



Obligation-based bribes in Vietnam: A view from the norm of reciprocity

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Abstract

Studies of bribery have been heavily influenced by the cost/benefit calculation, leaving social relationship of the involved parties under-explored. We propose the norm of reciprocity as a complement theoretical lens to explain bribery exchanges and explore different types of obligation that induce bribery. Based on qualitative data from a sample of government officials in Vietnam, we found that many bribery exchanges are governed by the norm of reciprocity, i.e., obligation-based bribery. In these obligation-based bribery exchanges, the parties extend and return illegal favors based on their senses of obligation to each other, in adjacent to cost/benefit calculation. We also uncovered two types of obligation, including pragmatic and moral, and found that these types of obligation are developed through different practices. Failure to address this social element of bribery would hinder much of anti-corruption effort. The study suggests that interactions between the norm of reciprocity and wider ethical norms in governing bribery should be further addressed by both researchers and practitioners.

Introduction

Bribes to public officials in emerging economies have been studied extensively with scholars proposing different explanations on how a bribe is initiated and perpetuated (Fisman and Miguel 2007; Luo 2002; Svensson 2003; Zhan 2012; Nguyen et al. 2020; Spector 2016; Tromme 2016). These bribes are generally defined as an

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informal payment or other forms of inducement a person/firm [hereafter: briber] made to public officials to fulfill a request or to exchange for an illegal/immoral favor (Gillespie et al. 2020; Malesky et al. 2020). Apart from conventional cost/benefit calculation perspective (Rose-Ackerman 1978; Shleifer and Vishny 1993; Svensson 2003), scholars have studied how the norm of reciprocity facilitates bribery (Abbink et al. 2002; Karhunen et al. 2018; Lambsdorff and Frank 2010; Wang 2016). Following this perspective, bribery exchanges are embedded in ongoing relationships where involved parties reciprocate even when immediate benefits are vague.

Two common streams of research that examine the role of the norm of reciprocity include laboratory experiment on corruption games and qualitative studies of bribery in specific contexts. Laboratory experiments build on the games of reciprocity to examine the conditions for bribery perpetuation (Abbink et al. 2002; Cameron et al. 2009; Lambsdorff and Frank 2010; Rivas 2013). In these studies, bribery partners initiate and return favors based on both positive (favor) and negative (punishment) reciprocity (Lambsdorff and Frank 2011). This departs from the conventional cost/benefit calculation in way that the punishment may be more hostile than the initial defect and would be carried out even if it costs the punisher. While these studies confirm the existence of reciprocal bribes, it has not been clear whether reciprocity involves a sense of moral values. Qualitative studies of reciprocal bribery are often conducted in specific contexts of Asian cultures, such as China (Luo 2008; Steidlmeier 1999; Tian 2008; Wang 2016), and/or transition economies, such as Russia (Karhunen et al. 2018; Tonoyan et al. 2010). In these studies, businesspeople rely on their close kinship and friend networks with government officials to get things done. This reliance on personal relationship facilitates reciprocal exchanges where both businesses and officials feel obligated to return favors, including bribes. In these studies, reciprocal bribery occurs primarily within close networks where trust among members already exists and where reciprocity is well understood as morally right.

While providing different insights, neither stream explains how reciprocal bribes are enforced between parties who do not belong to the same close networks. This is unfortunate since bribery exchanges could perpetuate among new acquaintances (Borlea et al. 2019; Lambsdorff and Frank 2010; Tonoyan et al. 2010; Torsello and Venard 2016). As bribery tends to persist (Khan 2006; Luo 2002), there must be some mechanism that governs and sustains these illegal relationships. Failure to understand how reciprocal bribery exchanges are enforced may hinder our anti-corruption effort since it leaves out an important driver of bribery.

This paper addresses these issues by examining how the norm of reciprocity governs bribery exchanges that involve government officials. Specifically, we ask two questions, including 1) What are characteristics of bribery exchanges that follow the norm of reciprocity? 2) What types of obligation are present in bribery relationships? In the paper, we use “norm of reciprocity” and “reciprocity norm” interchangeably. Vietnam is a relevant context for studying this topic since bribery is prevalent (Malesky et al. 2020; T. V. Nguyen et al. 2020; Spector 2016; Tromme 2016) and is commonly facilitated by personal relationships (De Jong et al. 2012; Gillespie et al. 2020; Le and Nguyen 2009). Bribery exchanges perpetuate even between newly acquainted parties (WB 2012, 2016) and government officials often

find themselves struggling whether to adhere to their professional ethics or to conform to the norm of reciprocity (V. T. Nguyen et al. 2017). We conducted eleven focus group discussions with a total of ninety government officials on this topic. To our knowledge, studies that explores bribery from government officials' perspective are rare.

We first present theoretical background on the norm of reciprocity and argue that the norm of reciprocity would provide complement insights into the persistence of bribery. We then describe research methodology and findings. Our discussion of theoretical and practical implications concludes the paper.

The norm of reciprocity and bribery

The norm of reciprocity refers to a set of socially acceptable rules regarding a relationship in which a party initiating a favor to another party obligates the latter to return. Gouldner (1960) originally conceptualized the norm of reciprocity in dyadic exchanges which involve initiation of favor, return of favor, and formation of the relationship between the two parties. According to Gouldner (1960), the norm of reciprocity requires that "1) people should help those who have helped them, and 2) people should not injure those who have helped them". The norm of reciprocity requires both parties have to participate in give and take actions. If one party initiates a favor, the other party will be under the obligation of giving back or returning the favor and vice versa. Without this obligation to repay, norm of reciprocity will not take place. In addition, whenever a party extends a favor, the obligation to return is strengthened because the exchange of favor is a self-reinforcing process.

The general obligation of repay benefits leaves two issues open. First, the time interval between initial offers of good or service (initial gifts) and its repayment differs across situations. It could span from simultaneous to infinite reciprocation (Sahlins 2017; Wu et al. 2006). During that time falls the shadow of "indebtedness" (Gouldner 1960). Second, the value of gratification and repayment could only be "roughly equivalent" (Gouldner 1960) or equal "in the long run" (Malinowski 2002). This disparity of gratification and repayment values could be attributed to variation in the timing and form of repayment. Once an interaction is taking place, there may be a countless of ad hoc transactions (payment and repayment) that occur at different times and take different forms. This ambiguity of equivalent payment and timing leads to a sense of outstanding obligations, and at specific time, there may not be a definite understanding of who owing whom.

Scholars have shown that illegal/immoral exchanges could be governed by the norm of reciprocity (Bello 2014; Tangpong et al. 2016; Wang 2016; Blau 1964). From the view of reciprocity norm, a bribe is given to create an obligation to repay which may or may not be realized in specified times and values. In other words, a bribe is paid not necessarily for a specific return but to purposefully create an obligation to pay back or make the other feel indebted. If successfully doing so, the initiator could expect being repaid in the future (Steidlmeier 1999; Tangpong et al. 2016; Wang 2016). The stronger the sense of obligation a bribe creates, the bigger the return of favors could be expected. In addition, the

returned favors could be unspecified in terms of timing, forms, and values. The payment and repayment are hardly equivalent, leaving the obligation outstanding that in turn initiates a series of interactions between the parties. This reciprocity is enforced through both external and internal mechanisms. The external mechanism includes an expected punishment for a failure to reciprocate within reasonable time (Blau 1964; Lamsdorff and Frank 2011). The internal mechanism is the parties belief that reciprocating their bribery partners is morally right (Granovetter 2007; Luo 2008).

The conform to norm of reciprocity plays an essential role in mediating social relationships, however, it can also inflict harm on society when illegal or immoral payments as well as repayments are involved (Gouldner 1960; Granovetter 2007). Whether the first favor is legal or not, an official who is the receiver of such favor may feel pressured to repay, causing him to commit possibly illegal acts. When there is not legal or moral way to return such favor, an official may still choose to conform to the norm of reciprocity instead of keeping his job's ethical standards. The likelihood of making that illegal/immoral favor would depend on whether the norm of reciprocity over-shades the official's sense of his/her status duties. In the absence of market institutions that clearly specify status duties and anti-corruption norms, exchange partners would be less alert to needs, problems, and ethical questions in the broader society (McCabe et al. 1996; Muethel et al. 2011). The partners would then prioritize conforming to the norm of reciprocity and be more likely to engage in bribery exchanges.

Two most common approaches to empirical research on reciprocity and bribery have been experimental studies on corruption games and qualitative/ethnographic studies on reciprocal bribes within close networks in certain cultural and/or institutional settings. Laboratory experiments built on regular games of reciprocity to address the threats of defection in informal contracting (Abbink and Hennig-Schmidt 2006; Abbink et al. 2002; Lamsdorff and Frank 2010, 2011; Rivas 2013). For example, Abbink et al. (2000) designed dyadic gift-exchange games and observed reciprocity in each pair of participants. One participant in a pair could spend resources to punish the other in case of defection. The authors found that reciprocal exchanges occur in most cases. More importantly, defections were commonly punished even when it costs the punisher to do so. Similarly, Lamsdorff and Frank (2010) run an experiment in which a businessperson gives a bribe to a government employee in order to gain a contract. Participants on the role of government officials could choose between whistleblowing, opportunism and reciprocity (delivery of a contract). Those acting as businessperson could call their payment either as a gift or a bribe and choose whether to blow a whistle at the end of the game. The authors found that participants frequently chose to reciprocate, departing from wealth maximization hypothesis. Bribery deals carry some collaboration roots and credible enforcement mechanisms, posing extra challenges to anti-corruption effort. Other studies examined the impacts of gender (Lamsdorff and Frank 2011; Rivas 2013), culture (Cameron et al. 2009), effects on third parties (Abbink and Hennig-Schmidt 2006; Abbink et al. 2002; Cameron et al. 2009) on reciprocal bribery exchanges.

While provide valuable insights into reciprocity in bribery exchanges, experimental research on corruption has its own shortcomings. First, its generalizability to real-life contexts is limited since stakes in real bribery exchanges are much higher than those in the games. Second, these games mainly focused on calculative motives as a mechanism of reciprocity, (Karhunen et al. 2018; Puffer et al. 2010) leaving moral issues understudied.

Qualitative studies on reciprocal bribery were mostly conducted in contexts where cultures and/or institutions are conducive to the use of personal relationships in businesses (Tonoyan et al. 2010; Welter and Smallbone 2011). Examples include studies of reciprocal bribery in *guanxi* network of China (Luo 2008; Steidlmeier 1999; Sun and Ai 2020; Wang 2016; Wu et al. 2006), *blat* in Russia (Karhunen et al. 2018; Puffer et al. 2010), and personal relationships in Vietnam (De Jong et al. 2012; Gillespie et al. 2020) among others. In these studies, a particularistic culture and/or under-developed market institution promote the use of close kinship and acquaintance network in businesses. These close networks reduce the opportunism of the parties in corrupt deals (Karhunen et al. 2018; Luo 2008; Steidlmeier 1999; Wang 2016), providing breeding grounds for corruption. Parties of a corrupt relationship feel obligated to return favors partly because dishonoring promises or violating trust would be considered as embarrassing and face losing (Luo 2008; Sun and Ai 2020; Tian 2008). This approach explicitly acknowledges the important role of culture in determining incentives for engaging in bribes (Achim 2016; Borlea et al. 2019). Here, culture influences both the magnitude and the ways partners use reciprocity norms in their bribery relationship (Karhunen et al. 2018; Puffer et al. 2010; Puffer et al. 2013). However, reciprocal bribery in these studies is only possible between trusted partners who already are members of a close network.

We argue that the norm of reciprocity could govern a number of bribery exchanges, involving partners who may not belong to the same networks. In the literature, what characteristics of these bribes and what types of obligation are present in a [bribery] relationship remained unanswered. In subsequent sections we describe our methodologies and findings on how the norm of reciprocity governs bribery practices in Vietnam.

Methodologies

Research Design

Our study requires in-depth inquiries and rich descriptions of stories, personal examples as well as interpretations from informants on highly sensitive and context-specific topic of bribery. We considered a qualitative study is the most appropriate approach for this project as it allows a critical, in-depth investigation of bribery through the collection of rich, ground-level data. The study also tries to approach bribery from the respondents' point of view. The respondents not only gave information but also clarified meanings of various events and incidents related to bribery/corruption (Torsello and Venard 2016). Qualitative approach is effective in probing into their meaning construction (Gillespie et al. 2020) and values (Vu 2019) relating

to bribery. It also allows us to probe into sensitive issues in a more unthreatening way.

Sample

The informants were public officials, working at central and provincial government. With support from the Government Inspectorate Research Institute (GIRI), we directly contacted hundred and sixty-five officials at five ministries and ten provinces, briefed them on the nature of the research, and invited them to a focus group discussion in Hanoi (for central level officials) or at their provinces (for local officials). Ninety officials agreed to participate with a response rate of 55%. These officials were working in different fields, such as planning, internal affairs, public security, science and technology, natural resources and environment, healthcare, construction, and education participated in these discussions. They also came from three levels of administration, i.e., district, provincial, and central. This was a relatively representative sample of public officials given the constraints of conducting primary research on corruption in Vietnam. Table 1 provides a breakdown of participants' localities and working sectors.

Focus Group Procedure

We chose focus group method to increase the number of informants in the sample and also to set a forum for them to contrast their viewpoints. In focus group, participants may be afraid of challenging their colleagues/superiors at the same units. We addressed that issue by limiting the number of participants from each working unit. As shown in Table 1, of 43 department/province units, only nine had more than

Table 1: Participants' sectors and localities

Locality	Sector							Total
	Nat. Resources	Finance	Trading	Construction	Transp.	Inspect	District	
Can Tho	2	1	1	1		1	3	9
Da Nang	1	1	2	1	1		3	9
Dong Thap	1	1		1		1		4
Ha Noi	1	1	1	1	3		3	10
HCMC		3	2		1		3	9
Hue	2	2	1	1	1		2	9
Nghe An	1	1	1	1	1		3	8
Son La	1	2	2	1	1	1	3	11
Thai Binh	1	1	2	1	1		2	8
<i>Sub-total</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>77</i>
Central								13
Total								90

one participant. In addition, participants may be reluctant to talk in focus groups on this sensitive issue. We mitigated that risk through several ways, including framing the discussions as contributing to the government anti-corruption agenda, ensuring complete confidentiality, and careful wording to avoid any implication on respondents' possible personal wrongdoings. Once realized the unthreatening setting of the discussions, the respondents were willing to share and enriched each other's stories and opinions. Personal relationships between researchers and informants together with confidentiality assurance endorsed by GIRI help break the ice and turn the interviews into lively discussions. Eleven group discussions were conducted in the period of June 2015 to March 2016.

The group discussions were semi-structured. The research team opened the discussions by explaining the objectives and ensuring a complete confidentiality of the discussions. The questions contained in the research tool were largely open-ended. To open the discussion, we provided several statements from the government on a slow progress in anti-corruption and asked participants why it was so hard to combat corruption in Vietnam. We then limited the discussion to explore the forms and nature of bribery exchanges that involve public officials and their subtle disguised forms, such as gifts, supports to family members, and/or earning from "backyard companies". The first section contained questions on the informants' experiences on the prevalence and nature of favor exchanges in their working environment. Participants were probed about situations and forms of favor-exchanges. The second section focused on participants' experience and/or perceptions of psychological process generated by favor-exchange practices in their working environment. Participants were asked to describe how favor-receivers would feel and how their feelings may intervene in their decision-making. The third section focused on whether the current regulations were effective in controlling favor-exchange, e.g., gift-giving, and consequences in the public sector (see the Appendix for the focus group guideline). During the focus groups, questions were carefully worded to encourage participants to share their experiences. For examples, we avoided using "you" in questions because we did not want to make respondents feel that they have to share their own stories. Instead, we used "they" and "people" to lessen the sensitivity of the discussions. The discussions lasted from 120 to 180 minutes.

Data Analysis

All data was transcribed and stored close to verbatim within 24 hours of the discussions. We followed grounded theory approach to analyze our data (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). We regularly discussed the emerging ideas and compared with existing constructs in social exchange, norm of reciprocity, and bribery literature. A thorough analysis was done at the end of the data collection. The authors agreed on the coding schemes and coded the data independently. We discussed any discrepancies on the coding until agreements were reached. We first explored different forms of bribes. The data revealed two types of bribes, calculation-based and obligation-based. As calculation-based bribes have been well documented in the literature, we focused on obligation-based bribes. Two types of

obligation emerged, including pragmatic and moral obligation. We then categorized data to further examine the nature of these obligation types. Table 2 summarizes our coding scheme.

Findings

Obligation-based bribes

From the data we distinguished calculation-based from obligation-based bribes. Calculation-based bribes are those that are extended to an official for specific returns. Examples include one-time bribes to get away from traffic violation or to pass administrative paper works. By contrast, obligation-based bribes are those that are extended to a public official to generate an obligation to return some [illegal] favors. Our informants believed that only few bribes were purely calculation-based. Instead, most bribes were obligation-based for two important reasons. First, bribes are secret in nature. For a bribery exchange to happen, the involved parties need to have some confidence in each other's benevolence which could be gradually developed in an ongoing relationship. Relying on the norm of reciprocity is an effective way of managing these secret exchanges. Second, not all [bribery] opportunities were known to the parties in the inception of their relationships. Sometimes, a bribe is paid to an official with an expectation that the official will keep his/her "eyes and ears open" for opportunities that could benefit the briber.

"Yes, it is a business, but you can't just show up and say: 'I offer this gift, could you please help me with that contract'. You need to build some sort of relationship before this kind of exchanges could happen." (an official in Ho Chi Minh City).

Obligation-based bribes and returned favors are governed by the norm of reciprocity and thus differ from pure calculation-based bribes in several aspects. Firstly, as suggested in the theoretical discussion, a party may not initiate a bribe for certain and immediate returns. Instead, the initial bribe may be offered just to create a sense of obligation on the part of the receiver, i.e., public official. The sense of obligation would induce the official to return favors when appropriate. In this way, obligation-based bribery blurs the link between initial bribe and returned favors, making it nearly impossible to be detected. In addition, opportunities for lucrative returned favors may not be present at the time of bribe initiation. Obligation-bribery leaves it to the public officials to decide what and when the returned favors should be. In this respect, the initiated bribes are more to reserve the right to access lucrative opportunities when they emerge rather than to exchange for specific deals. By offering a bribe, a briber may want "to save a slot for future lucrative opportunities".

"A favor is extended [to a public official] not necessarily to trade for a project or contract. In many cases, it is extended to ensure access to future opportunities." (A central official)

Table 2: Coding schemes

Concepts	Definition	Examples
TYPES OF BRIBES		
Calculation-based bribes	Bribes that are extended to an official for a specific return	One-time bribes to get away from traffic violation or to pass administrative paper works
Obligation-based bribes	Bribes that are extended to a public official to generate an obligation to return some [illegal] favors which may not be well specified in advance	Gifts or other favors extended to an official or his/her family to build relationship that ensures (unfair/illegal) access to future business opportunities
TYPES OF OBLIGATION		
<i>Pragmatic obligation</i>	A party feels a need to repay the other because it is beneficial to do so	- Present a gift to the other parties to maintain future transactions or to have an advantage in accessing new opportunities
<i>Moral obligation</i>	A party feels a need to repay the other because “it is the right thing” to do	- A party repays the other because the party believes he/she is in debt of the other - A party repays the other because he/she may have some emotional attachment to the partner
FAVOR-OFFERING AS PRACTICES OF OBLIGATION-BASED BRIBES		
Favor-offering as bribery investments	Favor-offering is used to nurture a relationship that may help access to future opportunities	- Presents favors to an official to build relationship (<i>nuoi quan</i> / <i>he</i>) - Favor-offering is used to maintain obligation for future repayments
Favor-offering as bribery social exchange	Favor-offering is used to help an official enhance his/her social life and/or achievement which induces an obligation to return favors	- Helping the official fulfill his/her social responsibilities Favors are given to an official’s family members or beloved ones Help the official in fulfilling his/her other social duties (family, community, religion) - Sacrifice time, resources, or reputation to help the official achieve his/her objective Conduct dirty work for the official Sextortion

Secondly, obligation-based bribes are normally exchanged under ongoing relationships between the parties rather than just one-off transactions. The interviews suggested that some sense of “personal attachment” (*sự gắn bó*) is needed for such secret exchanges to happen. A party often needs to engage in frequent communication with a public official to gain such “attachment”, unless she or he was endorsed by a third party trusted by the official. In these early interactions, some gifts or favors may be offered to the official “to pay a respect”, “to express a sentiment”, or “to show benevolence”. These initial favors generate some sense of obligation that induces the official to repay, which in turn creates an expectation for new rounds of offer-repayment. Over time, cycles of initiated favors, repayment, and outstanding obligation generate a sense of “personal attachment”. Bribery exchanges are then suggested and/or implemented partly to fulfill the obligation to pay/repay the other parties in the relationship. Thus, obligation-based bribery exchanges were mixed with legal/moral ones in a series of personal interactions between the briber and a public official. Obligation-based bribes and associated corrupt acts are not independent from other exchanges between the parties.

Pragmatic and moral obligation in bribery

We discovered two types of obligation that govern reciprocal bribery relationships, i.e., pragmatic and moral obligations. For a public official, pragmatic obligation refers to the urge to return favors to a partner for the official’s own benefits. In a relationship, the official has a rough sense of the accumulated values of favors she/he has received from the other party. The official may feel that she/he ought to return the favors in order to continue benefiting or to avoid punishment from the relationship. Pragmatic obligation differs from cost/benefit calculation in important aspects. Cost/benefit calculation is a purely cognitive process that governs discrete transactions based on economic logic for each party. Cost/benefit calculation is quite precise in the values of each party’s “give” and “take” and requires both parties to feel they get a fair gain in each transaction. By contrast, pragmatic obligation is a normative process that governs series of exchanges in an ongoing relationship, based on the logic of reciprocity. Pragmatic obligation allows parties to have a loose sense of the values of “give” and “take” in each transaction and requires the exchanges to be only roughly equivalent in the long run. Our data show that pragmatic obligation could be manifested in three forms. First, pragmatic obligation is rooted at the need to continue a lucrative relationship. Our informants recognized that most bribery exchanges occur in ongoing relationships rather than in discrete transactions. The parties engage in lucrative, bribery exchanges when they already built some confidence in each other’s intention and benevolence. Satisfactory returns of favors contribute to such confidence while failure to return favors may jeopardize the relationship. Second, returning favors to a bribery partner helps the official maintain his/her reputation in related networks which may affect his/her future career. Our informants recognized that it was common for a businessperson to be introduced or endorsed by a higher rank official so he could start a relationship with a targeted official. Some businesspeople even tried to signal to the targeted official of their network with high

rank officials. The need to join and/or fit in with these networks becomes a part of pragmatic obligation that pressures the official to return favors to the partner. Conforming to accepted norms of reciprocity is pragmatic in this sense. Third, in some situations, the official may perceive a risk of being punished should he/she fail to return favors to his/her bribery partner. Some bribers possessed evidence or information of the official's illegal exchanges as a leverage in their bribery relationships with the official. Others may use powerful people in their networks, e.g., high rank officials, to "gently remind" the official to "take care of business", i.e., return the favors to bribers. There was a strong sense that a failure to reciprocate would be punished more hostilely than the initial defect, even when it costs the punishers to do so. Several interviewees mentioned the feeling of "losing control" after engaging in bribery relationships. Others suggested some officials may become a part of a "bribery machine" which is harder to withdraw as the relationship evolves. In brief, the official feels an obligation to return [illegal] favors to bribers because doing so may help him/her capture future benefits and/or avoid possible punishments.

"There is a story we all know: A Provincial Chief of Police was removed to other localities. It turned out that someone spent lots of money just to remove him because he did not cooperate with them [bribers]." (A local official in Can Tho)

Pragmatic obligation is developed through series of investment-oriented exchanges, i.e., other parties like subordinates or businesses invest in a relationship with an official. One common form is series of gift-giving in which gifts are given to public officials with an expectation of some future favors. Gifts can be given periodically, on special occasions, or ad hoc. Each time, the given gift(s) does not imply a specific expectation of returning favor. However, the series of given gifts gradually builds a mutual understanding that at some point, the official would return some favor(s). Occasionally, it is the official who recognizes or even creates opportunities in his/her span of control and suggests them to the gift-givers.

"A gift is given not necessarily related to specific project, but may simply to 'pull strings' [gửi gắm] to future opportunities" [an official from Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Tourism]

"A businessperson repeatedly extended gifts or invited an official to a trip as an expression of sentiment. As the relationship becomes close, the businessman could access business information from the official long before his/her competitors could." [an official in Son La province]

Another form of investment-oriented exchanges is contributions to an official's advancement. As told in the discussions, subordinates or businesses could contribute resources for the official to campaign or even bribe related authorities who are deciders of the official's promotion. The official, once gets the promotion, would return favors with his/her new position. In these deals, businesses and officials collude to conduct corrupt acts. The risk in these investments is the "invested" official may not get the promotion. The quote below illustrates the point:

“Firms may ‘feed’ [nuoi] some officials [built a relationship] for years, 5 years or more, before getting lucrative returns.” [an official in Dept. of Natural Resources and Environment]

Moral obligation refers to the official’s perception that returning the favors is necessary and morally right. This obligation is rooted at the official’s moral values rather than benefit calculation or norm compliance. In this form, the norm of reciprocity is internalized by the official rather than externally governed as pragmatic obligation. Our informants suggested that reciprocating to bribery partners may violate professional values. Thus, to facilitate bribery exchanges, this moral obligation needs to be strong enough to overshadow professional values. The interviews suggested that moral obligation most frequently emerges when bribery exchanges generate social debts which is hard to convert to monetary form. Two common types of social debts generate strong moral obligation. The first type is the partner’s favors that help the official fulfill his/her social responsibilities. These include favors that are extended to the public official’s loved ones, such as family members or mistresses. Examples include scholarships for the official’s children, healthcare services to the official’s family members, or organization of divine worships for the official’s parents/spouse. These favors are seen as make-ups for the official’s busy schedule in satisfying the family’s needs. As retold in a discussion, a businessman frequently visited an official’s elderly mother. One day, the mother fell unconscious, and the businessman was there to take her to the emergency. “That was a big debt” for the official to repay. In a culture that highly values family/clan responsibilities like Vietnam, these favors generate social debts for the official.

“They [businesspeople] do not need to give gifts to the official. Instead, they take of the official’s family. I know a case where a businessman regularly takes the official’s wife to pagoda since she is very religious. When you win the wife’s opinion, you get the official’s support.” (A local official in Da Nang)

The second type of social debts is the partner’s sacrifice of time or even dignity to help the official achieve his/her personal/career objectives. According to our informants, it was common to see a subordinate or businessperson informally campaigning for an official’s promotion, connecting the official with influential people, or working hard on tasks that belong to the official’s responsibility. In some cases, the partner could even conduct illegal works for the official, such as bribing others or even using gangster forces. Sextortion is also a kind of bribe in this second type of social debts. In these conducts, the partner incurs a risk of being detected and punished. The partner’s sacrifice of reputation, dignity, and safety generates big social debts for the official to pay back. This is similar to Shohet (2013) concept of “sacrifice as a gift” in the society of Vietnam.

“We all know Mr. T. is not qualified to become a member of the university’s council but he is supported by a university’ Vice President. Five years back, Mr. T. worked very hard [including dirty work] to help the VP become parliament member. The VP owes him.” [an official from Ho Chi Minh City]

“Sextortion exists, but is very hard to prove. That may be direct or indirect [the briber has someone served the official]. This gift is intangible and hard to value.” [an official at the central level]

Generalization: A reciprocity view of bribery

We propose the norm of reciprocity as a theoretical lens to analyze bribery exchange. In this view, a bribe is an initial favor or “gift” a party extends to another party to create an obligation of illegal/immoral repayments, i.e., obligation-based bribe. Bribery exchanges vary in their relational focus which refers to levels of personal relationship between the briber and the bribed. We plot common types of bribes along the relational dimension to further contrast obligation-based with other bribes (see Table 3). On the “*Low relational focus*” extreme, bribes are dominantly calculation-based, including but not limited to bribes paid to get through one-time administrative procedure or to avoid fines. On the “*High relational focus*” extreme, public officials may extend favors to trusted partners in their kinship or friend networks. Bribes on this extreme are masked under favoritism and/or nepotism. Obligation-based bribes fall between these two extremes and contain a complex mixture of calculative and relational elements.

The logics of obligation-based bribes differ from calculation- and trust-based bribes in several respects. First, partners of obligation-based bribes are reciprocators. They rarely try to maximize short-term gain as those in calculation-based bribes. Nor do they grant favors based on pre-existing emotional attachment as those in trust-based bribes. Instead, the partners condition their returning favors on the other’s past and possible future favors. This allows for a variety of configuration on the form, value, and timing of bribes and repayments, depending on the partners’ tolerance to the ambiguity of future exchanges.

Second, obligation-based bribes are enforced through a combination of pragmatic and moral obligation to reciprocate. Pragmatic obligation pressures a partner to return favors for his/her own benefits in the long run. This differs from short-term calculation in that the incentives are long-term and conditioned on past and future reciprocity. By contrast, failure to reciprocate may cause punishment from the partner and his/her network, even when it costs the punishers to do so. On the other hand, moral obligation induces a partner to reciprocate because it is perceived by the partner as morally right. Here, the norm of reciprocity overshadows other moral values, including the sense of fairness to the population at large. For these reasons, obligation-based bribery is hard to combat solely through legal and economic measures because bribery exchanges are mixed with legal/moral ones, and also because the links between initial favors and repayments are blurred.

Based on the results, we develop two propositions from the reciprocity view of bribery

Propositions 1: A number of bribery exchanges follow the norm of reciprocity and are disguised in term of favor-exchanges, i.e., obligation-based bribes. In these exchanges, a party bribes an official not necessarily for direct and well specified favors in return. Instead, a bribe is given to create an obligation of

Table 3: Logics of obligation-based bribes

	<i>Low</i>	Relational focus	<i>High</i>
	<i>Calculation-based bribes</i>	<i>Obligation-based bribes</i>	<i>Trust-based bribes</i>
Typical types of corruption/ bribes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prolonged administrative procedures and/or pressures to solicit bribes - Arm-length exchanges (e.g., traffic fines) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contract kick-backs - Regular “gifts” to ensure future favors from officials 	Favoritism and nepotism to family or close friends
Behavioral foundation	Partners maximize short-term gain	Partners reciprocate	Partners rely on trust and emotion
Variety of preferences	Relatively homogeneous: self-interests	Relatively heterogeneous: Reciprocal favors vary in forms, timing, and values	Relatively homogeneous: favor to trusted partners
Enforcement mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Short-term incentive - Coercive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reciprocal incentives - Targeted punishment - Reciprocity as a moral order 	Emotional attachment

repayments. The stronger the obligation a bribe creates, the better the results the briber would get.

Propositions 2: In obligation-based bribes, the obligation of repayment could be pragmatic and/or moral. Pragmatic obligation induces the official to return the favors for his/her own benefits. Pragmatic obligation is developed mainly through relationship investment practices. Moral obligation, on the other hand, pressures an official to return the favors because she/he believes it is morally right. Moral obligation is developed primarily through social exchanges where the briber sacrifices his/her time and/or dignity to help the official fulfill social responsibilities and/or achieve career objectives.

Discussion

In this paper we addressed the question of how bribery exchanges are manifested and governed by the norm of reciprocity. We conducted eleven group discussions with ninety government officials in both central and local levels in Vietnam. Our results suggested that a majority of bribes follow the norm of reciprocity and are disguised under various favor-giving practices, i.e., obligation-based bribes. We also distinguished pragmatic from moral obligation and demonstrated that these types of obligation were developed through different practices. We propose that the strength of the obligation would positively associate with returned favors, and that moral obligation is stronger than pragmatic obligation. Obligation-based bribery is hard to combat solely via legal and economic measures since it mixes bribes with genuine favors, blurs the links between a bribe and illegal returned favors, and also because it could be perceived by the official involved as morally right.

Several limitations are in order. First, we relied on self-reported ideas, examples, and stories of public officials. As the topic is sensitive in nature, there existed a risk of social desirability bias, i.e., informants may feel uncomfortable to reveal details of stories or examples. Second, while providing rich insights on the issue, qualitative data do not allow us to quantify different variables discussed in the paper. Follow-up studies on these issues are needed for such purpose.

Theoretical implications

We contribute to the literature of corruption by developing a reciprocity view of bribery and distinguishing pragmatic from moral obligation. In this view, a party extends a bribery gift to create an obligation or sense of indebtedness which would induces repayments in future. This approach departs from the conventional cost/benefit calculation (Ades and Di Tella 1999; Rose-Ackerman 1978; Svensson 2003) as it views bribery parties as reciprocators rather than short-term wealth maximizers. In such relationships, the obligation never disappears but constantly shifts from one side to the other. Thus, bribery is hardly one-time calculative transaction. Instead, it is part of an ongoing relationship that involves a series of legal and illegal exchanges and is governed by the norm of

reciprocity. Our reciprocity view of bribery also complements the pure trust-based approach (Luo 2002; Steidlmeier 1999; Wang 2016; Zhan 2012) in arguing that reciprocal bribery does not only occur within pre-existing close networks of kinship and friends. Instead, the parties could also deliberately activate the reciprocity norm to facilitate an evolvement of their bribery relationships. In this process, pragmatic and moral obligation were developed through different favor-exchange practices that disguise bribery. This reflects the complex, multi-faceted nature of bribery. Its objective is calculative, but the process can be disguised in social and emotional interactions.

This reciprocity view of bribery suggests several research directions. Firstly, the interaction between the norm of reciprocity and societal ethical norms of integrity in governing bribery should be examined. While the norm of reciprocity is universal (Blau 1964; Gouldner 1960; Granovetter 2007), we expect that it is less powerful in governing bribery exchanges in contexts of developed market institutions where role expectations are clearly specified. Similarly, we hypothesize that obligation-based bribes are less prevalent in low-context cultures where universal values of integrity are promoted. Comparative studies of countries with different cultures (Achim 2016; Borlea et al. 2019) and/or different levels of institutional development (Tonoyan et al. 2010) would shed light onto these issues. Second, if bribery is characterized by a series of mixed legal/illegal transactions, how are these transactions structured to create and build-up obligations? For example, some legal “gifts” could be exchanged to build common understanding of reciprocity norm before illegal ones could be engaged. Secondly, the impact of moral and pragmatic obligation should be further examined. As moral obligation is better internalized by the official, it would be sensible to hypothesize that it is more persistent and induces more bribery exchanges. Finally, our analysis of obligation-based bribery could be extended beyond dyadic relationships. This extension would raise several new research questions, such as “Can favor be shared among network members?”, “Can a debt owed to one businessman be passed to another non-family businessman?”, and/or “How is the norm of reciprocity enforced within a bribery-prone network?”

Our paper also contributes to the social exchange theory, specifically to the norm of reciprocity, by categorizing obligation into pragmatic and moral types. While pragmatic obligation is based mostly on calculation of future benefits, moral obligation is based on both normative beliefs of reciprocation and sentimental feelings created by past interactions. Our proposition that moral obligation is more enduring and induces more lucrative returned favors is subject to empirical examination. Another question is whether the obligation evolves from one type to the other, and what could be the trajectories of this evolvement. Finally, future research could explore factors that trigger a breach of the obligation and consequences in bribery relationships. One possible cause is the differences in perceived values of the payment/repayment. Future research could examine factors that cause these differences and situations where differences in perceived values may trigger a breach of the relationship.

Practical implications

Our study offers some implications for policy makers and business managers. For policy makers, it becomes clear that anti-corruption regulations could only detect and deter certain types of bribes, i.e., calculation-based bribes. It would be extremely hard to detect and prosecute obligation-based bribes which are manifested under “favors as bribery investment” and/or “as social exchanges”. To control these practices, it is pertinent to develop clear role expectations and foster integrity culture in both business and public sectors. Strong and clear status duties will limit the effect of reciprocity norm in promoting bribery. Fostering integrity values also help neutralize the obligation for corrupt acts in dyadic exchanges. People with integrity values would refute returning bribery favors as pragmatic or moral obligation. They would then suppress themselves from the use of exchanges, e.g., gift-giving, as bribery investments and/or social exchanges. Introducing integrity values in public officials training and education programs should be considered as anti-corruption measures.

For business managers, controlling corruption in general is imperative for sustainable development. Businesses should establish appropriate internal control systems to limit corruption opportunities. Businesses should also introduce and promote code of conduct to enhance integrity values among their staff. These measures would help managers and staff to adhere to business integrity and enhance the reliability and certainty of the firms’ operation.

Conclusion

Addressing bribery issue is critically important for emerging economies like Vietnam. We have demonstrated that bribery can follow the norm of reciprocity and be internalized as morally acceptable by some public officials. This suggests that anti-corruption measures following conventional wealth maximization approach are not sufficient. It becomes imperative for an anticorruption agenda to develop measures to address such complex and multifaceted nature of bribery.

Appendix: Focus group guideline

(The guideline provides a general direction and structure of the discussion. The questions are suggestive. The moderators are expected to be flexible in leading the discussions.)

Introduction

- Objectives: To gain insights into the nature of bribery exchanges in order to offer recommendations to the government’s anticorruption agenda

- Confidentiality and disclaimers: Participants' identities are kept confidential and they are not representing their organizations

Section 1: Prevalence and nature of bribery exchanges

Cite the government's evaluation that the combat of corruption and bribery in Vietnam has progressed slowly. Then ask:

- In your opinion why it is so hard to combat corruption in Vietnam (each gives 1 to 3 causes)?

(The causes could be categorized, for example: lack of regulation framework, weak enforcement, low salaries, relationship culture, complex and subtle forms of corruption, etc.). Explain that the discussion focuses on the nature and forms of bribery. Then ask:

- Based on your experience, what does “bribery” mean? Could you give examples?
- What are some forms of exchanges/relationships that may contain a risk of bribery? *(The moderators could also ask participants to give comments on each other's examples or the forms raised in other focus groups).*
- Describe a recent favor-exchange situation (or bribery-risk exchange situation) *you know clearly (i.e., from your own observation or reliable sources)?* Could you please explain how the parties ensured their partner will keep promises?

Section 2: Emotion and justification in bribery-risk exchange/relationship

- What induce or pressure people in similar work settings of yours to engage in bribery-risk exchange/relationship?
- How would an official justify for his/her bribery-risk exchanges/relationships?
- What are typical emotions or feelings an official face when engaging in a bribery-risk exchange/relationship?

Section 3: Current anti-corruption measures

- In your opinion, how effective are the current anti-corruption measures *(examples include those that regulate gift-giving, conflict of interest, backyard companies, nepotism and favoritism, asset declaration, etc.)?*
- Given your discussions on various ways a bribery-exchange/relationship could be disguised, what anti-corruption measures would you recommend?

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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