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Corruption and Social Norms: A New Arrow in the Quiver

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Keywords

corruption, social norms, descriptive norms, injunctive norms, anticorruption, context-specific approaches, social norms mindful approach

Abstract

One key question driving innovations in corruption studies is how anticorruption reforms can be more impactful and sustainable. This is critical to understand due to the detrimental impact of corrupt practices on equality, human rights, peace, and the rule of law. A significant body of research has shown that many anticorruption initiatives do not produce the expected effect, or they achieve results that fade after the intervention ceases. Seeking to understand how to improve anticorruption outcomes, scholars have turned to causal explanations of the persistence of corruption ranging from institutional settings and individual motives to informal practices and social norms. This article explores the intersection of social norms and corruption as a contribution to improving anticorruption programming. It explains how norms impact our conceptual understanding of corruption and the vicious cycle that exists between corrupt practices and norms. Grounded in the belief that programming and social norm diagnosis need to be contextually driven, we lay out the nascent research on changing social norms that drive corruption and the consequences of ignoring them.

INTRODUCTION

The detrimental impact of corruption—generally understood as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain (e.g., Transparency International 2023)—on all areas of human life, from equality to safety, suggests that it is vital for people's well-being to understand why individuals sometimes act corruptly and sometimes not, why abuses of power are sometimes revealed and punished and sometimes not, and how to prevent corrupt practices in the short and long run. Previous research offers different theoretical-conceptual and empirical approaches that have been translated into mostly institutional anticorruption reforms at the local, national, and international levels. In light of recent indications of persistent and, in some contexts, worsening corruption trends, the efficacy of these policies and programs has been called into question by scholars and practitioners, some of whom have termed anticorruption a policy failure (e.g., Persson et al. 2013, Kubbe & Engelbert 2018). Studies worldwide have demonstrated that formal institutions, such as national anticorruption agencies, ombudsman offices, or stringent laws, have been overrated in their capacity to control corruption (Mungiu-Pippidi 2011, Charron et al. 2015, Rothstein 2018).

Theoretical and empirical state-of-the-art corruption research has produced several key findings. A first consideration regards the impossibility of legislating corruption away. Many efforts in fighting corruption have emphasized adopting legal and formal institutional reforms that follow what are considered "best practices" by international experts and practitioners. Such measures include adopting harsher punishment for corruption crimes, adding layers of administrative controls and checks for high-risk government activities such as public procurement, and establishing dedicated anticorruption agencies. Many countries have indeed adopted many such recommendations. However, the reality remains that most countries affected by high levels of corruption have adequate legal and institutional frameworks in place (as measured by adherence to those internationally recognized standards). Many scholars and practitioners speak of the "implementation gap" as one of the main challenges in the fight against corruption, referring to the observed difficulties in enforcing existing laws and formal policies.

A second key insight is that corruption is rarely due to individual "rotten apples" who abuse power or seek corrupt duty bearers. Rather, the evidence suggests that corruption is a highly networked phenomenon involving groups of individuals whose collective actions, often strategically planned and coordinated, enable rule breaking of different kinds and levels of complexity. The networked nature of corruption helps explain its resilience (Luna-Pla & Nicolás-Carlock 2020). As is well known from studies of organized crime and other informal networks, such groupings create established practices and tactics that endure even when individual members (even leaders) are removed (Bouchard 2020). Most conventional anticorruption approaches are designed to target the behaviors and incentives of individuals. However, behavior and incentives are framed differently when the individual acts as part of a closed group and when collusive practices are involved.

Third, evidence from behavioral science research has shown that individuals are not always the rational decision makers that underpin the assumptions of classic economic theory. In fact, human decision making is often affected by different types of biases and exogenous influences and pressures, which result in choices that are not always aligned with the expected outcomes following a traditional cost-benefit analysis. This research has shown the importance of elements such as collectively held beliefs and the desire for social belonging, which can result in behaviors that contradict formal legal prescriptions. It is not unusual to hear corruption characterized as part of the culture, which, albeit debatable as a statement of fact, is linked to how mental models, stereotypes, and socially embraced expectations normalize certain types of corrupt practices (Barr & Serra 2010, Klitgaard 2017).

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One key implication stemming from the considerations above is that corruption analysis should strongly focus on the context, as a complex system where formal legal frameworks have varying levels of relevance in influencing and shaping behaviors. Part of such a context-sensitive analysis involves identifying the drivers (factors that explain why a behavior occurs) and enablers (conditions that allow the behavior to happen) of corruption and the relationships between those factors.[1]

Scholars and practitioners increasingly recognize that adding a social norms lens to our understanding of corruption and anticorruption can reveal relevant variables in complex contexts and help overcome some of the empirical challenges revealed by the research mentioned above (Jackson & Köbis 2018, Kubbe & Engelbert 2018). Where formal laws are not predictably enforced, informal social networks associated with corruption are often instrumentally built and thereafter bound together using common understandings, mutual expectations, and accepted behaviors that can become self-reinforcing.

A social norms approach is thus conducive to better incorporating the dynamics and ways in which context-specific practices take shape and affect corruption and anticorruption outcomes in different regions and settings (Persson et al. 2013). An added value of considering norms is the acknowledgment of the stubbornness of practices, which one must understand if one wishes to change corrupt behavior (De Herdt & de Sardan 2015).

This article focuses on the role of social norms in analyzing and explaining corruption's persistence and addresses how anticorruption reforms should take them into account. To show why a social norms approach is a valuable addition to corruption scholarly research and anticorruption practice, we discuss the complexities and gaps involved in defining corruption and the shortcomings of leading theories of corruption. After that, we explore how accounting for social norms helps advance our understanding of corruption and aim to answer the following major questions: How do social norms influence corrupt behavior? How can social norms be factored into anticorruption policy and programming? We present theoretical-conceptual, empirical cross-country, and experimental findings concerning the influence of social norms on the occurrence of corruption. We articulate the need to target social norms to address corruption and build better bridges between academics and practitioners to avoid quick translations of research into the field based on general assumptions.[2]

CONCEPTUALIZING CORRUPTION AND THE ADDED VALUE OF A SOCIAL NORMS LENS

Definition of Corruption and Challenges Therein

Corruption research has grown exponentially in recent decades (Heywood 2017, Rothstein & Varraich 2017). Corruption involves the (ab)use of power, which entails unduly granting privileged

[1]Put differently, development and anticorruption practitioners should behave more as professionals in the life sciences do. Advances in medical research over the last 150 years have provided critical general knowledge about how to cure many illnesses. However, no responsible doctor would prescribe a drug or a treatment without carefully examining the individual patient. Before applying any universal cure, in medicine and in anticorruption, the practitioner must know the individual case. We thank our reviewers for this useful comment.

[2]Because this is an emerging field of study, the body of literature is still relatively limited, as is reflected in a reduced number of peer-reviewed academic publications. To give the reader a comprehensive picture of the state of the field, this review includes not only academic publications but also gray literature and other sources that put forth important arguments and proposals regarding the role of social norms in driving corruption and implications thereof.

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access to or extorting resources such as money, expertise, influence, or sexual favors. Arguably, the most widely used and accepted definition of corruption is that of Transparency International, which states corruption is the abuse of entrusted power for private gain (Transparency International 2023). In essence, corruption always involves exploiting entrusted responsibility—be it in public office or the private sector—for personal gain or to benefit a particular group at the expense of a broader collective. Ultimately, corruption "benefits the few at the expense of the many" (Johnston 2005, p. 1).

Corruption is a broad umbrella term encompassing many different behaviors and can be understood as a ubiquitous problem. It ranges from relatively small-scale bribery and embezzlement to various forms of high-level fraud, practices of favoritism including cronyism and nepotism, the sale of public policies, and other types of rent seeking and sextortion (e.g., Holmes 2015). When corrupt behavior trickles down to society as a whole and is perceived not as an exception from the rule but as a rule itself, we speak of endemic corruption (Kahana & Qijun 2010, Ledeneva 2013, Epstein & Gang 2019). Some forms of corruption are present in rich and poor countries alike, as well as in democratic and nondemocratic systems, such as corruption in police forces (O'Hara & Sainato 2015) or in sport (Hough & Heaston 2018). In contrast, other types of corruption vary depending on the nature and structure of the political system and the sector where they occur (Heidenheimer et al. 1989, Kramer 2018).

Corruption's complex and multifaceted nature continues to trigger intense debates among academic scholars (Heywood 2017, Mungiu-Pippidi & Fazekas 2020, Pozsgai-Alvarez 2020). The centrality of terms such as "abuse," "public," "private," and "benefit" is problematic because they are contentious terms that imply varying degrees of ambiguity. Importantly, some of those terms often depend on societal culture, varying interpretations (e.g., Heidenheimer et al. 1989, Rothstein & Torsello 2013, Gardiner 2002) as well as informal practices and social norms (Baez-Camargo & Ledeneva 2017, Kubbe & Engelbert 2018).

The broad definition of corruption thus fails to provide clear guidance on distinguishing a practice of corruption from other similar practices prevalent in a particular context. Resorting only to the prevailing legal framework in any particular context, observing what actions have been typified as corruption, is not the best guidance to discern what should be considered corruption from an academic point of view. The law may fail to comprehensively capture practices of abuse of authority for private gain that are entangled in local social understandings. Furthermore, rigid, legalistic criteria cannot account for the complexities and nuances that the use of the term corruption entails. Even people from the same context might disagree on whether some practices are corrupt or not.

Discussing the difficulties in establishing necessary and sufficient criteria to identify practices of corruption everywhere, Torsello (2011, p. 3) has argued that "the dichotomy private-public, informed by the Weberian rationality of the Western bureaucratic machinery, is context-specific." Boundaries are blurred, as practices that are socially acceptable in the context of a social interaction seamlessly are replicated in interactions between public officials and citizens (who might also be connected socially in their private spheres). Literature focusing on regions as diverse as sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Central and Eastern Europe has shown that gift-giving practices can be difficult to neatly separate into categories of corrupt or noncorrupt because they are associated with socially valued expressions of gratitude, congratulations, or sympathy and tend to be widespread (Miller et al. 2000, Ruud 2000, Chang et al. 2001, Blundo & de Sardan 2006, Moldovan & de Walle 2013, Stepurko et al. 2015). Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (1999, pp. 25–26) has written about the "moral economy" of corruption, pointing to the importance of understanding the context-specific "value systems and cultural codes which permit a justification of corruption by those who practice it (and who do not necessarily consider it to be such—quite the contrary),

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and to anchor corruption in ordinary, everyday practice." Against such a backdrop, a bribe can easily morph into a gift, and particular actions anchored in local social understandings become shrouded in ambiguity and prone to be applied with double standards (Ledeneva 2017). Therefore, following Alatas (1990, p. 304), corruption should be understood as a trans-systemic issue that can potentially affect all social systems and classes, state organizations and situations, and age groups and sexes of populations, at all times, constructed by specific traditions, values, norms, institutions, or historical settings.

Therefore, an important unresolved dilemma remains as to the best stance between cultural relativism and an ethnocentric, Western-values-infused understanding of corruption. Some scholars suggest that people around the world, even in countries considered to be endemically corrupt or in remote areas, not only understand quite well what corruption is and is not (Baez-Camargo 2015) but also mostly forcefully reject it (Klitgaard 2017, Haerpfer et al. 2022). Others emphasize how the public acceptance of what is commonly understood as corruption varies across societies and contexts (Hooker 2009, Kubbe & Engelbert 2018). Detailed empirical findings suggest real differences in what is considered corruption from one context to another. The Corruption, Justice and Legitimacy Program's work in Uganda and the Central African Republic (CAR) found that citizens differed in what they felt constituted corruption. In both countries, citizens identified bribery, favoritism, and political interference as forms of corruption. However, citizens in Uganda also considered absenteeism corrupt, while those in CAR did not. Conversely, citizens in CAR identified sexual favors as a type of corruption, whereas Ugandans did not (Scharbatke-Church & Chigas 2016).

In sum, despite a seemingly clear and widely accepted definition, understandings of corruption vary not only between societies but also between regions, sectors, institutions, and individuals within one country. To make things even more complicated, corruption is a highly politicized term. Numerous electoral campaigns rely on anticorruption promises and delegitimizing opponents by branding them as corrupt, where the term corruption often is used indiscriminately to characterize everything and everyone the candidates stand against (Mancini 2018, Kubbe & Loli 2020).

Whether it could be possible to formulate better definitions of corruption goes beyond the scope of the present article. This section discusses ongoing, unresolved questions surrounding what is undoubtedly a multidimensional concept.

Theories of Corruption

Corruption can be framed as a principal–agent problem, where an agent defrauds or manipulates the mandate received from a principal to reap private gain. In this perspective, the agent will engage in corruption if the expected net benefits of doing so outweigh net costs, illustrating the principle of "deterrence" (Becker 1968), which predicts that the prevalence of corruption will correlate with the probability of getting caught and penalized. According to this perspective (Klitgaard 1991), corruption happens because of problems of asymmetric information (the principal is unable to monitor the agent's actions adequately) and inadequate incentives (the agent is not adequately motivated to adhere to the mandate received from the principal). Many of the anticorruption prescriptions considered "best practices" are based on the assumption that corruption arises from a principal–agent situation and rely strongly on measures such as criminalizing corruption and strengthening performance monitoring and accountability bodies. This perspective assumes that there are authority figures who are not only interested in but also capable of enforcing the formal rules. Both political will and institutional capability are also assumed, which is problematic in many contexts.

Corruption can also be understood as a collective action problem. Individuals choose to engage in corruption if they believe everyone else is engaging in corruption because, by refraining, they

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will lose out. Corruption becomes the status quo through a self-fulfilling prophecy. In such scenarios, even intrinsically honest individuals will give in or, at the minimum, will accept and tolerate corruption. A collective action scenario entails the absence of an entity in a position of authority (a principal) who would be willing to enforce the rule of law. Some authors (e.g., Persson et al. 2013) have suggested that under such circumstances, corruption can only be tackled through a "big bang approach" where a government implements far-reaching reforms, drastic and compelling enough to disrupt people's beliefs about the inevitability of corruption.[3]

Yet another viewpoint underscores the need to consider the functionality of corruption (Marquette & Peiffer 2021). In this framework, corruption represents problem solving; it serves to, for example, expedite access to urgently needed public services, renew business licenses, or navigate burdensome red tape. In such cases, corruption is most often helpful because formal systems are not functional. This means that, without addressing the underlying shortcomings, anticorruption policies that target only the symptom are unlikely to be effective and likely to displace the corruption to other areas or manifestations. Furthermore, the functionality lens shows how misguided anticorruption approaches might end up causing harm, often doubly punishing particularly vulnerable individuals and groups. For example, public servants at the frontline of service delivery often receive wages so low that subsistence is impossible. Informal payments are often a solution to make ends meet. In such a scenario, harshly punishing service providers who accept informal payments is unlikely to end the problem; it will punish both the workers who are struggling to subsist and the users of the understaffed facilities.

Behavioral science has established that, due to biases, individuals often make decisions that do not necessarily maximize their welfare. An important category of behavioral drivers of corruption is linked to aspects of sociality (World Bank 2015). Individuals strive to fit into their community and peer groups and shape their behaviors to mimic those observed among the majority of people in their surroundings. Particularly relevant in this regard is research relating to corruption and social norms, which points out how patterns of behavior that are perceived to be expected and acceptable greatly influence people's behavior.

The short overview of theories of corruption above aims to clarify how the distinct perspective of the social norms approach can help academics and practitioners interested in understanding the multifaceted phenomenon of corruption.

SOCIAL NORMS AND CORRUPTION

Defining Social Norms

Social norms are defined as mutual expectations held within a group about what is typical and appropriate behavior (e.g., Scharbatke-Church & Chigas 2019). These norms are often experienced as social pressures or beliefs, and they should be distinguished from personal values or preferences and from actual behaviors. They are held in place through positive social sanctions for compliance or negative repercussions if one violates them. Social norms help make culture, along with language, religion, institutions, ceremonies, and more, but are not the same as culture.[4] Depending on the situation, they can influence the extent to which individuals engage—and expect others to engage—in corruption.

[3]This is by no means a consensus view; other authors (e.g., Stephenson 2020) argue forcefully that it is possible to achieve anticorruption success through cumulative, incremental reforms even in situations where corruption is driven by self-reinforcing mechanisms.

[4]In essence, social norms are specific behavioral expectations within a culture, while culture encompasses the larger context of beliefs, values, and practices that guide behavior and shape societal norms.

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Scholars advancing social norms theory have coalesced around a common understanding: Social norms are the unwritten rules about the right way to behave within a group (Cialdini et al. 1991, Mackie et al. 2015, Bicchieri 2017). These informal rules form mutual expectations about what is appropriate and typical behavior for that group in a particular context. Norms are created and held in place primarily through social sanction—be it reward for compliance or punishment for deviating—though they can become so internalized that individuals self-police and conform without experiencing external rewards or punishments (Scharbatke-Church & Chigas 2019). Social norms exist within informal contexts such as greeting customs or dress codes, as well as formal ones such as institutions and organizations.

Most social norms theories agree with empirical research (Cialdini et al. 1991) that shows the importance of distinguishing between descriptive and injunctive norms. Descriptive norms are what we see others do or believe they do; injunctive norms are what we think others expect us to do. "Everybody offers a bribe to avoid traffic sanctions" is an example of a descriptive norm. "If I fail to give a bribe and I fail my driving test, people will make fun of me" is an example of an injunctive norm.

An important element underpinning the concept of social norms is how one defines the group that follows the unwritten rule. More pragmatic interpretations frame social norms as existing within reference groups. Within these groups, expectations of abidance with the social norms must be mutual, flowing both ways and thereby defining the group's boundaries (Cislaghi & Heise 2019). This interdependence of expectation and action is critical (Paluck & Ball 2010, Mackie et al. 2015). Individuals can belong to multiple reference groups simultaneously, and these groups may hold conflicting norms that dictate different typical and appropriate behavior. An individual could belong to a faith community, a sports team, a professional network, and their family/kin, and each may have a different set of expectations. When facing a particular issue or situation, an individual selects which norm to follow based on which group membership is salient.

In practice, some behaviors are more consistently followed than others because norms vary in strength. This implies that the stronger the norm, the more likely group members will comply because they feel obliged to, and the harder it will be to change their behavior (group members think, "I have no choice but to do X"). For instance, many taboos are in fact strong social norms that should not be violated because that will upset people and can lead to exclusion from the group. Conversely, weaker norms drive behavior less predictably and can be less significant as an obstacle to change because they are commonly accepted but optional (group members think, "I should probably do X"). The question of social norm strength can be understood through a norm "tightness–looseness" theory that is based on the principle of adaptation to the environment (Roos et al. 2015, Gelfand et al. 2017). According to this view, societies that are confronted with a greater incidence of threats (e.g., natural disasters, meager natural resources) develop stronger norms and punishments as a means to ensure social coordination in the face of such threats. This theoretical perspective aligns with experimental data measuring norm change in a controlled setting (Szekely et al. 2021), as well as with empirical observations from research on social norms and corruption in contexts where a high prevalence of poverty and unmet needs correlates with strong social norms of solidarity and reciprocity (Baez-Camargo et al. 2019).

Pluralistic Ignorance and Why Social Norms Matter for Shaping Anticorruption Outcomes

It is worthwhile to distinguish between personal attitudes, social norms, and observed behaviors. Researchers with experience working in contexts of endemic corruption are familiar with the paradoxes of individuals asserting their dislike of corruption while simultaneously engaging in it. This

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Figure 1

Personal preferences, social norms, and behaviors. Adapted from Basel Inst. Governance and U4 Anti-Corruption Resour. Cent. (2022).

antipathy toward corruption is sometimes attitudinally based—meaning the individual feels unfavorably toward a particular type of corrupt behavior (for example, deeply disliking bribing public officials) that they nevertheless engage in. Research from other fields shows that the social pressure experienced from group expectations can cause an individual to act contrary to their own attitudes (Fishbein 1967, Cialdini et al. 1991). In other words, the desire to fit in, to stay in alignment with one's sense of identity, or simply to not be subject to a negative sanction can be more powerful drivers than a personal attitude.

Figure 1 shows how social norms can influence observed behaviors, and in principle, it is possible that expectations to do with social norms may override personal preferences. In other words, the ultimate behavior might be the same (corruption) in spite of different personal preferences when the perceptions of a strong social norm are in place.

Even in places where large swaths of people agree that corruption is wrong, one can still find strong social norms supporting corrupt acts (Hoffmann & Patel 2017). These are classic cases of pluralistic ignorance, where the perceptions of what others think should be done are inaccurate (Hoffmann & Patel 2023). People engage in bribery despite personally opposing it because they feel everybody else is doing it and they might be criticized or, in some other way, lose out if they fail to follow the social norm.

Therefore, corruption often follows from social norms—and the other way around. Social norms can incentivize individuals to be corrupt and facilitate corruption (Kubbe & Engelbert 2018, Baez-Camargo et al. 2019) and can also be a consequence of corruption. Furthermore, practices of corruption that are reinforced because they are associated with particular social norms are extremely difficult to eradicate through conventional, in particular legal or institutional, anticorruption approaches.

Unpacking the Link Between Social Norms and Corruption

Across the developing world, and particularly in fragile contexts, weak states and scarce resources mean that people often need to rely on others to cover their basic needs and to get access to the resources and opportunities they require. When government institutions cannot be relied upon to deliver services or security, informal social networks play an essential function as a social security safety net. Social networks can provide physical safety, access to jobs and financial support, or

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access to services and resources. These informal networks, often based on trust, solidarity, and reciprocity, can be extremely effective in delivering what the state cannot and therefore are greatly valued and trusted (Baez-Camargo & Sambaiga 2016). To a large extent, social networks are effective because they dictate rules and requirements for membership that are enforced through social rewards and punishments instead of formal contracts and legal obligations. In other words, social norms are hugely important in contexts of fragility and scarcity because they bind together essential social networks and enable punishment of those who violate the rules of the networks (which in this formulation are akin to the reference groups).

Baez-Camargo et al. (2020) conducted a comparative empirical study looking at behavioral drivers of petty corruption in Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda. This study found manifold ways in which social norms incentivize and perpetuate different patterns of corruption. In particular, two social norms are relevant: norms of reciprocity and norms of obligation to the group.

Reciprocity is crystallized, for example, in practices of gift giving. Giving a gift or doing someone a favor entails an unwritten but well-understood obligation to reciprocate. Economies of favors and how they are linked to bribery have been abundantly documented (Walton & Jackson 2020). Offering a bribe is, in this sense, embedded already in social understandings that tie the giving and receiving parties together. In addition to the immediate favor, a social connection is established. Bribery is, therefore, often understood not as a one-off transaction but as a social investment (Baez-Camargo et al. 2022). This social element makes bribery practices extremely resilient: Bribery is perpetuated because interrupting the exchange, or even refusing it in the first place, is socially costly. Evidence from Tanzania indicates that health workers receiving bribes from users have trouble rejecting them. When they do, users get upset, cry, shout, and then speak badly about the health worker as being unhelpful (Baez-Camargo et al. 2019). The social norms are typically enforced through social punishments, such as gossiping and rumors, loss of status, and the like.

Obligation to the group is particularly relevant in that public officials often are challenged with strong pressures from their families and social networks to use their access to public resources and rent-extracting opportunities on behalf of the group. For example, in Tanzania, families invest in putting a family member through medical school with the expectation that once the individual becomes a practicing doctor, he or she will provide for the family. When the graduate obtains a position in the public health sector, the salaries turn out to be utterly insufficient to meet the expectations of the family (e.g., paying for school fees, funeral expenses, or weddings). The public official is, therefore, incentivized to use the public office to extract rents by resorting to practices such as accepting bribes from users, diverting medicines to the black market, and sending patients to the official's private practice. Again, those who are seen as not honoring their obligations to their networks are shunned, socially ostracized, and sometimes even physically harmed (Baez-Camargo et al. 2017). Kinship ties are very relevant here as failing to comply with family obligations is globally scorned. Interestingly, the emphasis on kinship does not prevent manipulating or even fabricating kinship ties. This is the case in Kyrgyzstan, where kinship ties are central drivers of politics and consequently corruption (Ismailbekova 2018), and in Moldova, where the practice of Cumatrism involves creating kinship ties through appointing godfathers for children and thereafter invoking those ties to demand support and favors.

Meeting the expectations associated with social norms of reciprocity and solidarity is often closely linked to social status and respectability. Informal systems of reciprocity and solidarity are valued because they work to solve problems and address unmet needs, often more effectively than formal state institutions do. For this reason, those who comply with social norms in a reliable and timely fashion earn respect and good standing within their networks (Baez-Camargo et al. 2020). Comparing the systems of economies of favors in the Soviet Union and China (*blat* and *guanxi*,

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respectively), Ledeneva (2008, p. 121) explains how individuals who control useful connections, *blatmeisters* and *tolkachi*, receive social recognition and respectability as people who can "solve problems and arrange things for others, and are thus called 'useful people.'" Makovicky & Henig (2018, p. 40), assessing the origins and pervasiveness of systems of economies of favors, go as far as to regard them as "central to the social production of value, as well as pride, respectability and self-worth." These are powerful drivers of behavior.

These kinds of phenomena can be seen around the globe. For instance, Urinboyev & Svensson (2018) analyze corruption and social norms in Uzbekistan. They explore the multifaceted role, logic, and morality of informal transactions and demonstrate that informal or illegal practices represent kleptocracy, individual greed, economic interests, or survival strategies, but also reflect social norms generated through kinship, social status, hierarchies, affection, reciprocity, or reputation.

Similarly, Köbis et al. (2018) ask why, in the same societal or organizational context, some people abuse power for private gain while others do not. Their analysis identifies social norms as a key factor in explaining the psychological justification processes of corrupt behavior. Based on data from Kazakhstan and the Netherlands, they show that descriptive and injunctive norms are largely interlinked. As they explain, the descriptive norm is the believed prevalence (perceived frequency) of a corrupt behavior within a social environment while the injunctive norm (acceptability) represents beliefs about whether corrupt acts ought to be done within a social context. The "ought" in this case arises not from a perception of moral rightness but rather a perception of what actions garner social approval or disapproval in a group.[5] Participants in both countries were presented with seven vignettes illustrating various forms of corruption and were asked to assess injunctive and descriptive social norms for these behaviors. Köbis et al. (2018) reported three key findings. First, there was a positive correlation between injunctive and descriptive norms in both countries, indicating that a higher perceived prevalence of corruption corresponded to greater acceptability. Second, overall, Kazakhstan exhibited significantly more prevalent perceived descriptive and injunctive norms for corruption compared to the Netherlands, implying that corruption was seen as more common and morally acceptable in Kazakhstan. Third, when examining specific scenarios, the authors found that the nature of corruption played a crucial role. Market-oriented corruption, involving monetary exchanges for favors, was considered more prevalent and acceptable in Kazakhstan than in the Netherlands. However, no significant cross-country differences were found in norms for parochial corruption, which revolves around nonmonetary transactions based on relationships, such as kinship. This study uncovered the interplay between corruption prevalence and moral acceptability, highlighted cross-country disparities in corruption norms, and emphasized the influence of corrupt behavior types on normative perceptions.

Ledeneva (2008, p. 120) describes "the cultivation of personal relationships and networks of mutual dependence; and the creation of obligation and indebtedness," otherwise known as *blat*, as an essential survival mechanism developed to withstand the hardships of living under constant scarcity and authoritarian threat in the Soviet Union. Jackson's (2018) work in Kosovo describes how norms are held within a social circle or moral community of which people feel part and demonstrates the role of local-level leadership in shaping and nurturing certain social norms leading to drastically different anticorruption outcomes.

[5]There are two aspects to stress here. First, it is an individual's perception of social approval/disapproval that drives behavior, and this perception may not be accurate. Second, these are implicit beliefs; individuals do not poll their peers to ascertain their individual attitudes, which might find corrupt acts wrong, but rather are operating at a subconscious level.

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Traditionally, corruption has been associated with lacking prosocial norms such as trust, altruism, or positive reciprocity. By extension, this suggests a negative association between prosocial norms and corruption. Rosenbaum et al. (2013) test this view by examining market corruption—defined as one-shot exchange transactions between strangers in the shadow of the law. They examine the relationship between prosocial behavior in economic experiments and corruption levels. Their results from meta-analyses of both trust and dictator game experiments indicate positive, significant links between prosocial norms and prevailing corruption levels. They demonstrate that, in the absence of repeat interactions and legal remedies to prevent contractual violations, acts of petty corruption require strong norms of generalized trust and altruism. As such, prosocial norms facilitate, rather than mitigate, petty corruption.

Indeed, qualitative studies in East Africa (Baez-Camargo et al. 2022) have shed light on how the regular exchange of bribes (for example, between public officials providing undue favors or expediting services and brokers who refer users to them) is an effective mechanism for building trust. Reciprocity is reinforced in many contexts as a social norm; those who do not reciprocate received favors are repudiated. This norm of reciprocity provides a tit-for-tat mechanism of trust-building and trust-cementing relationships, which is essential in the absence of formally enforceable contractual obligations for those engaging in illicit activities.

It is beyond the scope of this article to explore all the possible ways in which social norms may influence corruption and anticorruption outcomes. However, a topic that deserves special attention is how social norms relevant to gender interact with the presence or absence of incentives to engage in or resist corruption. A significant volume of research has focused on exploring a possible relationship between corruption and gender (Kubbe & Merkle 2022). Overall, results are inconclusive. On the one hand, some studies present a strong case that women are less corrupt than men. For example, in an analysis of World Values Survey data from 83 countries, McGee & Benk (2023) found that women were either significantly or somewhat more opposed to bribery than men in about 80% of all cases. Similarly, focusing on the case of Nigeria, Asomah et al. (2022) found that women are less likely to offer bribes than men, but also that women are less likely to believe they can report corruption without retaliation. Other authors report findings that do not support the gender hypothesis. For example, Alatas et al. (2009) find a lack of significant gender differences in preferences regarding corruption across several countries, and a comprehensive review by Boehm (2015) concludes that women are not intrinsically less corrupt than men. Replicating and expanding Alatas et al.'s (2009) study, Kubbe et al. (2019) provide insights into gender-related rationalizations of participants' behavior in bribery games. The key finding reveals significant gender disparities in the reasons behind behavior: Men exhibit risk-seeking behavior, whereas women display prosocial reasoning, challenging the notion of gender-based risk aversion.

The above notwithstanding, more research is needed on how social norms relevant to gender have an impact on driving corruption. For example, patriarchal norms may render women more vulnerable to extortion by providers of public services and preempt their willingness to resist or denounce it. Women may also be vulnerable to sextortion where social norms normalize gender-based violence and where the stigma on victims plays a role in keeping them silent (Mukama 2017, Stahl 2021, Bjarnegård et al. 2022).

SOCIAL NORMS AS PART OF ANTICORRUPTION STRATEGIES?

Targeted Social Norms Strategies

All anticorruption programs have the same aim—to support regularized adherence to agreed rules of ethical conduct, be it through detection, sanction, or prevention of corruption. To achieve this

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goal, programming must be tailored to the context, which includes determining the role of social norms as a driver of the corrupt act or system. While social norms are not a magic bullet that will transform corrupt transactions, they are a critical piece of the puzzle that, if left unattended, can undermine existing efforts (Scharbatke-Church & Chigas 2016). As such, anticorruption reformers need to add targeted norms strategies into multidimensional anticorruption programs (Orlova & Boichev 2017).

It is necessary to identify the specific set of expectations that a specific group of people holds because it dictates strategy. For instance, is it more important to target the descriptive norm, or is the severity of the punishment the critical motivator behind adherence to the norm? Is the reference group seen as elite and irreplaceable, such that it is deemed critical to stay in alignment with them, or is it a casual association of acquaintances? Norm components can be identified through quantitative research in sectors such as public health (Scharbatke-Church & Kothari 2021). Vignettes are an important tool that has proven helpful in identifying and measuring the prevalence of social norms in the health and gender studies fields (Stoebenau et al. 2019, Cannon et al. 2022, Surendran-Padmaja et al. 2023). The vignette approach has started to be used to identify and quantify social norms linked to corruption (Jackson 2018, Baez-Camargo et al. 2022), but insufficient work exists in the corruption field to say this is standard practice. Jackson & Köbis (2018) outline four common normative pressures behind corruption—sociability and kinship as well as horizontal and vertical pressures within organizations—and provide a useful guidepost to direct research specific to social norms that drive corrupt practices.

Diagnosing the specific norm is one thing; determining an effective strategy to change it is another. Research and evaluation findings on effective change mechanisms are far more abundant in the gender and reproductive health fields than in corruption, governance, or integrity.[6] Some of the findings of gender and reproductive health practitioners are encouraging. A social norms mindful approach has been tested and yielded positive results concerning topics such as decreasing the rates of female genital mutilation in Senegal (Mackie & LeJeune 2009), and improving prosocial behavior related to gender-based violence prevention in the United States (Mennicke et al. 2021).

One area that has recently received significant attention is the use of collective action strategies within anticorruption theories of change (e.g., Bauhr & Nasiritousi 2011, Mungiu-Pippidi 2011, Rothstein 2011, Persson et al. 2013). As Marquette & Peiffer (2015, p. 5) explain in their work on corruption and collective action, social norms are one of many variables that affect whether a group can overcome a collective action problem: "Norms can either work to enhance a person's willingness to forgo immediate individual goals in the interest of pursuing the collective good, or not." This suggests that an anticorruption effort that seeks to enact a collective action strategy, such as integrity pacts or anticorruption coalitions, would be wise to include explicit social norms change efforts.

Despite the above, very few studies investigating possible applied social norms approaches have occurred in the anticorruption field. One modality of a targeted social norms change approach is to focus on shifting perceptions of the descriptive norm (what people think others do) to diminish corrupt practices. Zhao et al. (2019) conducted a two-part study to determine the effect of perceived descriptive norms on bribe-taking intention and the psychological mechanism underlying this effect. The study found that perceived descriptive norms catalyzed the propensity of individuals to morally disengage, which generated a slight increase in their corrupt intentions. This study

[6]See the resources on the Georgetown University–based Global Social Norms Learning Collaborative website, **https://www.irh.org/projects/social-norms-learning-collaborative/**.

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suggests that an anticorruption campaign that prevents moral disengagement of individuals, as well as reshaping beliefs about what others are doing, could diminish bribe taking. Also addressing descriptive norms, the experiment by Köbis et al. (2022) compellingly showed the potential of a simple public awareness campaign revealing that bribery is not as widespread as people think in a particular South African region. This study found that individuals exposed to this information engaged in bribery in a corruption game less frequently.

Another strategy is focusing on changing injunctive norms (what others think is appropriate). Banerjee (2016) used laboratory corruption games to find that the perceived sense of social appropriateness is crucial in determining actual behavior. Agerberg (2022) has looked specifically at the use of communications to influence injunctive norms in Mexico. He found that informing people of the actual scale of anticorruption sentiment effected a seven-percentage-point reduction in respondents indicating they would be likely to pay a bribe to avoid a traffic ticket. He concludes that "a simple information intervention will hence not dramatically affect attitudes and perceptions. . . . Rather, we should think of such measures as one part of the anticorruption toolkit" (Agerberg 2022, p. 946).

An innovative study in Nigeria attempted to influence both descriptive and injunctive norms around corruption reporting (Blair et al. 2019). This two-pronged effort sought to shift social norms by showing a film in which high-status local actors played fictional characters who reported corruption.[7] The study combined this intervention with a mass text-message campaign that sought to reduce the psychological and fiscal barrier of reporting, as individuals could reply free of charge—a classic nudge strategy. The study showed an immediate increase in reports: The "process produced 1.7 times as many concrete corruption reports as 1 year of the previous nationwide corruption-reporting campaign" (Blair et al. 2019, p. 2). However, reporting experienced a rapid decline within days of the mass text message.

Further investigation showed that the effort to shift the social norm around corruption reporting was not effective. Viewers did not leave with an increased perception that corruption reporting was widespread and increasing, as intended. Rather, the film impacted the viewers' perception that corruption and anger about corruption were widespread. We recommend caution in interpreting these findings as it is possible the hypothesis was correct. Still, the film had insufficient dosage to catalyze the desired change (e.g., the number of minutes or the single channel of reporting shown was insufficient).

There are very few examples of rigorously tested social norms anticorruption interventions happening in real-world settings and involving the expected beneficiaries. An exception is the work by Baez-Camargo et al. (2022), who, based on the research findings on the role of social norms of reciprocity fueling bribery in Tanzanian health facilities, designed and piloted a social norms anticorruption intervention in a hospital in Dar es Salaam. The pilot applied a peer-led approach, where health workers adopted the role of champions, disseminating antibribery messages among their peers. This was introduced as a means to change the perception of the injunctive norm of bribery among hospital staff. In addition, the intervention included posters and desk signs featured prominently in the hospital treatment units, which advised users against offering bribes to health workers. This intervention element aimed to shift perceptions about the descriptive norm of bribery in the hospital. It achieved positive and statistically significant reductions in the perceptions about the need to bribe and intentions to provide bribes in the future among hospital users. Apart from this example, the anticorruption field is still not ready to draw conclusions about successful strategies.

[7]The treatment version of the film included this storyline, while the placebo version edited out the reporting.

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Incorporating Social Norms Thinking into Anticorruption Programming

Social norms are not always a driver behind corrupt practices, but when they are, it is imperative that they are factored into programming. This is especially so in contexts of fragility and conflict, where social norms play an even greater role in behavioral choices. "A person's relationship and networks with like-minded people are key to [their] ability to survive and navigate life. This reality places a primacy on cultivating and maintaining relationships within one's group or social network" (Scharbatke-Church & Chigas 2019, p. 9). Similarly, where institutions are weak, social norms can have undue influence. As Pottenger (2015, p. 486) explains, "[i]ncentives that aim to constrain specific forms of behavior through penalties become less effective as the benefits increase."

According to Scharbatke-Church & Chigas (2019), not addressing social norms when they are a driving factor behind a corrupt practice has numerous potential negative consequences, such as hindering a program's ability to achieve results. Jackson's (2018) work on why integrity-building interventions in Kosovo rarely induce the desired changes in governance practices provides one rationale. He explains how underlying norms within society shape choices about whether to engage in integrity-supporting or -undermining practices. The research demonstrates how change can be held back by interdependent behaviors requiring a whole set of interventions to address.

Ignoring the role of social expectation is increasingly being identified as a key factor behind the ineffective nature of anticorruption laws, rules, or sanctions that do not align with prevailing social norms. According to empirical analysis, social norms are crucial for crime prevention, as well as for the enforcement of legal rules (Engelbert 2017). When rules and norms do not align, the enforcement of laws or rules is deficient, as reflected in extremely low conviction rates. The same applies within institutions; as Pottenger (2015, p. 486) argues, "grafting new rules onto a system without regard for the underlying ideas and beliefs within that system is less likely to work effectively or as intended."

Social norms not only impair the application of the law but also can deter those who could turn to the law for justice or restitution. In this instance, the norms relate to rejecting the use of official justice processes such as review authorities and courts. Engelbert's (2017) research on procurement corruption indicates that challenging procurement decisions before the administrative review system is perceived—by both private companies and public entities—as an offense rather than a legitimate remedy. "Resorting to the legal processes, such as the review mechanism, is sanctioned outside the legal system, based on social norms, by unofficially blacklisting complainants and excluding them from business circles" (Engelbert 2017, p. 210).

Posner (2002) finds that a stark divergence between social norms and the law negatively influences the application of public procurement laws. Engelbert (2017) highlights the role of the expectation to follow "orders from the top" among procurement officers when these orders contradict formal rules and processes. Most public officials try to overcome the problem by carrying out the corrupt act but taking great pains to conceal it. "In systems where corruption is deeply entrenched and trust in the impartiality of oversight institutions is absent, procurement officers who refuse to take orders from their corrupt superiors are not sufficiently protected" (Engelbert 2017, p. 218).

Abbink et al. (2018) explores the impact of a potential sanction through a sequential bribery game to discern the effect of descriptive social norms among public officials on bribe offers by firms. Participants who knew that they were interacting with a partner from a group with a majority of corrupt (as opposed to honest) partners offered twice as many bribes. This effect of norms occurred independently of strategic considerations and the possibility of being sanctioned. Indeed, the effect of sanctions was not significant.

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Orlova & Boichev (2017) look specifically at norms and formal rules within institutions in the Russian construction sector. They argue that changes in "formal rules alter the cost-benefit analysis associated with informal rules and norms surrounding corrupt practices. For example, introducing harsher criminal law penalties for bribery can lead to bribes being given less often, but the amount of bribes increasing to account for the increased risk introduced by formal rules" (Orlova & Boichev 2017, p. 417). This suggests that anticorruption programs need to think through the potential impact of new rules on existing practices and norms so as not to catalyze an evolution in the corrupt practice.

There is also growing evidence that disregarding norms can worsen corruption. Typically, this is due to communications campaigns trying to raise awareness of how "bad" the state of corruption is without understanding the impact of descriptive norms on behavior. For instance, receiving messages about how much bribery is taking place can increase citizens' willingness to participate in bribery, as they believe everyone else is doing it (Scharbatke-Church & Schaitkin 2018). Several experimental studies on corruption information confirm that drawing attention to the amount of corruption, or how common it is, is ineffective or even decreases willingness to fight corruption (Denisova-Schmidt et al. 2016, Peiffer 2020).

On the positive side, anticorruption practitioners can adopt creative ways to incorporate social norms thinking to boost the effectiveness of their interventions. One approach is to shift social norms by means of emphasizing prosocial (norm-deviant) behaviors as role models. Rewarding anticorruption champions with public visibility and other positive reinforcements can help make behavior change desirable. This is the logic behind projects like the Accountability Lab's Integrity Icon.[8] Field experiments by Buntaine et al. (2022) have also tested the impact of offering positive reinforcement to anticorruption champions through various forms of public recognition. As abiding by social norms of corruption is considered to confer status and respectability, the idea is that the same precept can be used to cultivate social norms of anticorruption.

Learning from what research has taught us about social norms and human biases may also fruitfully be incorporated into the theories of change of anticorruption programs. For instance, complicating efforts to change descriptive and injunctive norms is the "everyone is better than average" effect studied by Funcke (2015). In accord with this social psychology phenomenon, the author observes a general tendency for people to assume themselves to be less likely to engage in corrupt acts than the average person. This tendency can impact perceptions of what others do and believe is appropriate and complicate efforts for norm change.

A few scholars are also proposing hypotheses for changing norms with anticorruption programming. Orlova & Boichev (2017), in their examination of the dominance of informal rules in the construction sector in Russia, argue that the formal rules are just a façade; the informal rules dictate all interactions, under the threat of the use of the formal rules for any transgressions. They assert that the only chance for change is a coordinated, bottom-up response to change corruption-related norms. Orlova & Boichev (2017, p. 404) argue that "government regulators will have to include construction industry professionals, labor groups, and consumers in the process of designing regulations that are not only appropriate for the construction industry, but are also complied with." They believe cooperating with civil society may be necessary to build a sufficiently strong coalition to challenge the current status quo.

[8]Integrity Icon (**https://integrityicon.org/about/**) is a global campaign by Accountability Lab that is powered by citizens in search of honest government officials. It aims to generate debate around the idea of integrity and demonstrate the importance of honesty and personal responsibility. The campaign aims to inspire a new generation to be more effective public servants.

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Wickberg (2018) posits that making governance failures visible through media framing as a scandal can offer opportunities to change the norm around corruption. Using France as a case study, she asserts that norm change requires two things. First, multiple scandals are highlighted in the media, creating a cumulative effect; second, the public normatively assesses the acts to be wrong. The sense of public outrage is the critical fuel to the shift in the norm. This would suggest that anticorruption campaigners working in places of endemic corruption should tread carefully, as the general acceptance or banality of corruption weakens the sense of scandal.

Finally, there is a growing body of work on how gender norms inhibit corrupt practices, though not in the context of an anticorruption program. Gender norms are social norms defining acceptable and appropriate actions for women and men in a given group or society (Cislaghi & Heise 2019). In her review of the theory and evidence behind gender and corruption, Alexander (2021, p. 5) notes a "tendency to hold women to higher standards," which leads to harsher punishments when women do not meet these standards, thus deterring women from participating in corruption. Barnard-Webster (2017) finds this dynamic in her work in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where women are expected to be the holders of family values and thus face greater consequences than men if caught engaging in any type of corruption. The view of corrupt acts as a violation of a gender norm diminishes women's willingness to engage in them, due to the possible stark consequences (Stensöta & Wängnerud 2018).

Similarly, in Jordan, *wasta*—the practice of using personal connections, influence, or favoritism to gain advantages or access to resources, opportunities, or services—is a highly gendered practice. It is very rare for a woman to be directly involved in a *wasta* exchange, due to the expectations of how women are supposed to behave (Jackson et al. 2020). Alexander (2021, p. 7) theorizes that increased gender equality will lead to "new norms that prioritize universal value [and] dignity," changing the informal rules, with the potential to decrease corruption. Where there are gender norms that diminish women's willingness to participate in corruption but simultaneously limit their opportunity or ability to prosper, creative thinking will be needed to capitalize on corruption-diminishing gender norms without continuing to marginalize women.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

The field of social norms and corruption is ripe for additional scholarly attention with numerous topics that would benefit from empirical work. This section highlights some areas where inquiry would not only advance knowledge but also offer significant utility to practice.

First, evidence suggests reasonable success in correcting pluralistic ignorance related to college campus drinking, electricity use, and littering in North America. Several studies show that correcting a perception through the use of messengers who are deemed credible to the reference group and who offer accurate information can result in behavior change (Prentice & Miller 1993, Tankard & Paluck 2016). While there is evidence that pluralistic ignorance exists around certain corrupt behaviors (Hoffmann & Patel 2017), no empirical material is available regarding whether the North American strategy would effectively remedy corrupt practices. Empirical work examining the effects of correcting pluralistic ignorance would be an important contribution to anticorruption. Particular attention needs to be given to comparative analysis of different types of contexts (e.g., endemic corruption, postconflict situations), including different types of corruption (e.g., state capture, sextortion), to decipher if there are conditions that make anticorruption interventions more or less effective and sustainable.

Second, empirical investigation of the interaction between the various factors, including social norms, that influence an individual's choice to engage in a corrupt act would contribute tremendously to identifying appropriate anticorruption strategies. As stated above, social norms are not

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a magic bullet to end corruption; they should always be contextualized and considered through an intersectional lens along with other drivers, such as the path dependency of corruption and norms (historical perspective), the political system (macro level), the constellation of institutions (meso level), and individual factors such as gender, age, income, and personality traits (micro level). Seeking to determine if there are combinations of factors such as self-efficacy and intergroup relations that promote or inhibit the influence of social norms would be useful in developing effective theories of change.

Research methodologies to identify the social norms and associated reference groups tend toward large-scale, quantitative measures with analytic means requiring sophisticated training that is simply not feasible for the average anticorruption agency to conduct before developing a program (Scharbatke-Church & Kothari 2021). Thus, our third recommendation is the development of methodological approaches that are practical, in terms of resources and expertise, for anticorruption agencies to identify the specific social norm driving a corrupt practice.

Given the complexity of social norms, even these "good-enough" methods may be too difficult for agencies to use for program monitoring. The research community could offer pragmatic value by identifying viable proxies for change in social norms. For instance, can implementers consider social norms to be changing when behavior change reaches critical mass within the reference group, making behavior change a proxy for norm change (Scharbatke-Church & Kothari 2021)? The assumption is, of course, that these proxies may be conducive to simpler data collection.

Corruption and social norms are part of a vicious cycle, with both acting as cause and effect. The specifics of each are highly dependent on context, requiring anticorruption reform efforts to be tailored to the complexity of every situation. When norms are identified as key drivers of corrupt acts or systems, strategies for change should be integrated into multidimensional anticorruption theories of change. These strategies may target the descriptive or injunctive norm or both. Without tailoring to the context, including addressing social norms, reforms will, at best, echo the dismal results of the past: much effort expended with little diminishment of abuses of power for personal gain. The article does not aim to assess the state of (anti)corruption theories. However, we argue that it is crucial to build better bridges between academics and practitioners and avoid quick translations of research into the field based on general assumptions. At worst, ignoring social norms can result in programs that unintentionally exacerbate the very problem we seek to address: corruption.

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