

Towards a Psychodynamic Theory of Corruption

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ABSTRACT

According to Transparency International's latest corruption index, India is one of the most badly affected countries in Asia. To compound matters, the recent pandemic has made matters considerably worse. The explanations for such rampant acts of bribery and embezzlement tend to involve burdensome regulations and opaque branches of government. Other authors suggest that India suffers from a lack of competitive free markets. These explanations are, of course, valid. However, what the literature appears to lack is a more human-centered explanation for acts of corruption. For example, talking about Kafkaesque like regulations fails to answer a fundamental question: Why, on a deeply human level, do some people knowingly violate the law? More specifically, what factors could play a role in creating a person willing to engage in acts of dishonesty and/or illegality? From my research, when discussing India specifically, the extant literature lacks a psychodynamic theory of corruption. In this short paper, I attempt to address that problem. Please find the paper attached.

Keywords: India; Corruption; Abuse; Childhood; Psychopathy

INTRODUCTION

According to Transparency International's latest corruption index, India is one of the most badly affected countries in the Asian world [1]. To compound matters, the recent pandemic has made matters considerably worse [2]. The explanations for such rampant acts of bribery and embezzlement tend to involve burdensome regulations and opaque branches of government [3]. Other authors [4] suggest that India suffers from a lack of competitive free markets.

These explanations are, of course, valid. However, what the literature appears to lack is a more human-centered explanation for acts of corruption. For example, talking about Kafkaesque like regulations fails to answer a fundamental question: Why, on a deeply human level, do some people knowingly violate the law? More specifically, what factors could play a role in creating a person willing to engage in acts of dishonesty and/or illegality? From my research, when discussing India specifically, the extant literature lacks a psychodynamic theory of corruption. In this short paper, I attempt to address that problem.

Psychodynamic theory emphasizes the importance of childhood experiences in shaping our thoughts, actions, and behaviors as adults. Events that occur in childhood, especially within the first five years of existence [5], appear to have a profound impact on our future selves. If one is exposed to a particularly traumatic environment from an early age, for example, such unpleasant memories may be stored in the unconscious, and cause problems in later years [6]. But, one asks, how could negative events in childhood

create a future self-willing to engage in acts of corruption?

The Dark Triad and Acts of Corruption

The Dark Triad is a collection of three connected, largely unpleasant personality constructs: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy [7]. Not surprisingly, there appears to be a strong, highly credible link between Dark Triad traits and corruption [8].

After all, corruption involves duplicitous or fraudulent conduct. Those who score high on Machiavellianism excel at acts of calculated manipulation and deceit [9]. For one to successfully engage in an act of corruption, a certain degree of manipulation and disregard for moral conventions is necessary.

Meanwhile, narcissism is characterized by extreme self-involvement. It is positively correlated with excessive egocentricity, delusions of grandeur, conceit, and arrogant pretension [10]. As authors have argued [11], narcissists are more likely to engage in behaviors that provide immediate gratification, sometimes at the expense of others' wellbeing.

The last component of the unholy trinity is psychopathy; it involves high levels of impulsivity, cold-heartedness, and socially destructive behaviors [12]. It is a disorder characterized by evident emotional deficits, as well as a fundamental lack of remorse.

Those who score high on Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy tend to employ the "fast life strategy," which is characterized by both a present-oriented mindset and a lack of

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respect for social norms [13]. Unlike a slow-life strategy, which is underlined by a deliberative, future-oriented mindset, people who engage in fast life strategies are more impulsive and prone to acts of greed [14]. Furthermore, they are more likely to endorse deviant behaviors [15]. Corruption, by its very definition, is an act of deviancy.

Childhood years and the Emergence of the Dark Triad

The development of psychopathic traits is positively correlated with early exposure to a dysfunctional environment [16]. The term dysfunctional environment is somewhat vague, so for clarity, I wish to define such an environment as one that lacks what it is expected to provide. Children who receive inadequate nutrition and are deprived of access to basic healthcare are victims of a dysfunctional environment. Furthermore, children who find themselves born into homes where physical abuse and persistent neglect prevail are also victims of a dysfunctional environment. India, sadly, is home to great degrees of dysfunctionality.

Somewhere in the country, every 15 minutes, a child is sexually abused [17]. That works out at close to 100 children a day, 700 a week, 2800 a month, and 33,600 each year. India is home to some of the worst cases of child abuse in the world [18].

Psychopathy

When it comes to the emergence of psychopathic traits later in life, a history of childhood abuse is often a contributing factor [19]. Though victims of sexual abuse are more likely to be female, the sexual abuse of young boys in India occurs with alarming frequency [20]. As males in India make up a significant majority of the workforce [21], and males appear to have significantly lower moral standards than females [22], the widespread abuse of young boys is a valid point to include when discussing possible catalysts for corrupt behavior. An environment where moral standards are lacking allows corruption to flourish [23].

Narcissism

Meanwhile, narcissism develops at a young age, with some authors identifying its manifestation in children as young as 4 [24]. Regarding its development, a traumatic environment where “excessive deviations” from ideal parenting practices occurs appears to play a significant role [25]. Neglect or abuse is a prime example of excessive deviation. Abusive parents view their children in an unrealistic manner, which only serves to devalue their worth as individuals.

This is not to say that Indian parents are more abusive than, say, Nepali parents; it’s to say that far too many children in India are products of environments where “excessive deviations” from ideal parenting practices are too common.

Worryingly, narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), the most extreme version of narcissism, appears to have a strong genetic component [26]. Narcissism and dishonesty, one of the defining features of corruption, are strongly correlated [27].

Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism is intimately and inextricably linked with corruption [28]. Those who score high on the personality trait tend to prioritize money and power over commitments to the broader community [29].

Machiavellianism’s manifestation appears to have strong associations with childhood trauma [30]. Like NPD, Machiavellianism has a genetic component attached to it [31]. Of course, the environment one is exposed to also play a significant role. For example, the identification hypothesis suggests that children imitate the behaviors and actions of their primary caregivers [32]. A couple of intriguing studies [33,34] suggest that children of parents who score high in Machiavellianism go on to display high levels of the trait later in life.

Negative childhood events (sexual abuse, extreme cases of neglect, etc.) are closely associated with the emergence of Dark Triad characteristics. This is not a controversial point to make; exposure to childhood trauma can have adverse, lifelong effects.

Poverty and Corruption

Childhood abuse occurs more frequently in poverty stricken environments. 60% of India's citizens live on less than 227 Rupees (about \$3.10) a day; meanwhile, 21%, or a quarter of a billion people, survive on less than 147 Rupees (\$2) a day [35]. One of the consequences of poverty is malnutrition. Across the Asian continent, Indian children are among the most malnourished.

When compared with well-nourished children, malnourished children are more likely to experience emotional dysregulation [36]; in addition, they are more prone to aggressive outbursts [37]. Additionally, malnourished children struggle with inhibitory control and display higher levels of impulsive behaviors. Malnutrition, in extreme cases, can cause irreversible brain damage. Such damage can have a profound impact on the individual later in life, effecting everything from decision making to their emotional disposition [38].

Poverty has a devastating effect on humans, both collectively and individually. Corruption thrives where poverty thrives. In fact, corruption and poverty share a bidirectional relationship: the latter encourages the former, while the former entrenches the effects of the latter [39-41].

CONCLUSION

To clarify, this short paper was not intended as a criticism of Indian people or Indian culture. My intentions were pure. I wanted to show how too many innocent children, through no fault of their own, are exposed to inhumane treatment. Exposure, especially if prolonged in nature, may very well play a role in creating adults more willing to engage in acts of duplicity. Such a society, where dishonesty and disregard for others thrives, may benefit a small minority (i.e. those who benefit from corruption), but the majority certainly suffers. India is a country of extreme inequalities, where a select few enjoy the riches.

When merely surviving is a struggle for millions of Indians, the adoption of a “fast-life” strategy towards life is to be expected. With such a mindset, as discussed earlier, a host of problems arise. Addressing the issue of corruption in India requires a more humanistic approach. Lest we forget that corruption is, after all, carried out by humans, every one of whom was once a child. It would serve us well to keep such an obvious assertion at the forefront of our minds.

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