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Descriptive norms and corruption: Examining the moderating role of ethical leadership

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ABSTRACT

Background: Corruption is one of the major inhibitory to various advances. Corruption that was characterized by misuse of public or organizational positions for personal or organizational benefit commonly involved public officials in the form of bribery behavior. Therefore, it is important to investigate factors contributing to bribery behavior in public officials.
Purpose: Taking a micro-level perspective, this research aims to extend corruption literature by focusing on the moderating role of ethical leadership in the relationship between descriptive norms and corruption.
Method: The study used a quantitative survey approach with 116 participants working in public organizations. Three scales were used to measure descriptive norms, ethical leadership, and corruption. A moderation regression-based analysis was used to analyze the data.
Findings: The results showed that descriptive norms have a significant role in predicting corruption. However, ethical leadership has no moderating role in the relationship between descriptive norms and corruption.
Implication: These findings provide new insight into the literature by suggesting that ethical leadership might not be effective in reducing followers' corruption when corruption is widespread. Therefore, corruption intervention programs may emphasize descriptive norms aspect in anti-corruption campaigns to reduce the perception of descriptive norms in order to reduce the possibility of individuals engaging in corruption.

KEYWORDS
corruption; descriptive norms; ethical leadership; public officials; moderator analysis

Introduction

Tax evasion, corruption in social welfare funds, and various other corruption scandals indicate that corruption remains a major problem that hampers progress in Indonesia. The latest Corruption Perception Index (CPI) survey showed that Indonesia's CPI score dropped from 38 in 2021 to 34 in 2022 (Transparency International, 2023). High levels of corruption can hinder any development. Therefore, the United Nations (2018) considered corruption as the biggest obstacle to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) including poverty eradication and improving the quality of education, health, and infrastructure.

Corruption is a complex phenomenon and has various factors (Misangyi et al., 2008). Most studies on corruption have emphasized macro factors such as culture, political system, history, and the economy of a country (Gorsira, Denkers, et al., 2018). The macro-level approach explains why one country has a high level of corruption while another does not. However, this macro approach could not explain why someone, or an organization is involved in corruption while others are not. Therefore, some disciplines such as psychology have started to study corruption on the micro level emphasizing micro aspects such as personality (Manara et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2016), attitudes (Rabl & Kühlmann, 2008), motive (Gorsira et al., 2018), and ethical climate in organizations (Gorsira, Steg, et al., 2018).

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Previous research has shown that one of the micro-factors that contributes to corruption is descriptive norms (Köbis et al., 2015; Zhao et al. 2019). Description norm is information related to how most people behave in a particular situation. It is also related to a person's perception of the frequency of a particular behavior. Research has explained that the more individuals think that most people are corrupt in a particular situation, the more likely they are to engage in corruption (Köbis et al., 2015). A qualitative study (Manara et al., 2023) also showed that before deciding whether to commit corruption or not, individuals searched for information related to how others behaved in the same situation that they faced. For example, when an individual decides whether to engage in bribes or not to get a project, they try to find out how other people process to get the project. The literature indicates that the more individuals think that corruption is common, the easier individuals engage in corruption (Köbis et al., 2015; Zhao et al. 2019). This can explain why in countries with high levels of corruption such as Indonesia, corruption is difficult to eradicate. When the descriptive norm of corruption is high, it is easier for individuals to engage in corruption without feeling guilty.

Previous studies have also examined factors that can prevent corruption in organizations. Ethical leadership (Brown et al., 2005) is one of the organizational factors that can prevent various unethical actions such as organizational and interpersonal deviance (van Gils et al., 2015), counterproductive behavior (Bedi et al., 2016), and corruption (Manara et al., 2020). Although various literature and research have shown that ethical leadership has a positive impact in reducing various negative actions and corruption in organizations (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Den Hartog, 2015; Manara et al., 2020), there is no research, so far, that has tried to look at the effectiveness of leadership in reducing corruption when corruption has become a descriptive norm. Therefore, this research aims to know the interaction effect between descriptive norms and ethical leadership in influencing corruption.

In sum, this research can advance the study of corruption at the micro level by focusing on two predictors, namely descriptive norms and ethical leadership. Previous studies have shown that these two variables have a role in predicting corruption, but there are no studies examining the interaction between these two variables in predicting corruption. Therefore, it can provide additional information in corruption studies regarding the predictors and interactions between these predictors. This research may also provide practical insights for parties involved in the corruption prevention process. This research can be used as input into corruption prevention programs. In the next part of the introduction, we will describe the theoretical background and hypotheses.

Corruption comes from the Latin, *corruptus/corrumpere*, which means damage and deviation (Abidin & Siswandi, 2015). There is no single definition agreed upon by researchers regarding corruption, but from various definitions of corruption, there are three core points that are often mentioned in each definition. First, abuse of power is found in almost all definitions of corruption (Transparency International, 2024; Anand et al., 2004; Nye, 1967; Tanzi, 1998). This abuse of power has a different scope for each definition. Some definitions specify the power that leads to public organizations (Transparency International, 2024; Nye, 1967; Tanzi, 1998). The definition by Anand et al. (2004) uses the term organizational position more generally, which can include both public and private organizations. Second, the benefit is the reason for corruption and is always present in every definition of corruption (Transparency International, 2024; Anand et al., 2004; Khan, 1996; Lambsdorff, 1999b; Nye, 1967; Tanzi, 1998). Benefits arising from acts of corruption can lead to personal gain (Transparency International, 2024; Lambsdorff, 1999b; Tanzi, 1998); organizational or group gain (Anand et al., 2004); benefits for other people such as family and friends (Nye, 1967). This form of profit is not always in the form of money but can also be in the form of status and power (Khan, 1996). Third, violations of norms or laws are also found in many definitions of corruption. Corruption is an act that violates laws, rules, and norms (Anand et al., 2004; Khan, 1996; Nye, 1967). From the various characteristics of corruption above, corruption is an act violating norms or laws that abuses power or authority in both private and government organizations for personal or other people's gains.

Corruption had many forms, such as embezzlement of public funds and bribery (Vargas-Hernández, 2011). Bribery is one of the most common types of corruption (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, 2018). Therefore, this research focuses more on bribery behavior. The term corruption in this research refers to bribery behavior. Bribery behavior itself can be seen from two frames of the perpetrator, namely the giver and the recipient of the bribe. The Corruption Crime Law categorizes both the act of giving and receiving a bribe as a criminal act of corruption. In Indonesian law of corruption (Undang-Undang No. 20 of 2001, 2001), corruption is defined as an act of abuse of authority for personal or group interests that causes state losses. Based on this definition, bribery behavior refers to bribery behavior involving public officials. In this research, the form of bribery behavior is focused on government officials as the parties who receive bribes. Therefore, the term corruption in this research refers to bribe-receiving behavior among public officials in Indonesia.

This study proposed descriptive norms as the predictor of corruption. Descriptive norm is part of social norms. There are two types of social norms, descriptive and injunctive norms. Descriptive norms relate to information regarding how most people behave in certain situations. This norm is related to the frequency of a behavior. While injunctive norms are norms of belief or moral norms that are held as truth. So, this norm refers to beliefs about how most people perceive whether a behavior is right or wrong (Reno et al., 1993). A behavior may be considered wrong by most people (injunctive norm) but most people perform that action (descriptive norm). Although most people may consider corruption as a wrong action (injunctive norm), some people may see corruption as an acceptable action based on the frequency of corruption itself. The more individuals think that corruption is carried out by most people, the more they consider that corruption is an acceptable action. Beliefs about the frequency of corrupt acts (descriptive norms) are an important factor of corruption. For example, if someone thinks that bribing the police during traffic violations is a frequent and common behavior, then that person will tend to take bribes because they think that giving bribes has the possibility of being successful and can avoid a fine.

Previous studies have shown that descriptive norms positively correlated with corruption. Köbis et al. (2015) found that individuals in the group who were given information that corruption was often carried out had a higher tendency to commit corruption than individuals in the group who were given neutral information. Other research also finds that perceptions of descriptive norms for corruption are positively correlated with intentions to commit corruption (Zhao et al., 2019). Therefore, this research proposed a hypothesis that descriptive norms are positively correlated with corruption, namely the higher (lower) the descriptive norms, the higher (lower) the corruption.

Hypothesis 1: Descriptive norms are positively correlated with corruption, namely the higher (lower) the descriptive norms, the higher (lower) the corruption.

Leadership has an important role in several outcomes in organizations such as work attitudes and work behaviors (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Ethical leadership was defined as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120). Ethical leadership shows behavior that is in accordance with ethics that leads to the norms that apply in the context of a particular organization through personal actions and interactions. In addition, ethical leadership promotes ethics to subordinates through communication, providing reinforcement for ethical behavior and punishing unethical behavior (Brown et al., 2005).

Ethical leadership has a positive role in reducing unethical behavior in organizations such as reducing counterproductive behavior (Brown & Treviño, 2006), and is negatively correlated

with deviant behavior in organizations (van Gils et al., 2015), as well as corruption (Manara et al., 2020). Besides, ethical leadership can also prevent factors that are positively correlated with unethical behaviors. For example, previous studies (Belschak et al., 2018; Ruiz-Palomino & Linuesa-Langreo, 2018) found that ethical leadership can reduce the tendency of subordinates who have a Machiavellianism personality (manipulative personality) to carry out several negative behaviors such as information hiding, emotional manipulation, reduced helping behavior and unethical tendencies (Ruiz-Palomino & Linuesa-Langreo, 2018).

This study considered ethical leadership a variable that may reduce the positive role of descriptive norms on the tendency to commit corruption. Although descriptive norms of corruption have a positive role in the occurrence of corruption, ethical leadership may be able to prevent this impact by providing examples of ethical behavior, promoting ethical behavior, as well as providing reinforcement and rewards for ethical behavior, and punishing unethical behavior such as corruption. Therefore, ethical leadership may buffer the positive role of descriptive norms on corruption.

Hypothesis 2: ethical leadership moderates the positive relationship between descriptive norms and corruption, the higher (lower) ethical leadership, the lower (higher) the positive relationship between descriptive norms and corruption.

Method

Participants

Participants were public officials (i.e., employees who work for government or public organizations) in Indonesia and have direct supervisors. Participants were recruited using a non-probability sampling technique namely accidental sampling. This sampling is a sampling by selecting individuals who met the criteria found by researchers to become research participants. In addition, a snowball sampling technique was used where participants were asked to share the survey link with their friends or colleagues who met the criteria for being participants in this study.

Participants, first, read the study information. Given the sensitivity of the topic, the study information stated that the study is about work behavior rather than corruption. To minimize any undesirable biases (Chan et al., 2017), it also emphasized that the responses would be anonymous, and confidential, and the data would be analyzed aggregately and only used for research purposes. Participation in this study was fully voluntary, and participants indicated their consent at the end of the study information. Next, participants were asked to respond to the demographic questions (i.e., gender, age). We then asked participants to complete all the scales in the following order: ethical leadership, bribe-receiving behavior, and descriptive norms. At the end of the survey, we thanked participants for their participation and asked them to fill out their e-wallet account in another link of the survey to send the reward. Participants were rewarded with IDR 20,000 (approximately USD 1.20). This study procedure was ethically reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Review Committee at the authors' home university.

A total of 187 participants were successfully recruited and expressed their willingness to complete the research survey. Seventy-one of the participants were not included in the data analysis process, due to incomplete responses. The data analysis process was carried out on 116 participants who filled out the survey. Of the 116 participants, 58.6% were men, 39.7% were women, and 1.7% chose not to specify their gender. The average age of participants was 37.2 years (SD = 9.6) with the youngest 18 years and the oldest 74 years. A total of 48.3% had undergraduate degree, 28.4% high school or equivalent, 10.3% vocational program, 8.6% master, 0.9% doctor, and 3.4% others.

Instruments

Corruption was measured by The Corruption Scale from Gorsira et al. (2018), the bribe-accepting subscale containing three items that were translated into Indonesian by Manara et al.

(2020). An example item: "At my work, I have accepted money, goods, or services from other parties in exchange for preferential treatment." The scale was responded on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (often). The reliability of this scale in previous research was .98 (Manara et al., 2020).

The descriptive norm scale for corruption in this study used a three items-scale developed by Zhao et al. (2019). First, participants were provided with scenarios developed by Bai et al. (2014) for example:

> "The municipal government is currently selecting and promoting one section chief. Employee A is following this selection process and has a strong desire to gain a promotion. However, employee A is in a disadvantaged position in the competition compared with other section-level candidates. Before the final decision, employee A asks the deputy mayor to help and plan to privately promise him a certain sum of money as a token of thanks if the employee wins the competition."

Participants then were asked a question: "If this kind of thing happens to others around you, how many people do you think to choose to accept the offer from Employee A and help him in the selection process?" Participants responded to questions on this scale on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (none of them) to 7 (everyone). The three scenarios and the items were translated into Indonesian and back-translated using the method by Brislin (1970). The reliability of this scale in previous research was .88 (Zhao et al., 2019).

Ethical leadership was measured using the ten items of the Ethical Leadership Scale (Brown et al., 2005; e.g., "My leadership disciplines subordinates who violate ethical standards."). Each item was responded using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The ethical leadership scale (Brown et al., 2005) was translated into the Indonesian language by Manara et al. (2020). The reliability of this scale in previous research was .93 (Manara et al., 2020).

Analytical Techniques

We analyzed our data with regression analyses using IBM SPSS program. First, we ran regression analyses putting descriptive norms as a main predictor of corruption to test Hypothesis 1. Second, we reran regression analyses including the ethical leadership and the interaction between descriptive norms and ethical leadership to test Hypothesis 2.

Result and Discussion

Table 1 presents the mean, standard deviation, Cronbach's alpha, and correlation between the research variables.

Table 1
Mean, Standard Deviation, Cronbach's Alphas, and Correlations Between Variables

No.	Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1.	Corruption	3.75	1.53	(0.71)			
2.	Descriptive norms	8.93	4.61	0.33**	(0.92)		
3.	Ethical leadership	40.45	6.20	-0.14	-0.15	(0.91)	
4.	Gender	n/a	n/a	0.22*	0.06	0.19*	
5.	Age	37.1	12.4	-0.01	-0.06	-0.05	0.01

Notes. N = 116. Cronbach's Alphas are shown diagonally in parentheses. Gender is coded 1 = Female and 2 = Male.
$^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$.

Table 2 shows a summary of the regression analyses. Model 1 testing Hypothesis 1 indicated that descriptive norms had a statistically significant positive relationship with corruption, b = 0.33, $t(114) = 3.71$, $p < .01$. $R^2 = .10$, with $F(1, 114) = 13.81$, $p < .01$, which means that descriptive norms can significantly predict 10% of corruption. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 of this study was

confirmed. Model 2 tested Hypothesis 2, which was ethical leadership moderates the positive relationship between descriptive norms and corruption. The results of the interaction test showed that there was no significant interaction between descriptive norms and ethical leadership in predicting corruption, $b = .006$, $t(113) = 0.06$, $p > .05$. Therefore Hypothesis 2 was rejected.

Table 2
Results of Regression Analyses of Descriptive Norms, Ethical Leadership, and Corruption

Independent variables	Model 1			Model 2		
	b	*SE*	*t*	*b*	*SE*	*t*
Descriptive Norms (X)	0.33	0.088	3.71**	0.31	0.091	3.36**
Ethical Leadership (W)				-0.97	0.098	-0.98
X x W				0.006	0.092	0.06
F	13.81**			4.93**		
R^2	.10**			.09		

Note. $N = 116$. **$p < .01$.

This study aims to examine the relationship between descriptive norms and corruption and the role of ethical leadership in moderating this relationship. The results indicate that descriptive norms have a significant positive role in predicting corruption. The more an individual believes that corruption is carried out by most people around him, the more an individual has a high level of corruption. These results are in line with several previous studies which show that descriptive norms are one of the factors that play a role in corruption (Köbis et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2019).

These findings expand the study of corruption at the micro level. Previous studies have found several micro factors that can contribute to corruption such as personality (Zhao et al., 2016), attitudes and motives (Rabl & Kühlmann, 2008), and ethical climate in organizations (Gorsira, Steg, et al., 2018). The findings of this research strengthen the findings of previous research which found that descriptive norms play a role in high levels of corruption (Köbis et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2019). With a field survey approach involving workers who have the potential to commit corruption and in countries that have high levels of corruption, this research expands the level of generalization about the positive impact of descriptive norms on corruption.

On the other hand, the results indicate that ethical leadership did not moderate the relationship between descriptive norms and corruption. In other words, ethical leadership does not have a buffering effect in reducing the impact of descriptive norms on corruption. This result is not consistent with the argument underlying Hypothesis 2 which argues that ethical leadership can reduce the impact of descriptive norms on corruption. Furthermore, these findings are not in accordance with several findings in the ethical leadership literature (Belschak et al., 2018; Ruiz-Palomino & Linuesa-Langreo, 2018) suggesting that ethical leadership can reduce several risk factors that cause negative behavior in organizations, such as preventing subordinates who have a Machiavellianism personality from carrying out unethical behaviors such as hiding information and manipulating emotions. Our different findings from the previous literature (Belschak et al., 2018; Ruiz-Palomino & Linuesa-Langreo, 2018) might be because of the different contexts of organization. While the previous studies (Belschak et al., 2018; Ruiz-Palomino & Linuesa-Langreo, 2018) were conducted in private organizations, our study was conducted in public organizations. Furthermore, we examined different unethical behaviors. As we studied corruption, unethical behavior that has a more severe impact and is also considered illegal behavior, ethical leadership may be less effective in reducing such behavior than in reducing mild forms of unethical behavior such as hiding information and manipulating emotions in organizations (Belschak et al., 2018; Ruiz-Palomino & Linuesa-Langreo, 2018).

This finding may provide new insights for the ethical leadership literature that ethical leadership may not be effective in reducing negative behavior, especially corruption when these

behaviors are widespread and become normal behavior (descriptive norms). Therefore, the results of this research are in line with Den Hartog's (2015) recommendation to test the effectiveness of ethical leadership in reducing negative behavior in organizations in various forms and contexts. Thus, future research can test the role of ethical leadership in other negative behaviors apart from those that have been extensively tested. Future research, for example, could examine the role of ethical leadership in sexual harassment, bullying, and aggressive behavior in organizations as well as contextual factors that may moderate the effect of ethical leadership on organizational outcomes.

The results of this research may also have practical implications. This study indicates that the more individuals think that corruption is widespread, the higher the possibility of individuals engaging in corruption. These results can be used as consideration for decision-makers involved in corruption prevention. So far, news related to corruption has increasingly appeared in various media. This may be counterproductive to the aim of preventing corruption. With various reports about corruption, the public may consider that corruption is widespread and think that everybody does it. People may use that perception as a justification for the corruption that will be carried out. Therefore, parties involved in the corruption prevention process can consider reducing the perception of descriptive norms to reduce the possibility of individuals engaging in corruption (Köbis et al., 2015; Zhao et al. 2019).

This research certainly has limitations. First, this research is a cross-sectional study that examines research variables by measuring them at the same time without manipulating the predictor variables. Therefore, the conclusions of this study only explain the relationship between the variables and cannot draw causal conclusions. Thus, it is recommended that further research should test the hypotheses using an experimental approach (such as Köbis et al., 2015; Manara et al., 2020). Furthermore, this cross-sectional study may suffer from common method biases that may interfere with the conclusions of this study. However, we minimized the common method bias by separating each variable scale in our questionnaire, emphasizing anonymity as well as assuring that there are no right or wrong answers and that respondents should respond to the scales based on their preferences (Podsakoff et al., 2012)

Second, this research only focuses on a specific type of corruption, namely bribe-receiving among public officials. Corruption is a quite complex phenomenon that has many forms and involves various parties (Köbis et al., 2016; Manara et al., 2023; Misangyi et al., 2008; Vargas-Hernández, 2011). Therefore, future research may examine corruption by focusing on other forms of corruption that have not been widely studied, such as embezzlement and favoritism (Manara et al., 2023). Future research may also study other types of leadership styles that may be effective in reducing corruption such as transformational leadership which has a positive impact on follower behaviors (Belschak et al., 2015).

Conclusion

The present study extends the previous findings by examining the moderating role of ethical leadership on the relationship between descriptive norms and corruption. The findings of this study show that descriptive norms have a positive impact on corruption. However, ethical leadership has no moderating role in the relationship between descriptive norms and corruption. These findings warrant further research to test the effectiveness of ethical leadership in reducing unethical behaviors in various forms and contexts. Corruption has serious negative impacts on society. We suggest decision-makers can prevent corruption by reducing perceived descriptive norms of corruption.

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