As put by Yale University Political Scientist James Scott, it is unanimously acknowledged that corruption involves deviation from certain behavioural standards, yet the criteria establishing the latter remain unclear[10].

One way to unravel the issue of conceptualising corruption is to consider the various workable definitions adopted by the different agencies working in the field. The below table summarizes some of the most widely cited ones:

**Table (1): Definitions of Corruption According to International Agencies**[11]

| **Agency** | **Definition of Corruption** |
|---|---|
| **Transparency International** | "The abuse of entrusted power for private gain"[12]. |
| **World Bank** | "The malicious use of public power and resources for personal benefit and purposes"[13]. |
| **The UN Office on Drugs and Crime Global Programme Against Corruption (GPAC)** | "The abuse of power for private gain"[14]. |

An increasing number of academic and policy publications choose to rely on these wide definitions for corruption, common among which is the reference to some moral component, yet without much guidance into what the "use" or "abuse" of power means in practical terms[15]. Despite their fame, these definitions fail to explain much about the content of what corruption entails.

Turning to academic contributions, a survey of some the works of influential academics appears relevant here. While some scholars have defined corruption in a broad and simple manner, close to the practice-oriented definitions mentioned above, others have articulated more elaborate ones. In broad terms, Banerjee et al., quoted in Zhang et al., define corruption as "violation of rules by official for personal gain". Shleifer and Vishny choose a close definition, describing corruption as "the sale of government officials of government property for personal gain"[16]. Like their practitioners' counterparts, these definitions fall short of providing the details necessary for proper analysis.

Preferring further elaboration, one of the earliest definitions of corruption was offered by Robert Brooks, who defines it as "the intentional mis-performance or neglect of a recognised duty, or the unwarranted excise of power, with the motive of gaining some advantage more or less personal[17]". Along the same line, the prominent Political Scientist Joseph Nye defines corruption as the "behaviour which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence"[18]. Also, one of the most elaborate definitions of corruption is put forward by Mark Philip, identifying three main actors in the corruption process: a public official (A), the public who entrust the former (B), and a third benefiting party (C). Corruption, as per this understanding, occurs when A violates B's trust, through conduct that exploits public office, contrary to the accepted code of conduct in a given political culture, providing C with a benefit they would not otherwise acquire[19]. Similarly, but with a specific emphasis on the functional perspective, Carl Freidrich recognizes the existence of a pattern of corruption "whenever a power holder who is charged with doing certain things, that is a responsible functionary or office holder, is by monetary or other rewards, such as the expectation of a job in the future, induced to take actions which favour whoever provides the reward and thereby damage the group or organization to which the functionary belongs, more specifically the government"[20]. Emin Aktaş adds a new element to these definitions, focusing on the human behaviour aspect of the concept. He defines corruption as "a public official's attempt to explain with a reasonable cause that he/she does not use this authority or violates his/her duty without a valid reason, and as a result, accepts money or gifts of monetary value"[21]. Emphasizing its implications, Frank Rusciano defines corruption as "the exclusion and disempowerment of citizens leading to perceived insufficiencies in provision of public goods by leaders"[22].

Although this wealth of definitions has existed for years, one can still identify four major challenging questions pertaining to the competing definitions outlined above, and contributing to the complexity of identifying an agreed-upon definition. First, the question of whether corruption is primarily an economic issue. Second, the question of whether corruption is associated exclusively with the public sector. Third, the question of the universality of corruption. Finally, the question of the morality versus legality in relevance to corruption.

Concerning the first issue, the controversy of whether corruption is a purely economic issue is one that needs to be critically investigated, especially that it is much narrower than how corruption was defined in earlier periods of political thought. For example, Plato, Aristotle, Ibn-Khaldun, Machiavelli, Montesquieu and Rousseau saw corruption as a destructive exploitative societal condition; a product of luxury that follows success[23]. In their view, it is not merely an economic issue, it is rather a fundamentally political one, manifesting itself in various sectors from the military to the economy[24]. The tendency to narrow down corruption to the economistic view can arguably be seen as a development resulting from the predominance of liberal individualism and its subsequent decreasing interest in the public good[25]. This would in turn lead to confining anti-corruption efforts to economic technical solutions, ignoring the wider political and social contexts.

Similarly, viewing corruption as a matter of power abuse in exchange of personal gains of different types, while offering more flexibility in defining the rewards of corruption, does not also account for situations where the abuse of power is not in the favour of an individual, but their political party, religious or ethnic group. A prominent example here the American Watergate scandal[26]. Attempting to solve this issue, some scholars tend to argue for a categorization, encompassing economic and political corruption, depending on the nature of the gains coming from the act, while still labelling both as corrupt[27]. Yet, it might seem more efficient if one adopts a wider understanding of the phenomenon as one that goes beyond economic terms. It rather encompasses different types of power abuse or exchange in return for various types of gains, making it a political, social, cultural and institutional phenomenon, besides being an economic one.

Secondly, prevailing definitions of corruption usually confine the phenomenon to the public sector, overlooking the fact that private sector corruption is widely acknowledged, in spheres like business, and even sports. The focus solely on the public sector ignores the fact that institutions which might be public in one context, can be private in another. For example, education and healthcare can either be public or private, depending on the context one is studying. Additionally, the boundaries between the public and the private sectors are not always strictly clear. Some institutions can be thought of as hybrid in nature. This may lead to classificatory problems if corruption is definitionally confined to the public sphere. Most importantly, this conceptual reduction risks portraying the solution to the problem of corruption as "abolishing" or "diminishing" the state, which is an ideologically driven libertarian view, rather than a neutral policy orientation[28]. Furthermore, the assumed link between corruption and public office poses a dilemma concerning whether a person can be considered corrupt outside the formal public institutional framework[29]. If the answer is negative, the definition would be too narrow, overlooking important corrupt practices outside the realm of the public sector. Still, if the answer to this is affirmative, this runs the risk of diluting the concept, and thus it becomes more complicated to define what it really entails.

Subsequently, a wave of scholars, including Dennis Thompson and Zephyr Teachout, started adopting an alternative institutional conception of corruption, transcending sectoral lines[30]. Within this institutional framework, Mark Philipp differentiates between individual and institutional corruption, depending on how much it is rooted in a given institution. The former refers to corrupt practices that benefit an official in their personal capacity, while institutional corruption is the type of corruption whose ramifications are gained by an actor in official/political capacity[31]. According to Thompson, institutional corruption describes the situation in which personal interests widely infiltrate decision-making circles. It is more invasive than individual corruption, since the collective arrangement of the political system in such case generally deviates from the norms of integrity[32]. Recognizing that corruption may, to different extents, stem from the organizational culture in an institution, be it public, hybrid, or private, allows for a more comprehensive, realistic, and context-sensitive understanding of the phenomenon.

Third, the question of universality is another source of vagueness pertaining to corruption. On the one hand, some researchers tend to believe in the universality of the definition of corruption in a globalized world. Meaning that they believe that although Western norms are the ones against which corrupt behaviour is practically defined, one can still apply the definition to non-Western societies. The logic here is that such norms are based on essentially universal virtues of morality, like justice and honesty[33]. On the contrary, other scholars tend to acknowledge the ethnocentric approach adopted by such writings. According to the particularistic/relativist view, "one society's corrupt practices might be another society's standard and accepted behaviour"[34]. Although declaring corruption invokes shared norms of integrity, whether social or political, the essence of such value remains contestable. "Normal duties" as specified by Nye might be differently perceived in different contexts, which results in identifiable differences among nations in how corruption is defined[35]. According to the renowned Political Scientist Arnold Heidenheimer's view, which was later supported by public opinion surveys, differences do not only exist across different cultures but may also exist within the same society among different social groups. Variation in perceived standards of acceptable behaviour can be vertical across classes, or horizonal across ethic groups and social segments[36]. In his view, corruption can be viewed as "black", "grey" or "white", depending on the extent of consensus over an action's tolerability[37].

This anthropological logic, emphasizing social constructivism, has led some researchers to investigate what corruption means in different contexts. Attempting to do so, Frank Rusciano has noted that in order to uncover the meaning of corruption, one must consider the variance in citizen power and service provision across different societies[38]. Accordingly, and regardless of the possible methodological limitations of Rusciano's work, it can be concluded that although corruption is a global phenomenon that is found nearly in every country, special appreciation should be granted to the local context[39]. This conclusion consequently rejects "one-size-fits-all" definitions and necessitates that researchers develop a concrete understanding of their relevant context.

Finally, the issue of legality versus morality in the identification of corruption is quite controversial. The positivist view holds that for an act to be considered corrupt; it must be prohibited by law. If it is not, it should not be considered as such, even if it remains unethical. Although sometimes legality and morality overlap, this is not always the case[40]. This might result in the prevalence of a phenomenon of "legal corruption", where morally corrupt acts are built into the institutional setting, becoming a political norm, only because they are not directly addressed by laws. For instance, corrupt procurement practices might fall under this category, where contracts are given to officials' family and friends. While such bids might still meet the minimal formal requirements, they might not be the best bids for the public interest. In such cases, law becomes "contentless", having little to offer in the fight against corruption[41].

On the other hand, an act might be considered unlawful and corrupt, but still necessary or morally sound. This is known as the "noble cause corruption" phenomenon[42]. Such case is evident in contexts of excessive poverty, prevalent discrimination, or repressive laws[43]. For instance, if someone bribes an official to refrain from torturing a detainee, this might be considered illegal, but it remains morally justified[44]. In this regard, some literature differentiates between "need" and "greed" corruption, implying variation in the major motivations behind the corrupt act, including morally justifiable ones in some cases[45].

Thus, it is imperative to recognize that "corrupt" and "illegal" cannot be used interchangeably, since "not all illegal transactions are corrupt, nor are all instances of corruption or bribery illegal"[46]. As such, it might be helpful for researchers to be mindful of this question and to consider the context while defining corruption for research purposes.

## B. Types of Corruption

The above discussion leads to enforcing our understanding of corruption as a multifaceted concept that may include different types and forms of illegal and immoral actions. Several researchers have attempted to identify these forms/types, hoping to elaborately and pragmatically define what constitutes corruption.

One key distinction often made by scholars is between petty and grand corruption, in other words "flies" and "tigers"[47]. The former refers to instances of minor corruption practices taking place in routine government transactions by middle and lowerlevel officials[48]. This is usually prevalent in societies where corrupt behaviour is widespread and generally tolerated. Examples of petty corruption include twisting rules for friends, extending official deadlines, or overlooking some transgressions. On the other hand, grand corruption refers to corruption incidents which involve high level politicians and state officials manipulating state instruments for personal gains, distorting policies and institutions. This is usually woven into the fabric of the business world, as well as the public-private sector relations. Examples of such behaviour include manipulations pertaining to major procurement deals, and investment projects[49]. Grand corruption is equally found in high and low corruption countries since it is less likely to come to the prosecutors' attention via formal reporting[50]. The prevalence of grand corruption might lead to a third and more severe type of corruption, referred to as 'state capture', indicating the undue illicit influence exercised by elites in shaping laws and policies of the state[51].

Apart from classifying corruption in terms of its graveness or severity, the kind of actions described as corrupt are numerous. Two broad categories of actions can be identified in this regard: extortive and collusive. The former refers to the situation in which an individual in a position of power uses threats or coercion to obtain illicit benefits, while collusive corruption refers to individuals or entities cooperating or conniving to achieve mutual gain through corrupt practices[52]. The literature commonly cites several forms for corruption in the literature falling under these broad categories. Thes include bribery, clientelism, cronyism/patronage, nepotism/favouritism, embezzlement, illicit enrichment, extortion, misappropriation, and fraud[53].

Despite scholars' efforts in identifying corruption types, most efforts are mainly example-focused, which leaves room for some practices that can hardly fit into any of the categories. Take for instance the type of corruption which the Harvard Law Professor Lawrence Lessig refers to as one major type of corruption in the United States; this involves legislators depending on donors for election campaigns, for which they later return in the form of interest favouring[54]. Similarly, cases of applying policy procedures incorrectly or assisting in a corrupt process; although not easily situated within one of the aforementioned types of corruption, these can still form fertile institutional grounds for corrupt practices[55].

Attempting to offer a more systematic and comprehensive taxonomy of the types of corruption, Adam Graycar has developed a types, activities, sectors, and places (TASP) framework. This framework is meant to capture the wide variety of corrupt practices, providing examples for each category. For instance, the different types of corruption include the offenses referred to above. Examples of activities that might involve corruption incorporate appointing personnel, procurement, delivering services, construction, licensing, regulation, issuing permits and administrating justice. As for the sectors in which corruption can take place, these range from construction, to health, energy, the legal system, and education, among others. The framework points out to the fact that the previous can take place on different levels, from workplaces, to localities, to countries[56]. This framework is arguably very effective in setting the roadmap for scholars to conceptualize corruption, through focusing on a narrow form of corruption in a defined context, while acknowledging the broader framework of the definition[57].

### C. Corruption Analysis Paradigms

An important part of understanding corruption is understanding its root causes and the factors attributable to it. It is worth noting though that arguing that an issue as complex as corruption has one cause would be both incomplete and inaccurate. Accordingly, one can identify at least three major paradigms for the analysis of corruption in the literature. As will be presented shortly, each of these paradigms has its drawbacks that are better addressed by another. Thus, a critical examination of these theories can give a better understanding of the phenomenon of corruption[58]. In light of this, the view that this paper adopts is that these are not entirely mutually exclusive or irreconcilable.

The economic paradigm, namely the principle-agent model, is perhaps one of the most widely cited theories in analysing corruption. The theory emphasises the role of three stakeholders:

the principal, the agent, and the client, all operating with a rational choice mentality seeking to maximize individual utility[59]. The agency problem arises mainly from the conflicts of interest between the principal and the agent, namely the government and the public officials respectively. Due to the powers delegated to the agent, he/she gains an informational advantage, and subsequently works for self-interest. The client provides an opportunity for the agent by consensually taking part in corrupt behaviour, to obtain certain goods or services[60].

The economic paradigm has been criticized for its narrow focus on corruption as conceptualized in economic terms. The excessive focus on the principle-agent model tends to have problems accounting for the environment in which this type of exchange happens[61]. Additionally, the analysis of corruption based on incentives and costs only tends to take values and preferences for granted in the behavioural equation, which makes this approach unable to explain the rationale behind why and under what circumstances do corruption patterns change[62]. Furthermore, in their attempt to outline a normative decision-marking theory in analysing individuals' decision to act corruptly, Manara et al. find that it is important to consider the possibility of unintentional corrupt behaviour, implying that corruption decision-making process can be rational or intuitive. In their study, some participants have reported being "not (fully) aware that their actions were illegal and could be considered corrupt. Consequently, they reported fewer personal goals or information search activities, and mostly did not actively decide to engage in the behaviour that was then later judged as corrupt as it was part of their everyday behaviour or because they blindly relied on the judgment of others"[63].

Addressing these issues, the behaviouralist approach presents itself as a wider and more comprehensive approach to understanding corruption. This approach conceptualizes corruption as one form of unethical human behaviour that harms institutions and societies[64]. Studies adopting the behaviouralist approach focus on the micro/individual level of analysis, employing either an experimental approach or a qualitative methodology on a limited number of individuals. As such, social psychological theories like the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) are relied on as useful general frameworks in the analysis of corruption. Here, attitudes, norms, and perceived behavioural control are considered key factors influencing an individual's intention to act, regardless of whether the act brings positive or negative effects, and regardless of the existence of an open opportunity[65]. Despite some common reservations on the methodological roadmap adopted by studies belonging to this approach, the results of such strand of research remains important in outlining the behavioural determinants of corruption[66].

This research trajectory paves the way for a deeper look into the second factor forming a major paradigm in the analysis of corruption, culture[67]. This perspective questions whether culture impacts an individual's intrinsic motivation to engage in corruption. Beyond just that, the paradigm questions if there is such thing as a "culture of corruption" in some countries, leading to prevalence of corruption in some contexts compared to others[68]. The role of culture in informing an individual's corrupt or non-corrupt behaviour is simply that it shapes "governing norms" or "professional standards", posing "moral costs" and "informal constraints" on peoples' relevant actions[69]. Some research has managed to provide empirical and experimental evidence suggesting that social values, norms, and beliefs, which are formed and internalized through education and socialization[70], play a role in an individual's proneness to act corruptly[71], concluding that corruption, at least in part, is arguably a cultural phenomenon.

Nevertheless, one should be cautious when assessing the cultural paradigm's findings, as some empirical findings suggest that prevalent norms do not necessarily align with actual behaviour. For instance, according to Evrensel and Sened's study covering data from ninety-eight countries, while an important cultural dimension like individual religiosity is associated with less justifiability of corruption, it still has an inverse relationship with control of corruption[72]. The cultural explanations of corruption have also been subject to the triviality objection, which stresses that all human behaviour is cultural in one way or another. The circularity objection is another major concern. This claims that the cultural paradigm draws a picture of a vicious circle, whereby attempting to explain why corruption is related to a culture, leads to arguing that this is because its members act corruptly[73]. Accordingly, one can argue that the cultural paradigm's explanatory powers, on its own, are pragmatically limited. Yet, it should not be completely ignored; as focusing on culture serves to practically highlight the particularities of the context being studied, correcting for a major flaw in the universality argument.

The neo-institutionalist approach introduces an additional aspect to analyse. It incorporates an evaluation of the institutional setting/framework which facilitates the use of discretionary powers, referred to earlier[74]. As claimed by criminological theories, motivation is not enough without opportunity for an illegal act to be committed[75]. Corruption is thus the result of both profit-maximizing behaviour and a power asymmetry opportunity structure[76]. In Klitgaard's view, *"Corruption (C) = Monopoly Power (M) + Discretion (D) – Accountability (A)*[77]". The UNDP has added two more variables to this equation, highlighting the absence of transparency and integrity, in addition to accountability, as the main ingredients of corruption[78]. Thus, according to the neo-institutionalist perspective, corruption can be explained via an analysis of the institution’s political/administrative/legal internal mechanisms and their impact on individuals’ belief systems[79].

Some in-depth reflection would reveal that neo-institutionalists do not entirely contradict the view of the proponents of the cultural paradigm; since both recognize the role of informal norms governing corruption as a human behaviour, which strongly opposes the classical economic model. Although differences in the unit of analysis and the extent of the impact of culture on corruption remain key points of divergence, one can arguably claim that the change mechanisms that the neo-institutionalist and the cultural paradigms call for complement one another, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and how to deal with it.

## Conclusion

After reviewing key conceptual and theoretical contributions to defining and analysing corruption, the following key conclusions can be drawn. First, corruption arguably qualifies as an essentially contested concept. Its definition is faced with various challenges, ranging from whether it is an exclusively economic issue, whether it is only a public-sector related phenomenon, whether it can be universally defined and finally whether it is considered a legal or moral question, or both. Adding to the complexity of conceptualizing corruption are the various types and forms it can take, covering a wide range of practices from consensual to deceptive to coercive ones. These conceptual debates and dilemmas have undoubtedly extended their influence, resulting in competing analysis paradigms, which theoretically attribute corruption to different reasons and roots, from economic to behavioural/cultural to institutional ones.

Assessing the different relevant arguments presented above leads one acknowledge the wide scope of the phenomenon, which necessitates that future research and policy interventions specify their own conceptual boundaries, guided by the disciplinary orientation of the research or the scope of the public policy being introduced. Moreover, an important note to conclude with is that the multiplicity of available theoretical paradigms, supported by different types of evidence, leads to a key insight, namely that "a better understanding of corruption appears to call for an interdisciplinary approach"[80]. This approach must draw on the different theoretical paradigms as well as the different contributions from social sciences in analysing corruption. This approach helps provide a more realistic analysis of the problem and thus a more comprehensive guidance on the mechanisms of change.

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