

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships: A study from Vietnamese public officials

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Abstract

Studies of bribery have not adequately considered individual psychological processes in the development of bribery-prone relationships. We propose an integration of moral disengagement and the norm of reciprocity as a theoretical lens to explain the evolution of bribery-prone relationships. Based on qualitative data from a sample of government officials in Vietnam, we found that public officials normally go through a “calculative judgment”, experience a certain level of emotional discomfort and then use rationalization strategies to decide whether to engage in a bribery-prone exchange or relationship. Furthermore, these psychological processes are distinctive in the initiation and perpetuation stages of a bribery-prone relationship. The study suggests that interactions of the norm of reciprocity and wider ethical norms in governing bribery should be further addressed by both researchers and practitioners.

KEYWORDS

bribes, corruption, moral disengagement, norm of reciprocity, Vietnam

1 | INTRODUCTION

Bribes to public officials in emerging economies have attracted considerable research interests (Fernando & Bandara, 2020; Fisman & Miguel, 2007; Svensson, 2003). These bribes are generally defined as an informal payment a person/firm made to public officials to fulfill a request or to exchange for an illegal/immoral favor (Gillespie et al., 2020; Malesky et al., 2020). Scholars have mostly employed rent-seeking and social norm perspectives to explain the initiation and perpetuation of bribery. According to the rent-seeking perspective (Rose-Ackerman, 1978; Shleifer & Vishny, 1993; Svensson, 2003), parties can actively engage in bribery with an expectation of abnormal rents. Regulation loopholes, monitoring shortages, and government officials' discretions contribute to the rise of bribes (Aidt, 2009; Dreher & Gassebner, 2013; Fisman & Golden, 2017; Khan, 2006; Rose-Ackerman, 1978). The social norm perspective, on the other hand, suggests that parties commit to bribery acts to adhere to the norms of corruption in the environment

(Dong et al., 2012; Uhlenbruck et al., 2006; Venard, 2009). Here, engagements in bribery are for survival rather than efficiency.

While providing important insights, the literature of bribery suffers from several shortcomings. First, existing studies commonly treat each bribe as independent from other exchanges between the bribe-giver and receiver. Yet, there are evidences that corrupt government officials and businesses often build their relationships in which bribery exchanges are related to and/or built upon legal ones (Gillespie et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2016; Zhan, 2012). By treating a bribery act as independent from other exchanges, existing studies leave the evolution of bribery-prone relationships underexamined. A bribery-prone relationship refers to a relationship between a government official and another party in which bribery acts may mingle with legal/moral exchanges. A bribery-prone relationship differs from normal relationships in its potential to improperly influence the performance of the official's duties and responsibilities. The parties engage in a bribery-prone relationship not only for personal gains from bribery exchanges. They may do so also to

respond to their own sense of obligation and/or emotional attachment with each other (de Jong et al., 2015; Köbis et al., 2017; Zhan, 2012). Studying bribery-prone relationships would contribute insights on why and how bribery persists despite much effort in improving regulatory environment (Khan, 2006).

Second, the literature has largely focused on external, non-individual conditions for bribes, including political regime (Diaby & Sylwester, 2015; Goel et al., 2012; Ivy, 2013), regulations (Dal Bó, 2006; Khan, 2006; Rose-Ackerman, 1978), competitions (Alexeev & Song, 2013; Diaby & Sylwester, 2015; Malesky et al., 2020), social norms (Fisman & Miguel, 2007; Nguyen et al., 2016; Vuong et al., 2020), and/or organizational settings (Collins et al., 2009; De Jong et al., 2012; Pinto et al., 2008). While the role of agents in interpreting and translating external pressures into practices has been well acknowledged (Scott, 2014; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008), individual psychological processes leading to bribery acts have rarely been examined in the literature (Fernando & Bandara, 2020; Gebel, 2012; Moore, 2008; Smith-Crowe & Warren, 2014). Without accounting for these individual psychological processes in theorizing corruption, we are left with the puzzle of how a person perceives and justifies for his/her engagement in corrupt acts.

The social cognitive theory of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999, 2016; Hindriks, 2015; Johnson & Buckley, 2015) and norm of reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960) provide some insights on the initiation and perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships. The moral disengagement framework proposes that individuals may utilize cognitive mechanisms to disengage their moral self-sanctions to ease themselves into committing corruption acts. Thus, an official may experience a state of emotional discomfort and employ some sort of rationalization strategies to justify for their corrupt (Bandura, 1999; Kominis & Dudau, 2018; Marquette, 2012). However, it has not been clear how these psychological processes, that is, emotional discomfort and rationalization, facilitate the evolution of a bribery-prone relationship and whether these processes change at different stages of the relationship. The norm of reciprocity, on the other hand, focuses on the formation and continuity in dyadic relationship of two parties. When one party extends a favor, it generates a sense of obligation for the receiving party to repay (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). In this view, obligation to repay could be a rationalization strategy an official used to continue a bribery-prone relationship. We argue that an integration of the two frameworks could shed lights on the initiation and perpetuation of a bribery-prone relationship. However, empirical inquiries on these issues are non-existent.

This paper addresses these issues by examining how bribery-prone relationships that involve government officials in Vietnam are initiated and perpetuated. Specifically, we ask two questions, including (1) What psychological processes does an official experience when she/he is offered a bribery-prone favor (e.g., gift)? (2) How do these psychological processes facilitate the evolution of a bribery-prone relationship? We shift the focus from determinants of discrete, independent bribery acts to the initiation and perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships. This shift is important since, as we have argued, a bribery act is normally embedded in a relationship

which involves a series of legal and illegal exchanges. Furthermore, our focus on individual official's psychological processes is important because government officials, like business managers, can exert the greatest degree of volitional control over their own actions (Whitener et al., 1998). Vietnam is a highly relevant context for studying this topic since the country suffers from a high level of corruption (Malesky et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2017; Vian et al., 2012). In addition, personal relationship has a strong cultural root and is widely practiced in both private and public sectors (De Jong et al., 2012; Gillespie et al., 2020; Le & Nguyen, 2009). We conducted 56 interviews with government officials on this topic to shed lights to the questions. Our data from government officials, as potential bribe-receivers, offer a unique complement to existing empirical evidence that has relied mostly on data from potential bribe-givers, for example, businesses and citizens.

We first present moral disengagement and the norm of reciprocity as two theoretical foundations of the initiation and perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships. We then describe research methodology. In the Findings section we present our process model of bribery-prone relationship evolution and map it onto two stages based on the data from a sample of Vietnamese officials. Our discussion of theoretical and practical implications concludes the paper.

2 | MORAL DISENGAGEMENT AND THE NORM OF RECIPROCITY IN BRIBERY-PRONE RELATIONSHIPS

2.1 | Moral disengagement

The theory of moral disengagement explains why certain people are able to commit inhumane conduct without apparent distress (Bandura, 1999, 2016; Bersoff, 1999; Hindriks, 2015; Johnson & Buckley, 2015). The theory assumes that people, including criminal and corrupt ones, do not want to see themselves as criminal (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Cressey, 1953). Furthermore, even individuals engaged in corrupt acts tend to not abandon the values that society espoused, that is, they continue to value fairness, honesty, integrity and so forth (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Thus, when engaging in inhumane behaviors, people apply some moral disengagement mechanisms to justify for their behaviors.

In his work on social cognitive theory, Bandura (1999, 2016) places moral self within a broader social cognitive self. This socio-cognitive system is governed by self-organizing, proactive, self-reflective, and self-regulative mechanisms. Within this social-cognitive system, an individual exercises moral reasoning for their actions through mechanisms rooted in moral standards. Individuals with high levels of moral disengagement frequently use cognitive mechanisms that nullify the self-regulatory processes which govern moral behavior.

Bandura (1999) proposed eight moral disengagement mechanisms, which are categorized into behavioral, agency, outcome, and victim (Table 1). These mechanisms share significant overlaps with

TABLE 1 Moral disengagement mechanisms (based on Bandura, 1999)

Loci	Mechanism	Definition
Behavioral	<i>Moral justification</i>	Immoral conduct is justified as being acceptable by the perpetrator as serves social or moral purpose
	<i>Euphemistic labelling</i>	The use of language to verbally sanitize the immoral conduct, making it seem respectable
	<i>Advantageous comparison</i>	Compare immoral conduct against perceivably worse conduct to make the immoral conduct more acceptable
Agency	<i>Displacement of responsibility</i>	Perpetrators stress that they are not responsible for immoral conduct and attribute to other people or factors
	<i>Diffusion of responsibility</i>	The perpetrator argue that he/she does not feel personally liable for that conduct
Outcomes	<i>Disregard or distortion of consequences</i>	Perpetrators choose to ignore the harm they have caused, point out to others that the harm is less serious than it actually is, or argue that they have not caused harm
Victim	<i>Dehumanization</i>	Perpetrator justifying the victim as being worthy of harm or of being less human than others
	<i>Attribution of blame</i>	Perpetrators seek to blame others for the immoral conduct

previous concepts of rationalization (Cressey, 1953) and neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957).

The work on moral disengagement has been used to explain political and military violence (Bandura, 1999) and organizational behavior, such as workplace harassment (Claybourn, 2011), counterproductive work behaviors (Fida et al., 2015; Samnani et al., 2014), and unethical decisions (Baron et al., 2015), among others. Several scholars have employed moral disengagement to explain organizational corruption (Kominis & Dudau, 2018; Marquette, 2012; Moore, 2008; Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Kominis and Dudau (2018) argue the unconscious rationalization processes that groups engage in are activated when facing cognitive dissonance from corrupt acts. Based on three cases, the authors found that facing with collective corrupt acts, actors tend to change cognition instead of behaviors and project blame on their leaders while continuing practices of corruption. Moore (2008) employs moral disengagement to explain the initiation and perpetuation of collective corruption. The author argues that moral disengagement helps ease and expedite the initiation of corrupt acts and facilitate the spread of organizational corruption.

These insightful studies on moral disengagement and corruption, nevertheless, remain either theoretical (Moore, 2008) or exploratory (Kominis & Dudau, 2018; Marquette, 2012). Most of previous works have explained how actors justify their discrete corrupt acts, leaving the evolvement of bribery-prone relationships unexplored. As social exchanges generate a sense of obligation (Gouldner, 1960), the nature of rationalization for development of a bribery-prone relationship may differ from those for discrete corrupt acts. Besides, the works on moral disengagement and corruption tend to assume that an actor uses some rationalization strategies every time he/she engages in a corrupt act. This assumption may not hold for the exchanges between long-term partners in a bribery-prone relationship. We turn to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960), specifically the norm of reciprocity, for more insights about these issues.

2.2 | The norm of reciprocity

The norm of reciprocity refers to a set of social rules regarding a relationship in which a party initiates a favor to another party obligates the latter to return. Gouldner (1960) originally conceptualized the norm of reciprocity in dyadic exchanges which involve initiation of favor, return of favor, and formation of the relationship between the two parties. At the minimum, the norm of reciprocity states that “(1) people should help those who have helped them, and (2) people should not injure those who have helped them” (Gouldner, 1960, p. 171). Gouldner (1960) emphasized three features of the norm of reciprocity. First, both sides have rights and duties to exchange favors. Once a party initiates a favor, the other party has an obligation to return. Second, the initiated and returned favors need not to be specific in their forms and values. Instead, it is the general obligation to repay benefits that constitutes the norm of reciprocity. Third, the exchange of favors is “perpetuating,” such that it is self-reinforcing or even escalating to higher levels. Over time, the obligation to return favor is internalized and becomes a moral norm governing the relationship of the two parties. Gouldner (1960) believed that the norm of reciprocity pervades almost all types of interpersonal relationships, maintains social stability, and is universal across cultures.

The norm of reciprocity, by itself, does not exclude illegal or immoral payments (Bello, 2014; Tangpong et al., 2016; Wang, 2016). This opens opportunities for bribery exchanges to be governed by the norm of reciprocity. From the view of reciprocity norm, a bribe is given to create an obligation to repay which may or may not be realized in specified times and values. The norm of reciprocity emphasizes several aspects in bribery exchanges. First, a bribe is paid not necessarily for a specific return. Instead, it can be given to generate a sense of “obligation” or “social indebtedness” which induces future repayments (Steidlmeier, 1999; Tangpong et al., 2016; Wang, 2016). Second, the returned favors could be unspecified in terms of timing, forms, and values. These elements depend largely on the presence of opportunities in which the public official could grant

to the briber within his/her authority and discretion. There would be hardly any case where the repayment is perceived by both sides as equal in value to the initial payment. This imbalance in values leaves some obligation outstanding and initiates a series of interactions between the actors.

The conformity to the norm of reciprocity and general status duties becomes troublesome when illegal/immoral payments are involved. An official may be under pressure to make illegal/immoral favor to a business partner, conforming to the norm of reciprocity. However, in doing so, the official would violate his/her role expectations and ethical standards in his/her status duties. The official then experiences some emotional discomfort and needs some rationalization strategies to engage in the bribery exchange. Conforming to the norm of reciprocity can possibly be used as rationalization. However, we are not aware of a study that integrates moral disengagement and the norm of reciprocity to explain the evolution of bribery-prone relationships. In subsequent sections we describe our methodologies and findings on how these theoretical perspectives explain bribery-prone relationships in Vietnam.

3 | METHODOLOGIES

3.1 | Research design

Our study requires in-depth inquiries on feelings and thought processes of public officials in coping with bribery. The exploratory and sensitive nature of the study called for qualitative methodology that allows interpretive and naturalistic approach to subjects and phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative approach is effective in revealing informants' meaning constructions (Gillespie et al., 2020) and values (Vu, 2019) relating to bribery. This approach is chosen for this study as it allows us to probe into public officials' assumption, viewpoints, and emotions in the evolution of bribery-prone relationships. Qualitative approach also allows us to mobilize personal relationships and foster some sense of trust with informants which increased the richness and reliability of the data.

3.2 | Sample

The informants were public officials at both central and local levels. With endorsement from some high-ranked officials (i.e., Department Head General) from Government Inspectorate, we directly contacted officials at five ministries and 10 provinces, briefed them on the nature of the research, and requested for interviews. Fifty-six interviews were conducted in the period of April to December 2018. These interviewees are officials working in different fields, such as planning, science and technology, natural resources and environment, healthcare, construction, and education. This sample provides a relatively robust cross section of public officials within the constraints of conducting primary research on bribery in Vietnam.

3.3 | Interview procedure

The research team opened the discussions by explaining the objectives and ensuring a complete confidentiality of the discussions. Endorsement from reputable third parties and an assurance of confidentiality fostered trust and encouraged informants to participate in this sensitive topic. The interviews were semi-structured with mostly open-ended questions. The first section contained questions on the informants' experiences of the prevalence and nature of favor exchanges in their working environment. Participants were probed about situations in which government officials involved in favor exchanges which may interfere with their decisions at work. We encouraged participants to talk about exchanges in continued relationships. The second section focused on various forms and timing of the "favors." Participants were encouraged to give examples of different situations in order to better "flesh out" the answers given on the nature of the exchanges. The third section focused on participants' explanations and/or perceptions of psychological process generated by favor exchanges in their working environment. Participants were asked to describe how an official would feel when she/he encounters requests for favor exchanges and how their feelings may intervene their decision-making. During the interviews, questions were carefully worded to avoid sensitivity and encourage participants to share their experiences. For examples, we avoided the words "bribery" and used more descriptive words, such as "personal favor", or "offers." Similarly, we used phrases as "do people in similar work settings of yours" rather than "do you," or "describe a recent favor-exchange situation you know clearly" rather than "describe a recent favor-exchange situation you were involved in," to avoid implicating the respondents in any wrongdoing.

3.4 | Data analysis

The data was transcribed close to verbatim within 24 h of the interviews. For forms of favors and psychological processes, we regularly discussed the emerging codes and compared with existing constructs in norm of reciprocity, moral disengagement, and bribery literature. We agreed on the coding schemes and coded the data independently. We first categorize the forms and motivation of initial offers to government officials. Two forms, that is, monetary/material and non-material, and three motivations, that is, bribery transaction, investment on relationships, and social exchange, emerged from the data. The official's judgment of risks/benefits emerged where benefits came mostly from the relationship, while important risks were legal (being detected and prosecuted) and relational (partner's opportunism, and/or resentment). Next, we explore emotional discomfort an official may experience when someone offers him/her a favor (e.g., "gift") at work. The data suggested that emotional discomfort comes from conflicting feelings. Some certain feeling encourages the official to accept the offer, including "desire for personal gain," "needs to fit in," "obligation to payback," "shy or lack of confidence when in debt," or "superiority in granting favors to others".

By contrast, some other feeling may at the same time prevent the official from engaging in the exchange. These include "guilt," "shame," "conscience-stricken," "conflict of interest," "fear of being betrayed," "sense of losing control" (Table 2).

Next, we coded how the officials overcome or rationalize when experiencing emotional discomfort. Some existing rationalization strategies in the literature matched well with the data. These

strategies are "using euphemistic languages" (e.g., gifts), "denying harm", and "denying responsibility". In addition, some new rationalization strategies emerged from the data. These include "beneficiary specificity" and "evaluation subjectivity" (Table 2).

Finally, we categorized data by stage of a relationships, that is, initiation, perpetuation, and collusion. As the data on collusion stage was sparse, we merged them with perpetuation. Thus, we could

TABLE 2 Coding scheme

Concepts	Definition	Examples
Stage of bribery-prone relationship		
Initiation	The offered favors are from a new partner	- New business managers - New subordinates
Perpetuation	The exchanges of favors are from a known partner who had offered favors to the official before	- Business in the area who have been working with the official for some time
Calculative judgment		
Benefits/opportunities	Potential [bribery] benefits a relationship would bring in to the official	- Monetary or material benefits - Intangible benefits: Fit in with a network of other officials/businesses; sextortion
Legal risk	The risk of being detected and prosecuted	- A bribe is detected and prosecuted
Relational risks	The risk of being betrayed by the partner	- Partner's resentment due to dissatisfaction in the relationship
Emotional discomfort		
Desire for personal gains	The desire to accept the offers for personal gains	- Offers could be money, material gifts, or other forms
Need to fit in	The need to fit in with other groups for personal gains	- Fit in with business group for more opportunities - Fit in with a network of colleagues in the government sector for career advancement
Sense of guilt	Feeling guilty (to him/herself) when breaching personal/professional moral standards	
Sense of shame	Feeling shame (to others) when breaching personal/professional moral standards	
Uncertainty of offeror's benevolence	Unsure if the offeror would betray or do harm to the official	The offeror may report or leak information of the illegal exchanges between the two
Obligation	The sense of being in debt to the offeror	
Sense of losing control	The fear that the official may lose control of his/her career due to the bribery-prone relationships	The official's secret bribery exchanges may be known to people in the networks
Rationalization strategies		
Euphemistic languages	The actors use language to verbally sanitize the immoral conduct, making it seem respectable	Gifts, favors, helps are used for "bribes"
Denying the harm	The actors ignore the harm they have caused, point out to others that the harm is less serious than it actually is, or argue that they have not caused harm	The actors explain the "gifts" are small or the gifts are given after the favor is returned, so no harm is done
Denying responsibility	The actors explain that they are not responsible for immoral conduct	The official believes that the partner persistently and voluntarily gives the "gifts", so he/she is not responsible for the gift-giving.
Beneficiary specificity	The actors justify that helping specific groups of people is better than contributing to general society	
Evaluation subjectivity	The actors explain that all evaluation is subjective and dependent on the evaluator's viewpoints	

compare emotional discomfort and rationalization strategies government officials experience at different stages of bribery-prone relationships.

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | A process model of bribery-prone relationship evolution

We develop a model that explains how an official rationalizes to overcome emotional discomfort at the initiation and perpetuation stages of a bribery-prone relationship (see Figure 1). While the psychological processes may be similar for both favor-giver and receiver, we focus on those of public officials as the favor-receiver.

At the initiation stage, our data shows that opportunity and motivation are necessary but not sufficient for an official to engage in a bribery-prone exchange. Facing an offer to start a new bribery-prone relationship, the official goes through a “calculative judgment” in which he/she weighs benefits/opportunities against risks with incomplete and uncertain information. While opportunities/benefits come mainly from institutional voids, risks are rooted at the offeror’s benevolence and expectation. The offeror’s efforts in building relationship and mitigating the risks for the official strongly influence the official’s judgment. In this “calculative judgment,” whether to accept a bribery-prone offer does not only

involve an issue as to what is offered but also as to who offers it, and how.

If the relationship is judged to be beneficial, the official then experiences some emotional discomfort. On the one hand, the attractiveness of an “offer” and the pressure to fit in with a wider [corrupt] political and businesses network encourage the official to accept the “offer”. On the other hand, a feeling of guilt and a sense of uncertainty about the favor-giver’s benevolence and expectation discourage the official to accept the bribe. These conflicting psychological processes creates an emotional discomfort for the official. The official may be tempted to accept the bribe, and yet do not want to see him/herself as corrupt.

The emotional discomfort triggers an attempt to rationalize for the exchange to be morally acceptable. The official will commit to the bribery-prone act only if s/he is satisfied with her/his rationalization. Our study reveals common forms of rationalization for corrupt acts, including using euphemistic languages and denying responsibility.

The acceptance of a “favor” at the initiation stage triggers an obligation to return the favor and moves the relationship to the perpetuation stage. In this stage, the official’s “calculative judgment” mainly focuses on the risks of the partner’s resentment which comes from a dissatisfaction with the official’s returned favors (expectation mismatch) and/or loses in competitions with other partners for the same favors from the official (internal competition). The partner’s resentment may cause uncooperative actions that harm the relationship and/or the official’s career. The official’s decision to continue

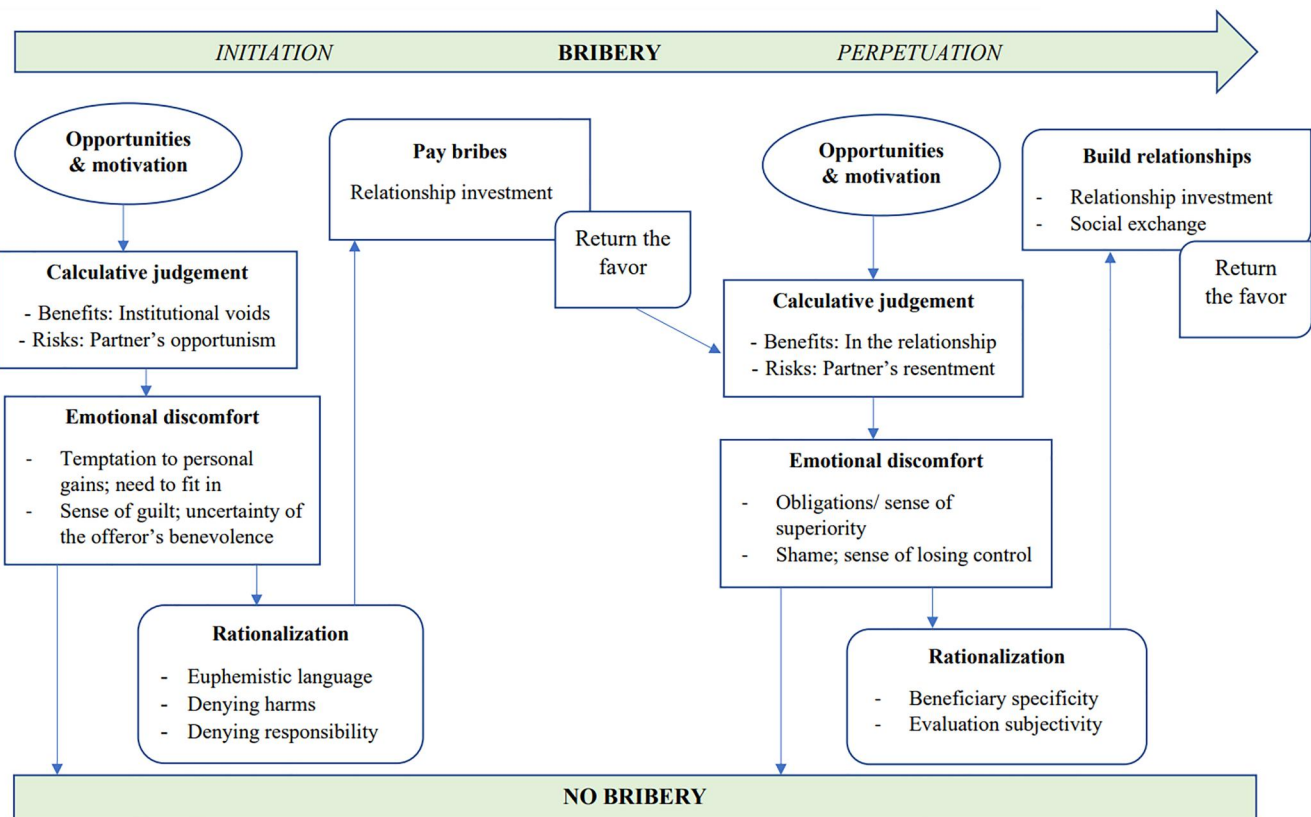


FIGURE 1 Process model of the initiation and perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

the bribery-prone relationship depends largely on his/her perceived ability to manage these risks.

Continuing the relationship, the official experiences a new round of emotional discomfort. On the one hand, the sense of obligation (if under-returned the favor) or superiority (if over-returned the favor) encourages the official to continue the bribery-prone relationship that has started. On the other hand, a feeling of guilt by breaching professional moral values and a worry of losing control hinder the continuity of the relationship.

Similar to the initiation stage, the conflicting emotions induce a rationalization for continuity of the relationship. An awareness of the norm of reciprocity is important but not sufficient. The official has to justify that adhering to the norm of reciprocity is more desirable than keeping the professional moral values. Two frequently used rationalization strategies include “beneficiary specificity” and “evaluation subjectivity”. “Beneficiary specificity” means that helping specific subject(s) [briber's groups] is better than striving to contribute to the “society.” “Evaluation subjectivity” rationalizes that the links between favors and returned favors are blurred, and thus “good” or “bad” depends on people's perception. The continuity of the relationship depends in part on whether the official is satisfied with their rationalization.

In the perpetuation stage, the parties engage in a series of exchanges, where illegal/immoral exchanges are embedded with legal/normal ones. Genuine “offers” (e.g., as expression of gratitude,

benevolence, friendships) mingle with bribery “offers” (i.e., those with expectations of returns of illegal/immoral favors). Opportunities are not only proposed by the bribe-giver, but are also suggested by the officials. The actors may not wait for bribery opportunities to emerge; they could actively create some. Over time, both sides may feel some emotional attachment. Gradually, rationalization may no longer be needed to continue their bribery-prone relationships. The actors identify with each other and collude in sustaining their bribery-prone relationships.

To illustrate the dynamics of process model, we map it onto two distinct stages of bribery-prone relationships. Table 3 summarizes the elements of psychological processes at the stages. We discuss these elements of each stage in return.

4.2 | Affective processes in the initiation of bribery-prone relationships

4.2.1 | “Calculative judgment” in entering bribery-prone relationships:

When a partner wants to start a new bribery-prone relationship, that is, offering a favor, the official experiences a process of “calculative judgment.” In this “calculative judgment”, the official has to weigh potential benefits and risks of the relationship based on incomplete

TABLE 3 Government officials' psychological processes at different stages of bribery-prone relationships

	Initiation stage	Perpetuation stage
Form and purposes of offered favors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Purposes: (1) initiation of bribery transactions; (2) investment in bribery-prone relationships (for future benefits) - Forms: Monetary and/or material forms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Purposes: (1) investment in bribery-prone relationships (for future benefits); (2) social bribery exchange - Forms: Monetary, material forms and non-monetary/ material forms
Risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The official may not be sure of the offeror's benevolence and expectation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Uncertainty of the partner's expectation (forms, values, and timing of returned favors) - Unsure of his/her own authority to return the expected favors - Partner's resentment from dissatisfaction with the relationship
Emotional discomfort	<p>The emotional discomfort is rooted at the conflict between two feelings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The temptation to accept the offers and the need to fit in with wider network of businesses and public officials - The sense of guilt of breaching professional values; conflict of interest and the uncertainty of the offeror's benevolence 	<p>The emotional discomfort is rooted at the conflict between two feelings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The obligation to return favors or the sense of superiority (if the returned favors exceed the initial favors in values) - Shame and/or a sense of losing control
Rationalization strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Euphemistic language, e.g., gifts, favors, helps - Denying the harm: e.g., just small gifts - Denying responsibility: The offers were voluntary; there was no better choice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Beneficiary specificity: Helping specific people/groups is better than serving general, abstract entities, such as “society” - Evaluation subjectivity: The links between initial offers and returned favors are blurred, and thus any moral evaluation is subjective

and uncertain information. On the one hand, benefits/opportunities for [bribery] exchanges were rooted mostly at the regulation loopholes, weak enforcement, and a cash economy. For examples, the tendering law could not inhibit a government official collude with a bidder in designing the bids to fit with the bidder's capacity. Similarly, the underdeveloped e-government system could not keep track of real estate prices at different locations, opening an opportunity for local officials to assign favorable prices to their [bribery] partners.

On the other hand, the risks were mainly about the offeror's benevolence and/or expectation as well as legal sanction. As one informant commended, the favor "could be a trap", and "you may not know what they [offerors] expect." The informants explained two common ways to judge whether the risks are acceptable. First, the offeror's attributes, such as his/her reputation in the network, endorsement from a third party, especially from high-rank officials, or even "a look of honesty" would reduce the perception of risks. However, these pieces of information were often incomplete and highly equivocal. Second, the official judged whether the offer-giving methods are legally defensible. Bribes, even disguised in such euphemistical names as "gifts" or "favors," were rarely accepted at this stage. "You cannot just offer a valuable gift and expect a return of favor early in the relationship"—said an informant. Instead, the official often appreciated the offeror's effort in building the relationship and considering the official's safety. Thus, "offers" were often presented as an investment for future bribery exchanges. The offers could be named as "gifts", "expression of sentiment" (*the hien tinh cam*), "as an introduction" (*de ra mat*). Some offers were carefully designed, such as subtly making the official win a golf contest's prize or hosting a worship trip for the official's wife. These "artful" efforts drove the official's "calculative judgment" more toward accepting the offers. This type of "offers" has unspecified returned favors in forms, timing, and even values, blurring the link between the given gifts and returned favors.

4.2.2 | Emotional discomfort and rationalization strategies

The official then experiences some emotional discomfort that comes from conflicting moral processes and feelings. On the one hand, the temptation of receiving valuable offers could be strong, especially in low-salary jobs. There is also a need to fit in within a larger network of businesses and public officials who already engaged in corrupt acts.

You refuse their offers, you do not fit in with the network. Can you advance at work? [An official in Thai Binh]

On the other hand, our informants acknowledged some sense of guilt in breaching professional moral values. Some officials may experience a feeling of "conscience-stricken" or being "looked down" when receiving the bribery-risk favor. Even if the returned favor is not immediate, the "offer" still causes potential conflict of interests.

In addition, there is a fear of being trapped or betrayed by the giver if illegal exchanges are implied. This mix of feelings creates a state of emotional discomfort, calling for some rationalization if the official wants to accept the favor.

The data show that public officials often engage in some rationalization strategies to justify for their acceptance of bribes. The first and most common strategy is using euphemistic language to disguise the corrupt nature of the exchange. "Gifts" are used for bribes, "favors" or "helps" are used for the official's returned favors, and "sentiment" is used to describe bribery-prone relationships, among others. Some actors went further to present his/her material "offer", for example, a decorative plant, as a "trading good", that is, "sold" to the official with a small fraction of the market price.

The second strategy is denying the harm of bribery-prone exchanges. Common justifications include "the gifts are small, no harm is done" or "this is just an expression of friendship". Some even went further to explain that "If the gifts [bribes] were presented after the favor had been granted by the official, they are simply a 'thank you' gift". Some officials may convince themselves that "this is a personal gift, which does not relate to work at all."

Finally, denying responsibility is another rationalization strategy that emerges from our data. One way to deny is to shift the responsibility to the favor-offeror. Some respondents suggested if the official does not ask for the gifts, then the gifts should not be seen as problematic. There were many situations where the partners, for example, businesses, "persistently" and "voluntarily" gave gifts to the officials. Turning the gifts down may "hurt the gift-givers' feeling and/or make them worried".

Another way for an official to deny responsibility is to convince him/herself that "there is no better choice". Several lines of justifications follow this strategy, including "Everyone does it", "You need to survive in order to do good things", or "The salary is too low. Public officials also need to feed the family."

According to the respondents, the need to rationalize often emerges in new relationships. However, this need is less intense for those officials who have already engaged in bribery exchanges before. As one respondent acknowledged, "people may feel uneasy at first, but after several times, they get used to it [accepting favors or gifts with a potential conflict of interests]". However, when they enter a new relationship, the uncertainty of the partners' expectations and benevolence remains, retaining a need for rationalization.

4.3 | Affective processes in the perpetuation stage of bribery relationships

4.3.1 | "Calculative judgment" after entering bribery-prone relationships:

Our data suggests that offered favors play two roles in facilitating the perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships. First, the "offers" continue to be as investments in the relationships. As the

relationships evolve, the “offers” can be extended at different time, in many different forms, to different recipients, such as family members. As an informant acknowledged, “a firm may ‘feed’ [nuoi] an official for 5 years before getting a contract”. The series of extended offers gradually builds a mutual understanding that at some point, the official would return some favor(s).

Second, the “offers” can be used as bribery-prone social exchanges. In this role, the offers are disguised under social interactions rather than material/financial exchanges. The offerors could spend time and resources to help the official achieve his/her objectives, such as to get promoted. In other cases, the offerors spent time and resources to take care of the official's family members or the loved ones as a “make-up” for the official's busy schedule. Finally, the offerors could sacrifice their dignity or reputation to help the official. The offerors could conduct dirty works for the official, such as bribing others or using underworld forces for the official's purposes. Sex-tortion is another “offer” in this category.

Despite a closer relationship with the partner, the official still has to go through some “calculative judgment” process. First, there may be some expectation mismatches between the official and his/her partner on returned favor(s). As one respondent believed, “they [the partner] may expect too much”. Second, there may be internal competitions within the network of the official's [bribery] partners. This often happened when several business partners wanted the same contract, or several subordinates wanted the same promotion. “They are your ‘close partners’. They all want it [contract or promotion]. Who would you support? It is a headache!”, a respondent discussed. Both unmatched expectations and losses in internal competitions could make the partner feel resentment against the official.

4.3.2 | Emotional discomfort and rationalization strategies

In the perpetuation stage, the official continues experiencing some emotional discomfort. On the one hand, accepting the offers generates some sense of obligation or indebtedness. The sense of obligation persists if the official believes his returned favor has lower value than the gift(s) he/she accepted. This leads to a feeling of being “shy” or “lack of confidence” when interacting with the partner. If the official believes he/she over-returned the favor(s), he/she may have a feeling of superiority in “conferring” favors to some other person(s). In the later situation, some new “offers” may be expected by the official. These emotions, either indebtedness or superiority, encourage the official to continue the bribery-prone relationship. On the other hand, a feeling of shame may emerge from breaching professional values of the public official. Besides, the respondents mentioned a feeling of “losing control” after engaging in the bribery-prone relationship. Committing in some irregular exchanges, the official's secrets become known to the other party who may jeopardize his/her career. The official may feel that she/he would become a part

of a bribery “machine” which is harder to withdraw as the relationship evolves. These uneasy feelings induce the official to exit the bribery-prone relationship. These conflicting psychological processes create an emotional discomfort, which in turn triggers a need for rationalization.

“He [a businessman] frequently visits the official's mother. One day, the mother told the official that ‘He takes better care of me than you do. Last week, if he was not here to get me to the emergency, I may be gone’. That is a big debt!” [an official in Thai Binh province]

Our data suggest that the norm of reciprocity is important but not sufficient to rationalize for continuing the bribery-prone relationship. There are professional moral values that inhibit the official from engaging in bribery exchanges. The official needs to justify that adhering to the norm of reciprocity either overpowers to or does not compromise his/her professional moral values. The first rationalization strategy is “beneficiary specificity”, that is, to prioritize helping people in close networks while devalue the contribution to the general society. Some officials believed that they were doing a good thing by [illegally] helping a company or a group of people to survive. To them, “the ‘society’ is an abstract concept” while “these people [bribe-giver's organizations] are flesh and blood”. According to this strategy, doing good for a specific group of people justifies for a violation of “general and vague” professional values that protect “distant and abstract” entity, such as “the society”.

The second strategy is to emphasize the subjectivity in evaluation of bribery-prone relationships, that is, “evaluation subjectivity”. Some respondents suggested that there is rarely a direct link between initial and returned favors since they are given in different forms, at different times, with inequivalent values. Sometimes the favors are not even offered to the official but to his/her close ones. . . “*There is rarely black or white. Good or bad are in the eyes of beholder*”—commented by a local official.

Over time, the two parties may develop trust and emotional bonding with each other. The official may proactively create opportunities for their exchanges. At that level of relationship development, the need for rationalization almost disappears.

5 | DISCUSSION

Before going to the paper's implications, readers should be cautioned of several limitations. First, we relied on self-reported ideas, examples, and stories of public officials. There existed a risk of social desirability bias, that is, informants may feel uncomfortable to reveal details of stories or examples. Second, qualitative data do not allow us to quantify different variables discussed in the paper. Follow-up studies on these issues are needed for such purpose.

5.1 | Theoretical implications

We contribute to the literature of corruption in two important ways. Firstly, we focus on individuals' emotional discomfort and rationalization when they face with bribery situations. Much of the literature has focused on non-individual factors that promote and condition bribery, including underdeveloped market institutions (Aidt, 2009; Kaufmann, 1997; Rose-Ackerman, 1978), authority discretions (Khan, 2006; Rose-Ackerman, 1978), competition (Alexeev & Song, 2013; Diaby & Sylwester, 2015; Malesky et al., 2020), and/or social norms (Fisman & Miguel, 2007; Vuong et al., 2020). We argue that these factors, while important, are not sufficient to explain the engagement in corrupt acts of public officials. In our view, engaging in a corrupt relationship is an individual volition which is facilitated by available lucrative opportunities and enabled by some rationalization strategies. Despite a temptation to seize corrupt opportunities, most officials do not want to see themselves as "corrupt". Furthermore, an official's decision to engage in corrupt acts depends not only on his/her reasonings but also on emotions that evolve from a series of exchanges between the official and his/her partner. Calculative motive is blended with emotional discomfort and moral rationalization. Secondly, we argue that bribery should not be viewed as discrete, independent transactions. Instead, it is a relationship that involves series of both legal and illegal exchanges. Corrupt acts are disguised and/or mixed with perfectly legal exchanges; bribes are embedded in a series of genuine gifts that express gratitude and friendship. The bribery-prone relationship may reflect patron-client relations in which public officials are believed to be the patrons and private partners are the clients (Rose-Ackerman, 1999). However, our study suggests the two sides may shift roles. In many situations, it is the officials who look for favors from businesses, such as when they need businesses' helps to access to higher-rank officials or to mobilize resources for promotion campaign. Future research could examine how these roles are structured to create and sustain bribery-prone relationship. Thirdly, our study opens a way to integrate the deterministic view that emphasizes exogenous feature of the business environment with voluntaristic view that acknowledges the agency roles in determining corruption (Luo, 2002; Peng & Luo, 2000; Scott, 2014). Specifically, the study shows how institutional constraints could be factored into individual's "calculative judgment" and moral disengagement processes to engage in corruption. This approach would complement to popular research on antecedents and consequences of corruption at the firm and national levels (Ades & Di Tella, 1999; Fisman & Golden, 2017; Fisman & Svensson, 2007; Rose-Ackerman, 1978; Svensson, 2003) by describing psychological processes and identifying actions that government officials and other stakeholders can take to tackle persistently high levels of corruption in an economy. This is particularly important given the resilience of corruption in many emerging and transition economies (Khan, 2006; Malesky et al., 2020; Smallbone et al., 2014). Finally, our study contributes to the debate on complicated consequences of corruption in emerging economies (Dreher & Gassebner, 2013; Krammer, 2019). On the one hand, our

study concurs with Zhu and Zhang (2017) in demonstrating that relationship-building between bribers and bribees is not easy. Thus, in the absence of developed market institutions, keeping corrupt relationships stable may lower the cost of corruption and facilitate short-term growth. On the other hand, resilient bribery-prone relationships limit market entry, inhibit fair competition, and erode public officials' morality which would serve as drivers of sustainable development. Thus, while some countries may enjoy a paradoxical combination of high growth and high corruption (Rock & Bonnett, 2004), we argue that such paradox would not be sustainable.

Our paper also contributes to the social exchange theory by suggesting that the norm of reciprocity, while important, is not sufficient to sustain a bribery-prone relationship. Studies of social exchange theories and corruption (Millington et al., 2005; Steidlmeier, 1999; Tangpong et al., 2016; Tian, 2008; Wang, 2016) often focus on the norm of reciprocity as a driver for bribery, bypassing the dynamic interactions between reciprocity norm with professional moral values. We argue that the norm of reciprocity needs to outweigh the official's professional moral values to perpetuate a bribery-prone relationship. This suggests that the impacts of the norm of reciprocity on corrupt acts needs to be examined in conjunction with the actors' universal moral values. Future research could investigate the interaction between the norm of reciprocity and societal ethical norms of integrity in governing bribery. In addition, this study shows that personal relationship based on reciprocity has been used as an operating mechanism for bribery exchange. Personal relationship, resembling similar concepts of "*guanxi*" (China), or "*blat*" (Russia) (Puffer et al., 2010; Zhan, 2012), is designed to remove legal, moral, and cognitive barriers to corruption. Embedding in relationship building, the otherwise venal and unlawful act of bribery is transformed into one, that is, filled with expression of gratitude, obligation, and understanding. This suggests that reforming formal institutions is necessary but not sufficient to combat corruption. Sufficiency appears to be a change in informal institutions toward the ones that respect integrity and transparency. Future research could examine what drive changes in the informal institutions of corruption, and how the changes occur.

The paper also contributes to moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1999, 2016) by proposing a dynamic model of emotional processes and rationalization. The few studies on moral disengagement and corruption (Kominis & Dudau, 2018; Marquette, 2012; Moore, 2008; Umphress & Bingham, 2011) have not distinguished emotional discomfort and rationalization strategies people use at different stages of a bribery-prone relationship. We have found that public officials experience different sets of emotional discomforts and employ different rationalization strategies at the initiation and perpetuation stages of their bribery-prone relationships. These emotional discomforts and the need for rationalization strategies may disappear when the relationships evolve to the highest level where the actors identify with each other. The model shows a slippery road of corruption in which even some decent government officials could trap themselves into. The risk of engaging in a corrupt relationship is not always recognizable because corrupt exchanges

could be disguised in euphemistic languages and are mixed with legal exchanges. The model also suggests that an official may experience some emotional discomfort or even wrestle with their conscience when engaging in bribery acts. Future research could examine when and how these discomforts may escalate into distress and trigger extreme actions, such as suicide.

5.2 | Practical implications

Our study offers some implications for policy makers and managers. For policy makers, it becomes clear that individual officials' moral values are critically important in the combat of corruption. Fostering integrity values helps neutralize the obligation for corrupt acts in dyadic exchanges. People with integrity values would suppress themselves from the rationalization strategies for bribery exchanges. The government anti-corruption agenda should promote such measures as introducing integrity values in public officials training and business education programs. Transparency International's experience on Integrity School could be referenced and promoted. Besides, it is pertinent to develop clear role expectations and foster integrity culture in both business and public sectors. Strong and clear status duties will limit the effect of reciprocity norm in promoting bribery. For leaders of each public organization, setting up clear codes of conduct and strong internal control systems could help officials avoid faulty rationalization, enhancing the reliability and certainty of the organization's operations as well as its integrity. It is also important to recognize that the engagement to corrupt acts is unlikely a swift decision. Instead, it may gradually evolve along with bribery-prone relationships. In this process, even decent officials may fall into the corrupt trap. Therefore, it is critical for organizations to prevent officials from relationships that contain potential conflict of interests.

6 | CONCLUSION

In this paper we addressed the question of what psychological processes a government official experiences in the evolvement of a bribery-prone relationship. This focus on bribery-prone relationships reflects the relational nature of most bribery exchanges. Our results suggested that personal relationship based on reciprocity has been used as an operating mechanism for bribery exchange. In this way, bribery is presented as an exchange with "social" and "human" interface between its practitioners. Bribery exchange is carefully designed to help government officials overcome the legal, moral and cognitive barriers that would otherwise obstruct the exchange from taking place. We have also demonstrated that an official may experience unique emotional discomforts and apply different rationalization strategies in the initiation and perpetuation of a bribery-prone relationship. These rationalization strategies may induce even decent officials to slip to the trap of corruption which is hard to escape. For emerging economies like Vietnam, our study calls for a

greater effort to foster government officials' moral values and social norm of integrity, besides improving the regulatory environment.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

PRACTICE IMPACT STATEMENT

The paper highlights that the engagement to corrupt acts may gradually evolve along with bribery-prone relationships. Therefore, it is critical for organizations to prevent officials from relationships that contain potential conflict of interests through setting up clear role expectations, strong internal control system, and building integrity values.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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