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Corruption as an organizational process: Understanding the logic of the denormalization of corruption

Corrupción como proceso organizacional: comprendiendo la lógica de la desnormalización de la corrupción

David Arellano-Gault

Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, Mexico

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Abstract

This article discusses the basic assumptions of an individualist vision on corruption. A different argument based on “social density” of the phenomenon is proposed instead: the process of normalization of corruption. Under this umbrella, corruption is a political concept that looks to impose a particular vision on what are “right” behaviors based on a sharp and unrealistic separation of the public and private sphere. A review of the organizational literature on corruption is developed, with the aim of understanding how organizational processes of socialization triggers behaviors that make corrupt acts to appear as “normal” under the organizational logic. Persons find themselves in a “slippery slope”, generating agreements and social dynamics that are able to produce corrupt logics under the normal life of an organization. A plea for discussing the social processes needed to “un-normalize” corruption is defended a conceptualization that goes beyond an individualist and moralist vision of the phenomenon.

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Keywords: Corruption; Organizational corruption; Socialization; Rationalization; Strategies against corruption

Resumen

El artículo cuestiona los supuestos de la visión individualista de la corrupción y se introduce al contrario una conceptualización más «densa socialmente»: el proceso de normalización de la corrupción. En esta

E-mail address: david.arellano@cide.edu

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última lógica, se advierte que una definición de corrupción es siempre una definición política e ideológica que intenta imponer una visión determinada de comportamientos «adecuados» de acuerdo a una separación pretendidamente tajante y clara entre las esferas de lo público y lo privado. Se realiza una revisión de parte de la literatura sobre corrupción organizacional, con el fin de comprender cómo las rutinas, procesos y estructuras de socialización propias de la arena organizacional pueden llevar justamente a las personas a «caer en resbaladilla» hacia una dinámica de corrupción. A normalizarla en otras palabras. Se concluye con un llamado a discutir los procesos de desnormalización de la corrupción, como estrategia sustantiva más allá de la visión individualista o moralista del fenómeno.

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Palabras clave: Corrupción; Corrupción organizacional; Socialización; Racionalización; Estrategias contra la corrupción

Introduction

It is common, in the literature on corruption (e.g., [Nye, 1967](#); [Rose-Ackerman, 1978](#)) to define it as an act of an individual, an inappropriate or deviated act according to certain parameters or social values that are relatively accepted in a society or group. This definition even opens the possibility to understand that, beyond the inappropriateness of the behavior of the person, it could be considered, under certain circumstances, as a rational or calculated behavior. In other words, corruption, from this analytical angle, is the decision made by an individual during a transaction with another individual or group of individuals, (unduly) taking advantage of from a specific *position* in this relation or transaction. This individualistic vision is sustained on a starting point: that the individual knows or understands in a broad manner, the situation in which she is and has calculated that behaving corruptly is convenient or beneficial to her. This way, a very particular interaction model is formed between actors that consciously calculate and act, measuring the consequences with a certain logic and intention. In this way, when placing emphasis in calculating individuals that act substantively thanks to this calculation ability (i.e., based on a conscious behavior), corruption is seen as a decision made by individuals under a certain and particular value context. In this logic of conscious and calculating individuals we can infer several things: first, that corruption is inevitable in social relations, as it is funded in the calculations of rational actors. Second, fighting it is basically a matter of affecting the balance between cost and benefit that the individuals are able to calculate.

The main issue to be considered in this article is that this individualistic vision is incredibly limited, first, to understand the phenomenon in its entirety and therefore, as a second point, to propose long-term solutions. The main objective of this document is to demonstrate, through a review of the literature on organizational corruption, that corruption is not a phenomenon where individuals enter discreet relations, but rather a dense social phenomenon. It is a social relation, in other words. And this social logic is both true for corruption in the private sector as it is in the public one, thus this article does not make a particular distinction between them. In other words, we speak of corruption in organizations of any type. From the review of this organizational literature of corruption we seek to fairly identify how corruption may be normalized as a social process with stages and socialization processes and rationalization.

The way in which the argument is developed is by analyzing how the studies of organizational corruption place significant emphasis in the group and social space where the decision is made and where the behavior generates. In this manner, we arrive to very different diagnoses and

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