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Should I Accept or Refute? Understanding the Socio-Organizational Factors Influencing Corruption in Ghana's Public Service

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ABSTRACT

Corruption remains endemic despite intensified global anti-corruption efforts, indicating a need to reassess current strategies. This study focused on how context-specific socio-organizational factors influence employees' engagement in corrupt activities in Ghana's public service. The sample for the study consists of 48 public service workers. This includes 26 middle-level management staff who participated in the focus group discussions and 22 directors who were interviewed individually. Additionally, 8 expert interviews were conducted to enhance comprehension and discussion of the findings. Key socio-organizational factors, including "opportunistic staffing," "reciprocal appreciation," "praise singing," and "order from above" were identified. Formal rules and sanctions alone were found to be inadequate in addressing corruption due to the complex contextual nature of the socio-organizational factors. These factors could serve as a foundation for designing training programs and nudges that promote ethical behavior. Moreover, they offer valuable insights for developing anti-corruption interventions that align with the practical realities of ethical decision-making in Ghana's public service.

KEYWORDS

Corruption; social-cultural factors; organizational factors; unethical behaviour

Corruption remains a persistent issue worldwide despite the numerous anti-corruption policies and initiatives. It continues to pose significant costs for governments and organizations, especially in developing countries (Muratbekova-Touron et al., 2022). This unethical behavior discourages investors and undermines public trust, reducing economic growth and productivity (Ceschel et al., 2022; Graycar, 2020; Hechanova & Manaois, 2020; Zhang, 2022). According to the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2018), corruption incurs a staggering cost of US\$2.6 trillion, equivalent to 5% of the global GDP, with Africa alone losing US\$148 billion, or 25% of its GDP, due to corruption. For instance, Ghana is estimated to annually experience a loss of US\$3 billion due to corruption (Ljubas, 2019). These alarming statistics have spurred researchers from various fields to dedicate substantial efforts to understand and combat this pervasive issue (Ete et al., 2022; Hamoudah et al., 2021).

However, despite the increasing body of scholarly literature on corruption spanning the past three decades, comprehension of this phenomenon remains unclear (Cintra et al., 2018; Moisé, 2020; Muratbekova-Touron et al., 2022). According to Von Alemann (2004), corruption can be perceived differently depending on the context, making it a "phenomenon of perception" (p. 23).

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The importance of context in comprehending corruption is widely recognized; nevertheless, there is a lack of empirical research examining the specific contextual factors that foster or mitigate corruption within various organizational settings (Baez-Camargo et al., 2020; Muratbekova-Touron et al., 2022; Williams & Le Billon, 2017). The few studies available have primarily focused on investigating the relationship between individuals' proclivity to engage in corrupt activities by identifying various organizational factors such as ethical leadership, integrity climate, supportive management, and organizational justice (Ceschel et al., 2022; Ete et al., 2022; Hamoudah et al., 2021; Hechanova & Manaois, 2020; Zahari et al., 2022).

There is also a dearth of scholarly work examining socio-cultural variables that may influence an individual's propensity to engage in corrupt practices (Hauser et al., 2021; Köbis et al., 2015). Furthermore, the interplay between socio-cultural and organizational factors in influencing corruption in specific contexts has not been extensively studied, with only a few studies explicitly examining this relationship (Boateng et al., 2021). As a result, there remains a gap in understanding how both socio-cultural and organizational factors contribute to corruption within specific settings, warranting further studies in this area.

Also, a plethora of existing literature (e.g., Ceschel et al., 2022; Ete et al., 2022; Hamoudah et al., 2021; Hechanova & Manaois, 2020; Zahari et al., 2022) has shown that organizational and socio-cultural factors characterized as macro-level perspectives are likely to influence corruption. However, understanding micro-level perspectives, specifically, the individual choices that come into play when dealing with these broader macro-level factors, remains limited (Gorsira et al., 2018; Zimelis, 2020).

Undoubtedly, there is a pressing need for further empirical research to enhance our understanding of the intricate interplay between organizational and socio-cultural factors, collectively referred to as socio-organizational factors, that contribute to corruption across diverse contexts and how employees navigate through these factors in the organization. To address these knowledge gaps, the study adopts a qualitative approach with the following overarching research questions:

RQ1. What are the specific socio-organizational factors influencing corruption within the Ghana public service?

RQ2. How do public service workers (PSWs) experience and navigate these factors in corrupt situations?

By addressing these research questions, the study addresses the lack of empirical research on contextual factors that either promote or mitigate corruption within the Ghana public service. Moreover, the study pioneers a novel approach by identifying the specific socio-organizational factors influencing corruption and delving into how PSWs experience and navigate these factors in real-life corrupt scenarios. This innovative approach aligns with recent calls from systematic reviews in corruption literature, urging a deeper understanding of individual decision-making and behavior within corrupt environments (Zimelis, 2020).

Addressing corruption in Ghana's public service

Corruption in Ghana's public service has been linked to an entrenched mix of historical, political, socio-cultural, and economic constraints (Agbota et al., 2017; Gyekye, 1997; Igboin, 2016; Kumasey & Hossain, 2020). The Ghana public service consists of institutions tasked with developing economic and social policies, implementing public programs, raising revenue, and ensuring accountability in public service administration (Ohemeng & Kamga, 2020). In defining normative standards for public officials' ethical conduct and decision-making, Jørgensen and Rutgers (2014) emphasized the relevance of values such as accountability, transparency, equity, efficiency, and sensitivity to the interests of the public.

Despite efforts to institutionalize values of probity, integrity, accountability, and efficiency as outlined in the Ghana Civil Service Code of Conduct, most public services still project a tarnished unethical reputation and diminished trust of citizens (Kumasey & Hossain, 2020). As argued by researchers (e.g., Ayee, 2019; Asiedu & Deffor, 2017), the prevalence of cases of corruption in the Ghana public service is primarily an indication of the erosion of integrity.

Ghana has adopted globally recommended anti-corruption strategies such as direct enforcement and monitoring and indirect structural reforms aimed at mitigating corruption (Fritzen & Dobel, 2018). Ghana's legal framework to mitigate corruption consists of statutes, such as the Public Procurement Act of 2003 (Act 663) and the Whistle-Blowers Act of 2006 (Act 720). The Bureau of National Investigations, the Economic and Organized Crime Office (EOCO), and the Office of the Special Prosecutor are among the entities tasked with investigating corruption in Ghana (Kumasey & Hossain, 2020). Since 1993, ruling governments have implemented various indirect structural reforms to enhance public service delivery. These include the National Institutional Renewal Program (NIRP), the New Approach to Public Service Reform, and the New Public Service Reforms Strategy (NPSRS) (Ohemeng & Kanga, 2020).

Though these strategic interventions are supplemented by the watch-dog activities of civil society organizations (CSOs) and political pressure groups, the effectiveness of these global anti-corruption strategies has been limited by implementation and regulatory gaps, lack of political will and institutional capacity, and deep-rooted dysfunctional socio-cultural norms (Agbota, 2017; Sakyi & Bawole, 2010). For example, among Ghana's public service, the police force has been cited as the most corrupt public institution, currently with the prevalence of corruption 53.2 percent higher than other public services (UNODC, 2022). The implementation of a unified salary structure in 2010 to incentivize public servants appears to have had no effect on extortion and bribery within the Ghana police force but may have rather contributed to an increase in the monetary value of bribes solicited by police officers stationed at roadblocks (Foltz & Opoku-Agyemang, 2015; Tankebe et al., 2019).

To address corruption in Ghana and the public service in particular, the socio-cultural roots, negative colonial legacies, and current institutional and regulatory constraints must be targeted in tandem. As argued by Fritzen and Dobel (2018), there is no one best strategy in the fight against systemic corruption; thus, it is critical to identify the context-specific nuances in corrupt systems, with the goal of applying appropriate strategies to challenge and transform deeply ingrained constraints.

Bounded rationality and ethical fading in corruption scenarios

Corruption is a normative concept; therefore, its definition varies according to various stakeholders' cultural and contextual perspectives. However, the most common definition of corruption is "*the abuse of entrusted power for private gain*" (Transparency International, 2016). In academic discourse, corruption is commonly described as encompassing various illicit activities, including but not limited to fraudulent practises, bribery, preferential treatment, cronyism, and coercion (de Graaf et al., 2018; WEF, 2018).

The rational choice theory has contributed significantly to comprehending corrupt intents through the dominant principal-agent lens. According to rational choice theory, corruption is a cost-benefit analysis of incentives, sanctions, and utility maximization. Thus, changing incentive structures and implementing mechanisms that increase corruption risk may make corruption less appealing to corrupt actors (Juraev, 2018; Linstead et al., 2014; Persson et al., 2013; Tremblay et al., 2017). The theory has however demonstrated limited efficacy in detecting nuances specific to contexts and offering holistic solutions to address the issue of corruption. While decision-making is a process of choosing between alternatives, it is essential to recognize that decisions are much more sensitive to context than individual rational choices (Kubbe & Varraich, 2019).

Nottingham and User (2017) argued that the cost-benefit, step-by-step rationalistic assumption could explain actors' proclivities to corruption if decision-makers have full knowledge of payoffs and sanctions and can weigh all alternatives without cognitive constraints. Bounded rationality assumptions suggest that public servants may lack the ability or motivation to thoroughly consider the ethical, legal, and societal implications of their actions. As a result, they may engage in corrupt practices while disregarding the negative consequences.

Furthermore, various factors constrain decision-makers, and economic incentives do not always inform corruption (Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011). Decision-makers use cognitive shortcuts to choose the first option that meets their satisfaction threshold, known as "satisficing" (Simon, 2000). Similarly, bounded ethicality principles also suggest that ethical fading can affect decision-making in ethical dilemmas, possibly leading to a departure from initial ethical intentions. Ethical fading is a cognitive phenomenon in which social, cultural, economic, and organizational factors distort an act's ethical implications and consequences (Kominis & Dudau, 2018; Rees et al., 2019). This may explain why, despite widespread condemnation of corruption as legally and morally reprehensible, a significant number of individuals engage in this unethical behavior in an environment where it is destigmatized and accepted (Gans-Morse et al., 2018; Köbis et al., 2015).

Studies in neuroscience support the argument that beliefs and intuition influence corruption information processing more than logic (Bowman, 2018; Prehen & Heekeren, 2014). Other researchers reported that when confronted with ethical dilemmas, individuals' decision-making processes are influenced by the presence or absence of external factors, such as opportunities and social sanctions that either enable or constrain their behavior (Abbink et al., 2018; Agbota et al., 2017; Baez-Camargo et al., 2020; Campbell & Göritz, 2014).

The concept of African personhood (Gyekye, 1997) provides a contextual explanation. Gyekye explains that within the African context, ethical conduct embodies the principles of communalism. An individual is deemed to possess the status of "a person" (referred to as "onipa") when their conduct is perceived to be morally upright and advantageous to the broader community. This suggests that within the African context, individuals may engage in corrupt practices not solely for personal gain, but rather to fulfill societal norms and to gain sense of belonging (Kumasey & Hossain, 2020; Wariboko & Falola, 2020).

Materials and methods

This study employed the interpretive qualitative approach to investigate the perspectives of Ghanaian public servants regarding corruption. The research was conducted at public service establishments in the Accra Metropolitan Area. Public service organizations that administer identification documents and utility services were chosen as the focus of the investigation because of their frequent interactions with citizens and propensity to be confronted with corruption. The study emphasized the availability and willingness of participants while also considering factors such as gender and length of service. This was done to ensure a diverse sample for individual and group interviews. Twenty-six Directors and Deputy Directors were included in individual interviews. Twenty-two middle-level management employees participated in three focused group discussions made up of 6–8 participants in each group. Most of the participants were men ($n = 35$), and majority of the participants had over 11 years of public service experience (Table 1). To assist in the design of the interview guide and to enhance discussion of findings and recommendations, eight (8) expert interviews were held with participants from the Ghana Anti-Corruption Coalition, Star Ghana, IMANI Ghana, a Retired Public Servant's Association, and a Media House.

Focus groups and individual interviews were combined in the study to collect in-depth data and validate findings. All interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide that

Table 1. Background information of participants.

Item	Category	Number
Sex	Male	35
	Female	21
Age	25 – 35	15
	36 – 45	14
	46 – 55	21
	56 – 65	6
Years of work	1 – 10	19
	11 – 20	25
	21 – 30	9
	31 – 40	3

Note: From: Should I accept or refute? Understanding the Socio-Organizational factors influencing Corruption in Ghana's Public Service.

included three hypothetical corruption scenarios. The interviews were conducted in English and ranged from 60 to 110 minutes, with an average duration of 90 minutes.

With the participants' permission, audio recordings of the interviews were made. The audio recordings were transcribed and de-identified before being uploaded to the MAXQDA 2020 software. Braun and Clark's recursive approach was used in an inductive coding process where constant comparison and discussion were used to consolidate codes into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were checked for consistency with the primary data extraction. All three authors engaged in extensive discussions and interactions with the coded data, and observed discrepancies were rectified.

Findings and discussions

Participants' experiences with socio-organizational factors in corrupt scenarios

Eight sub-themes were generated under socio-organizational factors. These are: (1) praise-singing, (2) reciprocal appreciation, (3) order from above, (4) reciprocal trust, (5) opportunistic staffing, (6) content knowledge of rules/regulations, (7) informal sanctions, and (8) under-resourced offices (Figure 1). Socio-organizational factors were defined as acceptable functional or dysfunctional beliefs and practices that regulate working relationships in the public service. This section discusses the vignette findings on participants' experiences with the socio-organizational factors in corrupt scenarios. Participants were asked to identify corrupt behaviors in each vignette and suggest a solution to the dilemma. Findings revealed that participants navigated the socio-organizational factors based on their perceptions of (1) the corrupt act and (2) the relationship with the corrupt partner. This section highlights and explains the identified themes and participants' experiences using anonymized participant quotations.

Vignette 1

In Vignette (1), a person in authority requested that their relative be hired, even though the relative had been rejected after an interview. Most individual participants and all focus groups identified the scenario as nepotism, but they disagreed that nepotism is corruption. As explained by a participant:

This case is nepotism, we can say all the ...isms..., but in Ghana, we are all related. It is not really corruption, this issue of meritocracy versus favoritism and nepotism, look, it is dicey. It is not as if once you employ a relation of yours you are condoning a wrong. (DM10, male, 50 years, 18 years of service)

Most interviewees and all focus group participants knew that professional rules and regulations governing public service work existed. However, many could not recall or restate any specific

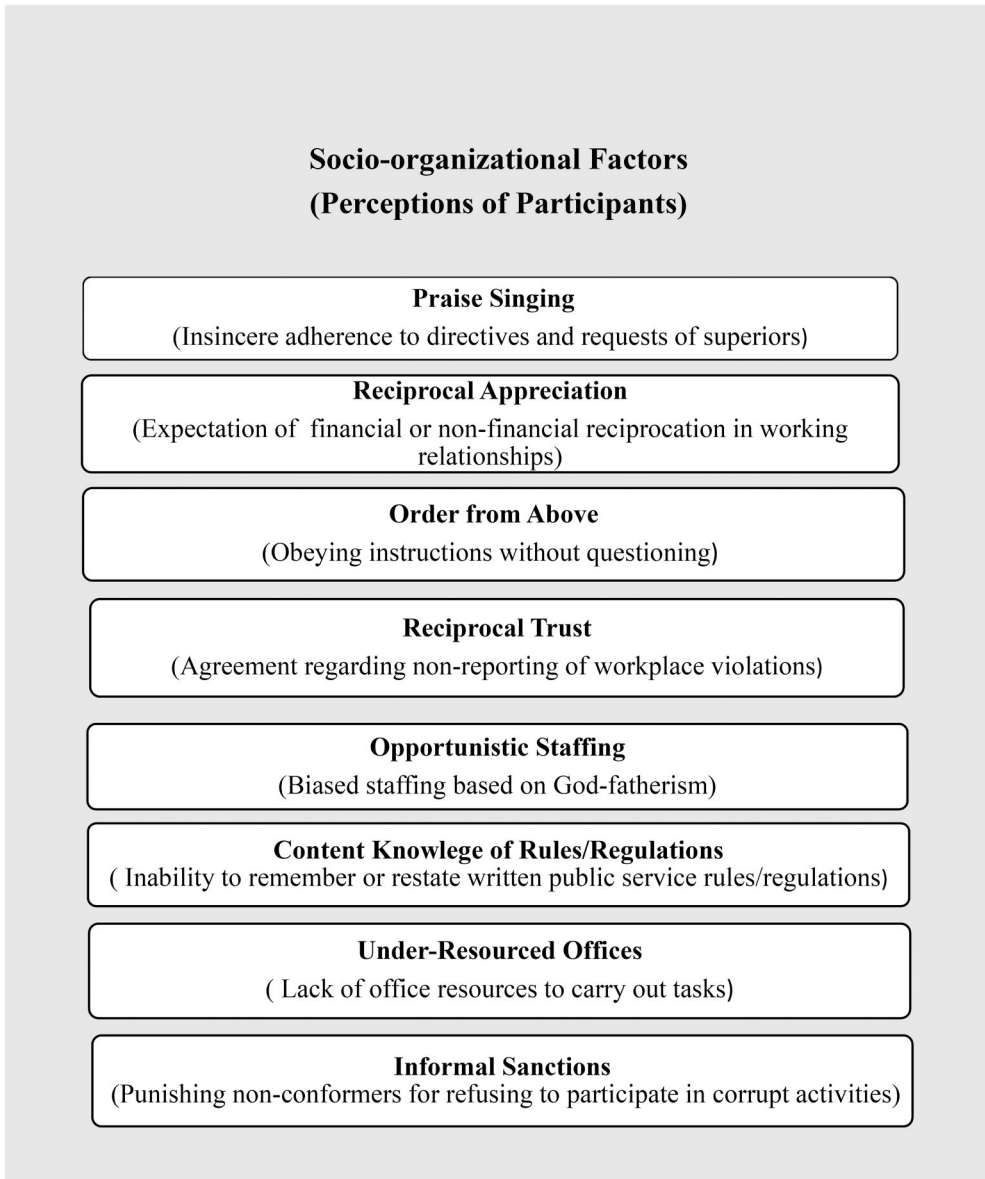


Figure 1. The summarized themes under socio-organizational factors.

code of conduct or regulation relating to favoritism or nepotism, indicating a *lack of content knowledge* of the rules and regulations. One participant narrated:

I do not remember clearly most rules and regulations of work... frankly speaking, there is no consistent orientation. ... for something to become a part and parcel of you, you must be trained. When someone gets into trouble, then you hear of the rule they violated. (DM25, 47 years, 13 years of service)

Many participants used the theme, *reciprocal appreciation*, to justify the acceptance of nepotism. *Reciprocal appreciation* alludes to an expectation of financial or non-financial reciprocation in relationships. Participants narrated that this norm appears to have evolved into a form of manipulation, as superiors demand favors and loyalty from subordinates in exchange for approval of formal incentives due to them. Participants were also concerned about the vignette character's

various social relationships with the corrupt partner (boss, church member, and classmate), as well as the possibility of informal sanctions and victimization from other individuals involved in these relationships. As articulated by a participant:

... , if I didn't know the boss, as also my mate and a church member, I would have considered saying the truth and terminating the appointment... there is that unseeing hand binding me to do him the favor. If I don't do it I would have to face the person in all these relationships. There will be cold shoulders. (DM1, male, 46 years, 15 years of service)

The theme "*order from above*" was a predominant discourse among participants in resolving this vignette. It refers to an unquestionable hierarchical reporting structure between higher-ranking officials and their subordinates. According to participants, it is considered disrespectful to question a superior's instructions, especially in front of co-workers, so in the present scenario, agreement to the corrupt act was expected as "an order from above." In the words of a participant:

Sometimes it is not as if public servants sit down and plan to be corrupt. Disobeying the order from above can land you into a web of trouble, once your boss tells you "order from above," it means the boss himself is now a puppet. He is already kowtowing. How do you then the subordinate remain standing. (FG 2 A6, male, 28 years, 3 years of service)

Most participants' labeling of nepotism as "not-real-corruption," as well as their justifications for advising the vignette character to commit the corrupt act, resonates with earlier findings that nepotism is common and acceptable in Ghana and the public service (Kumasey & Hossain, 2020). Thus participants ability to recognize nepotism as a barrier to meritocracy and as a counterproductive work behaviour may have been distorted. In their study, de Graaf et al. (2018) found no agreement on nepotism as a form of corruption. They posited that typologies of public service corruption should not be universal because public servants may interpret and experience corrupt acts differently depending on the context.

Anti-corruption efforts in the Ghana public service depend largely on the effective implementation and enforcement of the public service rules and regulations. *Lack of content knowledge* of rules and regulations may weaken accountability and increase the tendency to break rules without remorse (Akosa et al., 2020; Kumasey & Hossain, 2020; Sakyi & Bawole, 2010). Other researchers also observed that a lack of rigor in enforcing public service rules and regulations and a bias in punishing infractions, spread corruption (McCandless & Ronquillo, 2020).

Informal sanctions set organizational behaviour when codes of conduct and regulations fail (Agbota et al., 2017). Similarly, participants in this study reported that perceived threats of sanctions limit reporting of organizational misconduct, and limit compliance with organizational rules and regulations. The finding supports previous research (e.g., Abraham et al., 2018; Okafor, 2020; de Graaf et al., 2018; Tankebe et al., 2019) that corrupt networks are strengthened by group support and threatening of non-members from reporting unethical conduct. Meza and Zizumbo-Colunga (2020) reported that public servants become non-compliant due to the psychological burden of disregarding colleagues' interests; thus employees may not follow decision-making codes of conduct and are more likely to break the rules to show goodwill to colleagues. Kumasey and Hossain (2020) also indicated that kinship and other network pressures may undermine public service values and regulations through social capital.

The expectation to obey "*orders from above*" without question suggests top-down decision-making, which could compromise public service integrity. Subordinates may not be allowed to express their opinions on decisions affecting them and may be expected to show unwavering loyalty to superiors even in unethical situations. The narrative links with *respect for authority*, a social norm reported by Agbota et al. (2017) and Baez-camargo et al. (2020), where those in power in the society can overrule a decision to favour them or intimidate subordinates into obeying instructions without questioning. Applying *reciprocal appreciation* in public service working

relationships could engender the attitude that co-workers must be coerced into doing their jobs. This can stagnate workflow, and lower productivity.

Vignette 2

Vignette (2) highlighted administrative fuel allocation violations by a superior. Most participants described this vignette's scenario as fraudulent and suggested that the vignette character should follow administrative procedures and refuse the corrupt act. A participant recounted that the Public Service considers financial irregularities, or "money matters," serious offenses.

Participants' experiences on this vignette suggested that some superiors oblige subordinates to obey verbal orders to undertake corrupt acts. They reported navigating such orders by asking superiors to give written consents. Yet, some superiors are often unwilling to give written consents and to take responsibility for the repercussions of the corrupt acts. Thus, requests based on such "*order from above*" instructions, as identified in this vignette, may ultimately victimize subordinates while benefiting these superiors. Participants speculated that in this scenario, the corrupt partner (the superior) may impose *informal sanctions*, necessitating careful consideration of the consequences of noncompliance before making a final decision.

he will pay the price for going according to the books. Things that requires the approval of the Boss will be delayed unnecessarily. He will make his life miserable. (FG3, A2, 25 years, 2 years of service)

Furthermore, according to participants, the fact that the vignette character was recommended for the position by the superior obliges him to do his bidding. The theme, *opportunistic staffing* was employed to justify this assertion. Participants' narratives suggested that certain public service organizations are privileged settings reserved for workers assigned there by influential "godfathers." Due to the importance of services rendered and the frequency of public interactions, such public service organizations are considered as lucrative. Thus, some peers may criticize public servants in these organizations who try to follow protocols and avoid corruption. A participant recounted that:

It has become a habit that if you don't have a godfather (patron) you will not be sent to or survive in some particular public services. For example, public servants posted to (XYZ) [name of organizational withheld] are favourite children. Even in the same organization, some will be pushed into a corner and others will be put at locations where they can get gifts and bribes. (DF12, 55 years, 22 years of service)

The theme of *praise-singing* was identified in this scenario by all three focus groups and some individual interviews. Participants surmised that the vignette character may do the bidding of the superior because of expected benefits. This theme was cited as a significant factor in public service workers' inability to strictly follow public service rules and regulations. Most comments on this theme indicated that it includes insincere support and adherence to directives and requests from superiors, regardless of the ethicality of their request for fear of victimization. Such support may also be given in exchange for personal benefits such as government contracts, access to restricted information, and promotions.

Some participants asserted that the involvement and imposition of protocol lists in public service employee recruitment has resulted in over-recruitment and *under-resourced offices*. It was thus argued that the corrupt partner may be entitled to the fuel increase request because the official allocation may be insufficient. A female director contended that the lack of resources undermines supervision and encourages mal-administrative behavior.

Sometimes even office spaces are lacking, not to mention computers and other equipment. This means the average worker has to go the extra mile, and some even work with their own calculators and pens. How can you blame such workers for collecting bribes? I am not saying it is okay, but I am saying the system is not helping its officers to act right. (DF4, female, 57 years, 19 years of service)

In a corrupt environment, "bad apples" may exploit administrative and structural monitoring deficiencies to enrich themselves (Köbis et al., 2015). Campbell and Göritz (2014) also discovered

that under-resourced employees may engage in noncompliant behavior but justify their actions by aligning their perceptions with their intentions. This implies that ethical fading sets in as some public service workers rationalize their actions based on the excuse of *under-resourced offices* and become desensitized to corrupt behavior.

Opportunistic staffing in the public service defies inclusion and equity in public service recruitment and selection (Brierley, 2020). The assumption that public servants in such organizations have links with influential persons may make them immune to sanction or termination. This claim of influential support may also discourage colleagues from reporting corrupt acts. Brierley (2020) found that work design and hiring practices normalize organizational corruption, and reported that politicians use dual hiring strategies to manipulate bureaucrats to control state resources or reward them for their political allegiance. Group sanctions may also be applied in such corrupt environments to marginalize and victimize non-conformists to change their perceptions and lead them to conform (Campbell & Göritz, 2014; Ohemeng & Kamga, 2020).

Praise-singing is part of Ghanaian culture, usually ascribed to chiefs and other exemplary individuals (Asuro, 2020). The narratives of the participants revealed an unfavorable aspect of praise-singing, highlighting how some socio-cultural factors have infiltrated and evolve to encourage corruption. Such unquestionable loyalty to superiors can stifle positive criticism and productivity. This may increase unethical power use and make it harder for public service workers to avoid corruption (Appiah & Abdulai, 2017; Kumasey & Hossain, 2020). Sakyi and Bawole (2010) reported that some Ghanaian public service workers follow unethical orders to avoid being reassigned to unfavorable positions that could harm their careers and personal lives. Legros and Cislaghi (2020) also identified the apprehension of retaliatory measures as a hindrance that impedes public officials from disengaging from the intricate network of corrupt practises prevalent in the public service.

Participants' engagement with the vignette also revealed their fear of fraudulent acts being detected and the concomitant sanctions. These findings align with studies that showed that engaging in corrupt activities under duress may lead to the constant fear of being exposed and facing dire consequences which can generate severe stress and anxiety (Giacalone et al., 2016; Gillanders, 2016; Ogunfowora et al., 2023).

Vignette 3

Vignette (3) presented a scenario featuring a supplier seeking a contract from a public servant despite lacking the necessary qualifications. The scenario was identified as bribery and a conflict of interest situation. Participants reported that amongst corrupt partners within some public service organizations, there is an implicit agreement of *reciprocal trust* and non-reporting of workplace misconduct, therefore, reporting a colleague's misconduct is considered untrustworthy and attracts stigmatizing. Participants maintained that the theme of *reciprocal trust* has positive aspects and helps maintain harmonious working relationships. However, they mentioned that since the supplier in the vignette is outside the public service, *reciprocal trust* cannot be applied in the present scenario. Participants advised that the vignette character should adhere to the established regulations in awarding the contract, as the supplier might breach confidentiality by disclosing the corrupt act in the future. As narrated by a participant:

He should be transparent. It is the same man who may go "running his mouth" (divulge information). It takes such small favours like this for one to suffer disgrace. (FG 2, A6, female, 38 years, 7 years of service)

The analysis of participant quotes in vignette three revealed that they exhibited caution towards engaging in corrupt transactions with external corrupt partners. The use of *reciprocal trust* as a rationale for rejecting the act suggests that interpersonal trust plays a significant role in driving corrupt transactions and functions as a cohesive force to sustain or discourage corrupt practices within the public service. This finding is in line with scholarly discourse

(e.g., Rose, 2018; Torsello & Venard, 2016) that corruption is a social phenomenon that is perpetuated through social connections, with the principle of trust being a crucial factor in numerous corrupt activities. Participant views on *reciprocal trust* also imply that superiors may prefer to recruit or promote subordinates they can trust to cover their corrupt acts, potentially leading to a greater tolerance for unethical transactions. In line with the rationality assumptions that individuals weigh potential benefits and costs of their actions, participants suggested that the vignette character refutes the corrupt act because the reputational damage outweighs the potential financial gains or personal favors.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore the persistent issue of corruption within the Ghana public service by adopting a pioneering approach that examines context-specific socio-organizational factors influencing corruption and how public service workers (PSWs) experience and navigate these factors in corrupt scenarios. The decision to accept or refute corrupt acts was influenced by context specific socio-organizational factors, that constrained some participant's decision-making and served as mental shortcuts for solving the vignettes.

Although this paper offers organizational level data, which can be used to enhance national level anti-corruption prescriptions to mitigate corruption, it is acknowledged that it is not without constraints. Utilizing vignettes can be challenging due to the contrast between the fictional storyline and social reality. As a result, it is possible that the reactions of participants to the given situation may not accurately represent their real-life conduct. Nevertheless, it is argued that the vignettes' main objective was to elicit the participants' thoughts and experiences. It provided a means to facilitate the processing of information related to corruption in a non-intrusive manner.

Overall, corruption keeps endangering the common good because it entails the misuse of resources originally designated for public use for personal gain. The proliferation of anti-corruption interventions without a paradigm shift and willingness to strictly implement them renders the interventions ineffective. The socio-organizational factors identified in this paper could serve as a foundation for the development of training programs and nudges to promote adherence to Ghana's public service values. Taking into account international best practices as well as the contextual nuances of Ghana's public service, various anti-corruption stakeholders, including religious bodies and traditional rulers, must be involved in the fight against corruption.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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