

# The Rationalization of Political Corruption

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Corrupt officials sometimes rationalize their unethical actions as a psychological defense mechanism, presenting them in an alternative, morally neutral, context. However, there have been no systematic studies of such public sector rationalization. This article presents new data showing that those who engage in corrupt acts attempt to excuse themselves by obfuscating the negative consequences of their decisions. This contrasts with earlier findings that business managers tend to justify corruption in a different way, by highlighting own good intentions. Implications for future research and for anti-corruption efforts follow.

Government corruption, in which officials abuse their positions for private gain, creates lasting harm to society (Tanzi, 1998). Why do people engage in unethical behavior? It is speculated here that the way individuals rationalize their actions—that is, justify them after the fact—may play a role. Several studies of the psychology of corruption in the private sector, as opposed to the government sector, show that people who commit unethical acts tend to rationalize them afterwards, as a defense mechanism to decrease anxiety (Bazerman, 1997; Geva, 2006). Furthermore, some experimental evidence shows that there are distinct patterns to rationalization; for example, corporate actors typically rationalize corrupt behavior after the fact, and tend to do so most often in ways that highlight their own good intentions instead of in ways that minimize the harmful consequences of their choices (Rabl & Kühlmann, 2009). Although these findings have improved our understanding of corruption in business, no study to date has analyzed the rationalization of corruption in public sector settings. This gap in the literature has consequences both for research in corruption generally and for the design of mechanisms to reduce corruption, since successful rationalization has been shown in other contexts to lead to repeated corrupt acts.

The purpose of this study is to spur further research by establishing two arguments as plausible: (1) that public sphere actors who engage in corruption rationalize their actions, and (2) that there may be differences in the pattern of excuse-making rationalization between business and government. The underlying question, about the pattern of rationalizations offered by government officials who make unethical decisions, is important, since if there are systematic disparities between the kinds of explanations that corrupt individuals offer in business and

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government, then anti-corruption programs from the corporate world may not transfer effectively to public management.

The analysis begins with a description of the general problem of public corruption, a survey of the ways officials rationalize it, and a discussion of hypotheses. It continues by introducing a new dataset of public sector corrupt actors, coded for whether and how they explain their behavior, and presents some general findings that public sector actors do, in fact, tend to rationalize their corruption, but that they do so in a systematically different way than private sector actors. The analysis concludes with implications for future research and intervention.

## CORRUPTION

Corruption is the dishonest or fraudulent use of power for personal gain, in which an actor puts personal or small-group interests ahead of the broader goals he or she has otherwise committed to serve (Klitgaard, 1991, p. xi; Tanzi 1998, p. 564; Zyglidopoulos, Fleming, & Rothenberg, 2009, p. 66). Reducing the incidence of corrupt acts by government officials is widely viewed as a high priority in both developed and developing countries, because corruption reduces economic growth (Tanzi, 1998, p. 585), reduces trust in government and other institutions (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Bowler & Karp, 2004), and erodes social cohesion and trust generally (Richey, 2010; Rothstein & Eck, 2009).

Attempts to account for why officials engage in improper acts by accepting or demanding bribes typically identify either the social and institutional context or the individual-level factors. One extreme form of systemic corruption that is best explained at the social-institutional level is when there is a centralized system of corruption, whereby bribery is coordinated at the elite level and lower-level officials collect bribes that they filter up the chain of command in an organized and tacitly regulated way (Tanzi, 1998).

Social context has been shown to affect corruption levels in ways short of massive, systemic corruption. Systems with a separation of powers, and hence diffuse accountability, may produce higher levels of corruption (Rohr, 1988), although this may be offset by legislative oversight (Stapenhurst, Jacobs, & Pelizzo, 2014). Within the United States additional incentives for corruption account for variation (Alt & Lassen, 2003). Other studies with negative findings have tested the impacts of regional concentrations of religious participation (Flavin & Ledet, 2013) and other institutional factors, including the size of bribes available and the specificity of the applicable code of business practices (Rabl, 2011), although at least some kinds of ethics codes may have a measurable impact (Meine & Dunn, 2013).

To the extent that corruption is largely a social and institutional phenomenon, efforts to combat it will be most effective when they are grounded in a better understanding of institutional design. Vito Tanzi's cross-national review concludes that the most effective measures can include such interventions as raising public salaries, increasing the penalties for acts of corruption, eliminating rationing, replacing tax incentives with simpler tax systems with broad bases and lower rates, and reforming state institutions generally (Tanzi, 1998, p. 590).

These institutional understandings of corruption differ from the traditional normative view that corruption is rooted at the individual level. Traditionally, "normative scholarship on corruption tends to view the practices of corruption as alienated, self-interested acts by greedy public servants poaching on national resources and as selfish crimes of calculated desire in the absence

of public discipline.” As a result, “it is therefore assumed that a more pervasive public exercise of social discipline through state institutions will work to prevent corruption by stifling the selfish greed of individuals” (Hasty, 2008, p. 271). Most scholars conclude that situational accounts are ultimately more useful than individual ones (e.g., Hasty, 2008; Meier & Holbrook, 1992; but see Dubnick & Justice, 2014).

Still, some studies have concluded that moral reasoning is connected to corruption. In both experimental settings and observational studies, corruption seems to be connected to low individual cognitive moral development (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Rabl & Kühlmann, 2008), and although traits such as gender and political ideology have not been shown to predict corrupt behavior, other nuanced characteristics at the individual level are correlated (McCabe, Ingram, & Dato-on, 2006). As a result, a growing research program seeks to apply psychological theories to corruption, in particular in business (Craft, 2012; Zahra, Priem, & Rasheed, 2005).

Individual-level findings could furthermore be useful for improving governance, at least in principle. Organizations could reduce corruption, for instance, by focusing on selecting agents who are honest (perhaps by developing better screening processes that assess job applicants for their ethical values and then select only those with the highest integrity). Still, there is at least some connection between individual and situational factors, leading most scholars to conclude that interventions should target individual factors within the context of larger social and cultural conditions (Klitgaard, 1991).

This suggests a synthetic view, in which situations and institutions influence how individual-level traits are realized. For example, Hoekstra and Kaptein (2012) found that because ethical cultures vary across localities, national anti-corruption intervention programs in the Netherlands had different effects across jurisdictions. In another case, Rabl and Kühlmann (2008) conducted an experiment with 196 German college and high school students. The students were split into teams, each of which represented a firm in a business simulation competition. Told that their goal was to maximize the firm’s profits, the students had opportunities to propose and accept corrupt offers. It was made clear to the students that accepting or submitting a corrupt offer would increase their profits. The results suggested that, within a common setting, there was a large variation in how the students responded, suggesting at least some role for individualized differences.

## RATIONALIZATION

In their study of business students, Rabl and Kühlmann (2009) asked subjects to explain their decisions after the fact. Most of the students who had chosen to engage in a corrupt act tended to use rationalization mechanisms that highlighted the positive nature of their corruption, either explaining that their good deeds outweighed their bad actions or appealing to a sense of higher responsibility; in general, they were less likely to obfuscate the negative aspects of corruption by denying responsibility or injury. Rabl and Kühlmann explain this as being a result of the environment and context within which the rationalization occurred: “Therefore one may speculate that justification strategies relate to situational determinants of corrupt behavior” (p. 281).

Rationalization is the defense mechanism commonly used by people who commit acts they know are wrong (Bazerman, 1997, p. 258), for it allows them to disregard the moral content of

their choices. In the classic treatment of rationalization—or “neutralization”—Sykes and Matza (1957) showed that juvenile offenders avoided self-criticism by simply redefining their criminal behaviors as having been morally correct all along. Although rationalization is a *post hoc* justification for actions already taken (Sonenshein, 2007), it has consequences going forward. Excuse-making for corruption, especially when made public, can increase the ambiguity around ethical judgments and thereby reduce social trust even further (Wroe, Allen, & Birch, 2012).

A more immediate concern for public administration, however, is that rationalizations for corruption lead to further corruption. As actors who have engaged in one corrupt act explain their actions in ways that diminish the transgression, it becomes easier for them and for others to commit other, similar acts that can fit the same pretext. Rationalizations and corrupt practices thereby become mutually reinforcing (Anand, Ashforth, & Joshi, 2004; Gioia, 2002; Luo, 2006, p. 752; Murphy & Dacin, 2011; Umphress & Bingham, 2011; Zyglidopoulos et al., 2009, p. 65). Mechanisms producing this effect may include moral detachment (Moore, 2008), the role of retrospective judgments about past actions in making new ethical decisions (Reynolds, 2006), and a belief that evasions are widely shared within a like-minded community (Barnett, Sanborn, & Shane, 2005; Kayes, 2006).

Some preliminary studies of private sector corruption in the field of business ethics conclude that programs to counter rationalizations may have an effect in reducing prospective corruption, but these findings are tentative and require further exploration (Geva, 2006, p. 144). There is no extant research on the role of rationalization among public sector actors (outside of anecdotal reports, e.g., Tuckness, 2010).

### Varieties of Rationalization

People use rationalizations to frame their choices in morally neutral ways, but there are several forms that these strategies can take (see Table 1). Since intervention programs designed to counter rationalization will only be effective if they eliminate the specific justifications corrupt actors are likely to use, scholars early on began operationalizing variant kinds of rationalizations to distinguish between psychological processes that take place in very different ways (Rogers & Buffalo, 1974; Tsang, 2002).

In contemporary studies of business ethics, scholars tend to distinguish between two broad categories: strategies that highlight the positive intentions behind the corrupt actions, and strategies that obfuscate the negative intentions. Rabl and Kühlmann (2009) specify a number of examples of each broad expedient and define a typology that includes eight types of

TABLE 1  
Varieties of Rationalization

<i>Highlight the positive</i>	<i>Obfuscate the negative</i>
Appeal to higher loyalties	Argue legality
Metaphor of ledger	Deny responsibility
	Deny injury
	Deny victim
	Social weight
	Refocus attention

rationalization—six that obfuscate the negative and two that highlight the positive. These are worth noting in detail, as they can be usefully applied to public corruption. Some of the descriptions correspond directly to cases in the data introduced in the next section.

The first example of obfuscating the negative is *legality*. Corrupt actors excuse their behaviors by claiming that as long as an act is legal it is not specifically wrong (Rabl & Kühlmann, 2009, p. 272). In the area of public corruption, officials may take broad or vague laws and interpret them in a way that permits otherwise unethical behavior. For example, one official said in a newspaper interview, “Things just went bad. Yes, I had knowledge that he was over-billing. Our paperwork wasn’t in order. But we legitimately did some work and there was some work there that probably wasn’t” (Ajanaku, 2010). This individual believed that what he did was legal because it was a business process error, not an illegal act of corruption. However, under the technical definition of the law, what he did was in fact illegal. Similar cases may include officials saying that the law does not apply to them because of technicalities or other nuances.

A second rationalization technique that obfuscates the negative is the *denial of responsibility*. Here, “corrupt actors construe that they had no other choice than to participate in corrupt activities due to circumstances which are beyond their control” (Rabl & Kühlmann, 2009, p. 272). Actors who participate in this rationalization may say things like “My boss gave me no choice” or “Everyone in Chicago does it; it’s a way of life.”

Third, through the *denial of injury*, an actor concludes that the corruption did not have any victims. This type of ploy minimizes the act, as the actor believes it has zero consequences for others; it is common in situations of public corruption in which the social harms stemming from favoritism are widely diffused.

In contrast, in the fourth technique, the *denial of victim*, rather than denying that any person has been harmed, the corrupt actor denies the very existence or ethical standing of the victim. As an example, Rabl and Kühlmann suggest rationalizations based on the notion that the victim was a lower class of person and thus might have deserved it; this is probably rare in public corruption (Rabl & Kühlmann, 2009, p. 273).

Fifth, *social weighting* occurs when corrupt actors compare themselves to other, presumably worse, actors, including their accusers. One example from the data is a state legislator in Arkansas who said that the prosecution was politically motivated and thus coming after him. This type of excuse seeks to make observers put the corrupt actor in a frame and judge them based on the other people in the frame rather than on the merits or particulars of their act.

The last type of rationalization is when “corrupt actors deemphasize, compartmentalize, or suppress the knowledge of their acts in favor of more normatively redeeming features of their work” (Rabl & Kühlmann, 2009, p. 273). One example from the dataset is a state senator who explained that he had simply been a “good will ambassador” for a hospital which, after all, performed a useful social function, thereby focusing attention away from the bribe and toward a somewhat redeeming aspects of the arrangement.

Other kinds of rationalizations highlight the actor’s positive intentions. In the *appeal to higher loyalties*, the actors claim that the corrupt acts they committed were in pursuit of a higher goal or greater loyalty. For instance, after being charged with multiple counts of corruption, a former mayor of Detroit tweeted that “Moral responsibility may compel you to disobey the law” and “We must obey God rather than men.” This approach minimizes the corrupt action by placing it in on a different moral scale than others are judged upon. Finally, in the *metaphor*

*of the ledger*, corrupt actors claim they have earned a certain right to commit corrupt acts because of the credit they have gained for previous good works. One state senator in Alaska cast his corruption in a broader context that included all of the good he had done over a long public career.

## PUBLIC AND PRIVATE CORRUPTION

Findings from studies of ethical behavior and corruption in the private sector have often been applied to the public sector (Kantola & Seeck, 2011, discuss the carryover). However, we have not found any direct comparisons of overall patterns of rationalization across corrupt actors in business and corrupt actors in the public sector. In principle, there may be several kinds of comparisons that could be made, examining variations at the individual level, at the level of organizational culture, and in the concentration or diffusion of the harm that government or business corruption creates.

At the individual level, people drawn to careers as different as private enterprise and public service may have differences in their basic social value orientations that in turn have been shown to influence corruption tolerance (Folmer & De Cremer, 2012). Survey research in the United Kingdom suggests that officeholders are more tolerant of corruption than other people, and that even when they recognize that acts might be formally unethical, they are more inclined to excuse the behavior as having less of an impact (Allen & Birch, 2012).

At the organizational level, networks of interactions can magnify initial differences among groups of people. The social institutions of work life and peer networks matter as well for how people excuse their acts, suggesting that individual-level differences in rationalization will be magnified by social effects within an organization (Vitell, Keith, & Mathur, 2011). Finally, public corruption differs systematically from private corruption in that the victims are more diffuse. Obvious, immediately observable victims can engage the empathy of a corrupt actor, leading to the psychological crisis that rationalization then resolves (Salcedo-Albaran, De Leon-Beltran, & Rubio, 2008). In a case of public corruption with unobservable victims, rationalization may either be less necessary or take other forms.

These observations lead to two hypotheses. First, the universal nature of the subconscious processes that cause people to have anxieties about immoral or unethical acts will lead public officeholders to engage in rationalization after the fact. They may not do so in the same way as private sector actors, however. Rationalization strategies are determined in large part by the environment, and the public and private spheres are dramatically different environments that engender different sets of motivations and expectations. Although prior studies suggest that corrupt business actors tend to highlight their own positive intentions (Rabl and Kühlmann, 2009, p. 281), systematic disparities between the kinds of individuals who choose public service in the first place (combined with institutional factors that reinforce those initial differences) suggest the possibility that government officials may rationalize in a dissimilar way. In light of this, the two hypotheses tested in the present work tests:

H1: Public officials rationalize their own corruption.

H2: Public officials tend to rationalize by obfuscating the negative.

## DATA

This research involved the collection of a new dataset of public officials in the United States who were widely understood to have engaged in improper acts: officials who had either been charged formally or whose activities had been widely reported. Using a coding scheme based on the Rabl and Kühlmann (2009) typology, every rationalization for their actions that these people gave was recorded. The database contained 87 corrupt officials, of whom 51 were Democrats, 26 were Republicans, and 10 were other, unknown, or nonpartisan, with partisan codings made based on public information. Eighty-one were male and six were female.

Rationalizations were coded based on press reports, interviews, court records, and other public sources regarding each of the corrupt actors. Forty-three of the officials presented an unambiguous rationalization. For example, a Republican senator was classified as denial of responsibility when one news report quoted him as blaming his lawyers for sloppy bookkeeping, and a Democratic House member was coded as engaging in rationalization based on legality by redefining favoritism as “constituent service.” One state senator used the metaphor of the ledger by explaining that both he and the government contractors who had received payouts had also performed good work for the state. The full dataset as coded, with references to source material, is available at Chad Rector’s website (Gannett & Rector, 2015).

The purpose of the data is to probe the plausibility of there being different patterns to the rationalization of corruption in business and government, and our collection efforts were geared toward that purpose. Several limitations of the data are clear. First, the primary sources were media reports of the culmination of various journalistic, legal, and/or administrative investigations pertaining to the corrupt officials. In coding the data, direct quotations were used from named individuals, and we particularly sought instances in which actors gave the fullest explanation (including those in which an actors made more than one kind of excuse-making statement). Second, the rationalizations may have been designed strategically for public consumption or as part of a legal strategy. While we tried to overcome this by getting quotations from people after they were no longer in legal jeopardy or running for office, their later statements may have been influenced by prior political or legal strategies.

Identifying cases required an operational definition of “corrupt actions” that could be systemically applied. In practice, this was done by limiting the search to those officials who had been formally charged. Of the 87 individuals in the data, 81 were ultimately convicted; the rest were either acquitted on technical grounds or subjected to administrative sanctions. The individuals included in the data were either elected officials, high-ranking career-long aides to elected officials (such as chiefs of staff), or career civil servants. For this reason, we can be confident that the behavior and rationalizations found were shaped by careers in government service rather than in business.

## FINDINGS

The pattern of rationalization in public officials is the mirror image of the results from the Rabl and Kühlmann experiment. The majority of government corrupt actors (88%) used a form of rationalization that relied on obfuscating the negative aspects of their choices (see Table 2). Overall, of the 43 corrupt actors with identifiable rationalizations, five highlighted the positive,

TABLE 2  
Most Officials Rationalized by Obfuscating the Negative

<i>Highlight the positive</i>	<i>No. of cases:</i>	<i>Obfuscate the negative</i>	<i>No. of cases:</i>
Appeal to higher loyalties	1	Argue legality	19
Metaphor of ledger	4	Deny responsibility	8
		Deny injury	1
		Deny victim	0
		Social weight	6
		Refocus attention	4

while 38 obfuscated the negative. Of the 38 who obfuscated the negative, one denied injury, eight denied responsibility, 19 argued the legality, four refocused attention, and six used social weighting. There were no significant patterns specific to party, gender, or type of office held.

The evidence suggests that corrupt officials rationalize corruption and thus is consistent with the first hypothesis. Note that while evidence of rationalization was only confirmed for 43 cases in the database, there may have been other instances of rationalization for the actors identified that did not make it into accessible public records; the true number is likely to be higher. In any case, the pattern suggests that rationalization took place in at least half of the incidents, supporting the basic hypothesis.

The second hypothesis, that public officials rationalize their actions in a way that obfuscates the negative, also found support, with 38 of the 43 cases of rationalization falling in this category. Unlike private sector actors, these actors in government tended to focus on obfuscating the negative when they rationalized, using explanations for their behavior that included social weighting, arguing legality, and denial of responsibility. This contrasts with the Rabl and Kühmann (2009) study of private sector wrongdoing, which suggests that corrupt actors in business settings tend to highlight their own positive intentions.

## IMPLICATIONS

While preliminary, the findings offer a possibility that has important implications for research into both the individual-level motivations for public corruption and the effectiveness of interventions designed to reduce it. First, the results reinforce the idea that psychology has a role in corruption. If rationalization is a common element of public corruption, then psychological anxiety is a crucial aspect of a corrupt actor's decision matrix. Future studies of public sector corruption may therefore benefit from a careful consideration of rationalization methods. Second, current anti-corruption programs focus on the consequences of the problem and education about its legal component. However, if corruption has a strong basis in psychology, as indicated by the need to rationalize it, then programs that focus on negating potential rationalization techniques might be more effective. Such programs might target obfuscations of the negative, for example, rather than highlight the positive, emphasizing individual responsibility as opposed to describing broader social harms. This would target specific rationalizations to which public officials would be more susceptible, such as the denial of individual responsibility, rather than rationalizations to which they would not, such as the metaphor of the ledger.



Anti-corruption efforts implemented in business settings have been applied to the public sector, but the results have been mixed at best (Craft, 2010; Rosenson, 2009; van Montfort, Beck, & Twijnstra, 2013). One study found that mandated ethics programs are ineffective when the values they embody do not match the local moral culture (Fording, Miller, & Patton, 2003). This line of reasoning has sometimes led to the conclusion that anti-corruption programs should be, and typically are, operated at the local level and tailored to local conditions (Huberts & Six, 2012). However, if culture is a combination of unique individual traits and a process of ethical reinforcement (through informal connections among people who have all chosen public service as a profession), then the value of an anti-corruption campaign depends on the suitability of its tactics to the psychological—in addition to the cultural—terrain. It is therefore critically important to know whether there are broad differences between the way that public and private actors think about their acts. If there are systematic variations, then efforts to mitigate corruption through education and norm-reinforcement will be unsuccessful unless they combat the distinctive kinds of rationalizations for corrupt behavior that public sector officials are more likely to use.

The present study is an initial exploration of patterns in public sector rationalizations for corruption. It finds that public sector officials do, in fact, try to explain away corruption and tend to do so by obfuscating the negative. Future research could expand the sample of officials studied simply as a matter of robustness. In addition, it could relate corrupt acts to the kinds of anti-corruption education efforts that were in place, to see whether education programs designed to undermine common rationalizations actually reduced future corruption or simply led to a shift in excuses. In addition, the contrast with private sector corruption is striking and provides opportunity for further study. Why are public sector actors so different? How does corruption originate in the public sector? Further research is necessary on anti-corruption programs that utilize anti-rationalization efforts.

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