Beliefs about corruption and its valuation in university students and graduates of Lima and Callao. An exploratory study

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Creencias acerca de la corrupción y su valoración en estudiantes y egresados universitarios de Lima y Callao. Un estudio exploratorio

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Abstract:

The present study explores the beliefs and attitudes towards corruption of a group of middle-class and university-educated young people in the cities of Lima and Callao (n=22). A qualitative study was developed through in-depth interviews with a guide that inquired about three central themes (1) the conceptions about corruption, (2) the characteristics attributed to corruption and (3) the intention to become involved in acts of corruption. The results are contrasted with the definitions that from various organizations and from the social sciences have been developed on the subject. Specifically, participants identify three general conceptions of corruption. The structural conception of corruption defines it as a phenomenon rooted in institutions and normalized in society. The cultural definition presents corruption as a phenomenon with a historical foundation that influences people's identity, and the definition of direct corruption, which includes the daily manifestations of acts of corruption. The representation of the phenomenon is mostly negative, however there are some reasons when its presence is considered legitimate or necessary. Finally, the discussion shows how corruption erodes trust and affects life in society through the damage caused to the public sphere.

Keywords: Corruption, Culture, Institutions, Normative Transgression.

Resumen:

El presente estudio explora las creencias y actitudes hacia la corrupción de un grupo de jóvenes de clase media y educación superior universitaria de las ciudades de Lima y Callao (n=22). Se desarrolló un estudio cualitativo a través de entrevistas en profundidad con una guía que indagaba por tres temas centrales (1) las concepciones sobre la corrupción, (2) las características atribuidas a la corrupción y (3) la intención de involucrarse en actos de corrupción. Los resultados se contrastan con las definiciones que diversos organismos y desde las ciencias sociales se han desarrollado sobre el tema, identificándose tres concepciones generales sobre la corrupción. La concepción estructural de la corrupción la definen como un fenómeno arraigado en las instituciones y normalizado. La definición cultural presenta la corrupción como un fenómeno con un fundamento histórico que influye en la identidad de las personas y la definición de la corrupción directa, que comprende las manifestaciones cotidianas de los actos de corrupción. Aunque la representación del fenómeno es mayoritariamente negativa, se observan algunas razones sobre las cuales se considera legítima o necesaria su presencia. Finalmente, a lo largo de la discusión se aprecia cómo la corrupción erosiona la confianza y afecta la vida en sociedad a través del daño que se produce a lo público.

Palabras clave: Corrupción, Cultura, Instituciones, Transgresión Normativa.

Introducción

Defining corruption is a complex matter, because depending on the society where the issue is addressed, there are different representations and valuations about it (Julián & Bonavia, 2020; Basabose, 2019; Miranzo,

2018; You, 2018; Köbis et al., 2016; Graycar, 2015; Rabl & Kühlmann, 2008). The representational variability of corruption is also manifested when individuals tend to relativize morality and ethics, justifying or sanctioning corrupt actions depending on certain characteristics of the actor who carries them out, as well as the context and conditions in which they are carried out (Cabezas & Paredes, 2020; López-López et al., 2017; Agbo & Iwundu, 2016; López-López et al., 2016).

Considering the apparent difficulty to homologate a concept of corruption, different international organizations develop approaches to it based on the central idea that corruption comprises: "[a] misuse of a public or private position for direct or indirect personal benefit". (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2004, p. 23). In this regard, the World Bank (2014) and the Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo (BID, 2020) coincide in defining corruption as the abuse of public positions for private gain and highlight that administrative corruption is a form of distortion of the rules of the State. In addition, the World Bank (2014) considers corruption as a form of 'capture of the State', which occurs through illicit actions involving actors from the public and private sectors, who seek to influence the policies of a government, with the sole purpose of allocating or obtaining undue benefits. Consistently, Transparencia Internacional (2009) understands corruption as the abuse of power for personal benefit and, according to the amount of funds and resources involved and the sector where it occurs, classifies it as large-scale corruption, small-scale corruption and/or political corruption. Finally, among the list of illicit actions that comprise corruption are acts exercised by officials such as: bribery, fraud, undue appropriation, nepotism, extortion, influence trafficking, misuse of information for personal or private purposes, and the purchase and sale of judicial decisions (UNODC, 2020).

From different Social Sciences, other aspects attributed to corruption are revealed. For instance, Soto (2003), refers to the damage that corruption causes to the public interest of an institution or community. Moreover, Estévez (2005), represents corruption as a distorted conduct, in terms of the actions or inactions of those who confuse the public with the private, in order to obtain private benefits violating the common good. Warf (2018) and You (2018) incorporate in their definitions of corruption the dishonest, fraudulent, and untrustworthy behavior of those who perform the corrupt act, which in turn brings as a consequence the deterioration of the trust of those who experience or observe corruption.

In the same vein, Rabl and Kühlmann (2009, 2008), Rabl (2011) and Zhao et al. (2019a, 2016) refer that corruption is a deviant behavior, manifested in the violation of legal or moral norms and the abuse of power or resources entrusted, to obtain private benefits in a deliberate and clandestine manner. Meanwhile, Ubilluz (2010) and Serna (2009) link behavioral aspects of corruption with its effects on society, bringing the concept closer to that of pathologies that affect the common good, in which collective ideals are displaced by individual interests.

In the Peruvian context, for the Comisión de Alto Nivel Anticorrupción (2013), corruption is the deviation of the public service towards private interests through the violation of law, which affects both the legitimacy of the authorities and the fundamental rights of citizens. For Quiroz (2013, p.38) it is "the misuse of political-bureaucratic power by groups of public officials, colluding with greedy private interests, to [...] obtain economic or political advantages contrary to the goals of social development through the misappropriation or diversion of public resources, and the distortion of policies and institutions". Finally, Quiroz (2013) and Portocarrero (2005) add to the previous definitions that corruption in Peru turns out to be an endemic problem.

In fact, 96% of Peruvians believe that corruption in the government is a serious problem and more than 90% say they have little or no confidence in institutions like government, courts, and police (Transparencia Internacional, 2019). With the development of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, perceptions of the effects of corruption in Peru deepened. According to Transparencia Internacional (2021), Peru reaches a low score (38 points) in the global survey on perception of corruption in the public sector, which is in line with the results of Latinobarómetro (2021), regarding the high perception that parliamentarians (65%), judges and

magistrates (63%) and even the president and his officials (60%) are suspected of being involved in acts of corruption. It is worth noting that the same report indicates that there would be a 10% of interpersonal trust in Peruvian society, only 2 points below the average in Latin America.

Considering the definitions and approaches previously presented, corruption will be defined in this research as a socially deviant or transgressive behavior that involves (1) the abuse of a public or private position, (2) the violation or distortion of legal and moral rules, (3) the purpose of which is to satisfy private, personal or third party interests, to the detriment of the public good, (4) that violates the rights of individuals and (5) that affects interpersonal trust and confidence in the institutions of the citizenry; additionally, (6) it can be installed in a society as an endemic problem due to its persistence over time

From normative transgression to corruption

Levels of perceived corruption in a society are apparently related to the levels and ways in which individuals valuate corruption itself and other types of normative transgressions (Beramendi et al., 2020; Janos et al., 2018; Beramendi & Zubieta, 2013; Fernández-Dols & Oceja, 1994). Specifically, Shalvi (2016) and Gächter and Schulz (2016) empirically find that the constant perception of transgression or rule violation ends up damaging the intrinsic honesty of people within a society. This is related to a progressive conviction of assigning greater value to dishonesty (Marin, 1999). In this regard, it becomes relevant that individual dishonesty is not only influenced by the cost-benefit analysis of committing a transgressive act, but also by social norms and exposure to unethical behaviors, as models of socialization, in different settings of interaction among citizens. (Alva et al., 2021; Wenzel et al., 2017; Gino et al., 2009).

In the same vein, when the prevalence of dishonest behaviors, such as cheating, are widespread, tolerated, and often go unpunished in society, individuals will underestimate the consequences of being caught performing a transgressive act, questioning, in turn, their own beliefs about what dishonesty means (Nordin et al., 2013). As a consequence, people may see dishonesty and transgression in certain everyday matters as justifiable, without damaging their self-image as honest. (De Klerk, 2017; Shalvi, 2016; Gächter & Schulz, 2016; Shalvi et al., 2011; Anand et al., 2004).

Justifications lead to the performance of new dishonest acts with more frequency, without producing guilt or discomfort due to the moral costs of such behaviors, as long as individuals evaluate that the gains from their transgressive behaviors are greater than their moral costs. (Wenzel et al., 2017). To avoid moral cost of transgressions, individuals tend to attribute their own transgressive behaviors to necessity or contextual conditions that force them breaking the rules (see Delgado, 2013). Additionally, Gächter and Schulz (2016) mention that to justify their dishonesty people socially compare themselves with the degree of dishonesty they perceive in their social environments.

Likewise, people use moral disengagement as a cognitive mechanism to allow themselves to commit immoral acts (Zhao et al., 2019a; Zhao et al., 2019b; Barsky, 2011). According to Bandura (1999), moral disengagement disables the internalized moral standards that regulate individuals' behavior, allowing them to restructure or reframe their unethical or deviant behaviors so that they appear less harmful or socially acceptable. The elements previously listed and discussed lead to the process of normalizing corruption, which is internalized in the culture and even shapes some personal and social expressions of identity. (Cabezas & Paredes, 2020; Roth & Acosta, 2018; Sautu, 2014; Nordin et al., 2013; Portocarrero, 2005; Fernández-Dols & Oceja, 1994).

According to Arellano Gault (2017) and Ashforth and Anand (2003), the process that reinforces the normalization of corruption comprises three steps: (1) institutionalization of corruption, where an initial corrupt act becomes embedded in structures and processes until it becomes routine; (2) rationalization of corruption, where representational frameworks are developed to justify and even positively value corruption;

and (3) socialization of corruption, where individuals are induced to see corruption as something permissible, and even desirable (see also Quiroz, 2013).

For Hadiprajitno and Amal (2019), favorable attitudes toward corrupt actions will encourage people to attempt to perform corrupt acts. As a result, the more widespread the corrupt behavior is in the society, the greater the likelihood of emitting such behavior again (Tavits, 2010). For some social groups in Peru, tolerant attitudes towards transgressive behaviors are historically rooted, becoming internalized in the culture and identity as the *viveza criolla* or *criollada* (Quiroz, 2013; Portocarrero, 2005). Thus, *criollada* would be constituted as a cultural transgressive model of disrespect and disregard for the law (De Aliaga, 2012).

Based on the above, this qualitative research seeks to answer the following questions: how do a group of students and university graduates in the cities of Lima and Callao understand corruption, and what are their attitudes and behavioral intentions towards corruption? To this end, the following research objectives are proposed (1) to explore the concept of corruption in young university students and graduates; (2) to investigate the characteristics that young university students and graduates attribute to corruption; and (3) to identify the reasons why young university students and graduates would engage in acts of corruption

Method

Participants

Participants were 22 young people from the cities of Lima and Callao, with undergraduate university studies in progress (n=10) or already completed (n=12). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 33 years old. Regarding sex, 10 participants were women and 12 were men. Also, students and graduates belonged to careers in three areas of study classified by the Superintendencia Nacional de Educación Superior Universitaria [SUNEDU] (2017) as follows: Engineering and Technology (n=3), Medicine and Health Sciences (n=1), and Social Sciences (n=18). Table 1 shows the sociodemographic characteristics of all participants in the study.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of participants (n=22).

Code	Age	Sex/Gender	Career	Type of university	District	Perceived Socio economic level
Student 1	25	Woman/Female	Psychology	Public	Callao	Middle
Student 2	20	Woman/Female	Psychology	Private	Breña	Middle
Student 3	21	Man/Male	Law	Private	Callao	Middle
Student 4	19	Woman/Female	Political Science	Public	San Martín de Porres	Lower-middle
Student 5	18	Man/Male	Journalism	Private	San Martín de Porres	Lower-middle
Student 6	19	Man/Male	Psychology	Private	Cercado de Lima	Middle
Student 7	18	Man/Male	Political Science	Public	Independencia	Middle
Student 8	20	Man/Male	Political Science	Private	Puente Piedra	Middle
Student 9	23	Man/Male	Accounting	Private	Miraflores	Upper-middle
Student 10	25	Woman/Female	Odontology	Public	Chorrillos	Middle
Graduate 1	28	Man/Male	Economics	Private	San Juan de Lurigancho	Middle
Graduate 2	31	Man/Male	Industrial Engineering	Private	Callao	Middle
Graduate 3	29	Man/Male	Economics	Private	Villa María del Triunfo	Middle
Graduate 4	26	Man/Male	Accounting	Private	Pueblo Libre	Middle
Graduate 5	25	Woman/Female	Economics	Public	Callao	Middle
Graduate 6	29	Woman/Female	Management	Private	Callao	Middle
Graduate 7	25	Woman/Female	Business Engineering	Private	Miraflores	Upper-middle
Graduate 8	33	Man/Male	Chemical Engineering	Public	Callao	Middle
Graduate 9	33	Woman/Female	Law	Private	San Borja	Middle
Graduate 10	25	Man/Male	Management	Private	San Martín de Porres	Middle
Graduate 11	29	Woman/Female	Economics	Private	San Martín de Porres	Middle
Graduate 12	28	Woman/Female	Economics	Private	Pueblo Libre	Upper-middle

Data collection techniques

To collect the sociodemographic information of the participants, a general data sheet was prepared in which data related to age, sex, district of residence, career, type of higher education institution and self-perceived socioeconomic level were inquired.

In order to gather the information corresponding to the research objectives, individual in-depth interviews were conducted on the basis of a semi-structured interview guide, which was elaborated with reference to the literature reviewed and previous qualitative studies on the subject (Alva et. al, 2021; Genemo, 2019; López-López et al., 2016; Cuéllar, 2016). The questions that compose the interview guide and its structure were validated by three expert researchers on the subject of corruption (a social psychologist, an economist and a lawyer), who corrected aspects of phrasing (style) and content (relevance and coherence) in order to appropriately address the research objectives. Once the interview guide was validated by the experts, two pilot interviews were conducted to make adjustments to ensure the quality, comprehensibility, appropriate length and sequence of the questions.

Finally, the interview guide was divided into two sections: (1) beliefs regarding corruption: conceptions and characteristics; (2) reasons and intention to become involved in acts of corruption. Table 2 shows the structure of the interview guide in relation to the objectives of this research.

Table 2. Structure of the interview guide

Objectives	Section	Questions
To explore the concept of corruption in young university students and graduates.	Beliefs regarding corruption: conceptions and characteristics	For you, what is corruption or what do you understand by corruption?
To inquire into the characteristics that young university students and graduates attribute to corruption.		Why (reasons) do you think people get involved in corruption?
		What do you think people who commit acts of corruption value most?
		What do you think people who commit acts of corruption are like? What behavior do you think a corrupt person may exhibit?
		How do you think corruption affects Peru? Or What consequences do you think corruption generates in Peru?
To identify the reasons why young university students and graduates engage in acts of corruption.	Reasons and intentions to become involved in acts of corruption	Do you think it is justifiable to commit acts of corruption under what circumstances?
		Do you think that a certain level of corruption is beneficial for Peru? Why?
		Have you ever lived through or seen an act of corruption? Do you know anyone close to you who has participated in an act of corruption? Under what circumstances did it occur? Why do you think they did it?
		Have you ever been tempted to commit an act of corruption? How did you feel about it?
		What would you do if a corrupt act was proposed to you? What would you consider in order to commit a corrupt act? Under what circumstances would you agree to participate in a corrupt act?

Procedure

The snowball technique was applied for the selection of participants in the study, and they were intentionally selected, considering their accessibility and availability. During the recruitment process, participants were informed about the general purpose of the research. Those who agreed to be interviewed were provided with the terms of informed consent, where they were notified of the conditions of free and voluntary participation, since they had the option of leaving the interview at any time they wished without any type of prejudice. The procedure to be followed during the interview was also explained. In addition, authorization was requested for the interviews to be recorded in audio and video, and it was remarked that the information obtained during the interview would be confidential and would only be used for strictly academic purposes.

All interviews were conducted between September 25 and October 24, 2020, via a video-calling platform due to the pandemic context of COVID-19. The interviews were conducted individually and lasted approximately 35 to 60 minutes. Subsequently, the recordings were transcribed, and an identification code was assigned to each participant. For the interpretation of the qualitative data, a deductive-inductive

thematic analysis was applied as a methodological design that allows for a deeper understanding of the meanings and experience of the participants of the study with respect to the phenomenon addressed (Creswell, 2014).

For the systematization of the qualitative data, we used the methodology proposed by Nowell et al, (2017) for a reliable and rigorous thematic analysis, and which consisted of the following four steps: (1) transcription of the interviews, reading and re-reading, for familiarization with the content and annotation of general ideas; (2) identification of units of analysis, through quotations from the testimonies, to categorize and code them, in a process of searching for structures and meanings; (3) identification of relationships between categories to form conceptual networks and argumentative constellations; and (4) generation, review and naming of emerging themes. After two consecutive coding processes, the final result was 2 main themes and 12 categories that integrated common semantic patterns. Regarding the abovementioned, the ethical and rigorous criteria of qualitative research such as the veracity, authenticity and credibility of the information collected were validated (Creswell, 2014)

Results and Discussion

Below, the results regarding the beliefs and attitudes of the interviewees about corruption are presented and discussed. The results are organized into two major themes generated after the qualitative analysis: (1) the conceptualization of corruption from the perspective of the participants and (2) the reasons and intentions of the participants to be involved in acts of corruption.

Theme 1: Corruption from the perspective of participants

The first theme refers to (1) the conception of corruption and (2) the characteristics that the participants attribute to this phenomenon. Consequently, 6 categories describe these topics, which have made it possible to address the first two objectives of the study.

The first objective corresponds to the examination of the concept of corruption. In relation to this, 3 categories are identified in the participants' narratives that coincide with the three-dimensional approach to corruption proposed by Cabezas and Paredes (2020).

The first category *Corruption as a structural phenomenon* refers to corruption as the "institutional subjugation to private interests and corrupt behaviors" (Cabezas & Paredes, 2020, p.45). From this conception, norms and institutions would be aligned to make corrupt acts less punishable, so that power is used for private benefit while the illegal is legitimized. Two subcategories emerge from the view of corruption as a structural phenomenon. The first refers to corruption as (1) an institutionalized act and the second refers to corruption as (2) an abuse of power from authority and institutions

> "For me, corruption is a systemic phenomenon to the extent that, for example, at the level of regional, local and central governments, it is widespread. [...] corruption is also a structure since it can be present in any institution [...]". (Student 5, Male, 18 years old).

Both students and graduates agreed on the idea that corruption is rooted in the institutions that govern Peru. The generalization of corrupt acts in both the public and private spheres contributes to the perception of the 'institutionalization' of corruption in the participants. Precisely, Arellano Gault (2017) and Ashforth and Anand (2003) specify that, through institutionalization, a corrupt act penetrates processes and structures until it becomes a habitual, frequent, or common behavior. Additionally, interviewees agree in associating 'abuse of power' with corruption. According to Rabl and Kühlmann (2008, 2009), Rabl (2011) and Zhao et al. (2016, 2019a), corruption is manifested in the abuse of the public power for the achievement

of particular benefits. This idea is one of the most consensual in the reviewed literature so it was expected that it would not be absent from the participants' expressions.

The second category *Corruption as a cultural phenomenon* refers to the fact that corruption presents a highly complex cultural dimension, given that this phenomenon manages to integrate itself into daily life, regulate the codes of social interaction and even leads to corrupt behaviors being accepted by society (Cabezas & Paredes, 2020; Beramendi & Zubieta, 2013). In this regard, Julian and Bonavia (2017) point out that, if corrupt behaviors are perceived as normal in the group, there would be an intragroup reinforcement in which the corrupt behavior would not transgress the norms of the group itself and, therefore, would lead to the implicit acceptance of these behaviors. For the present study, 4 subcategories emerge referring to corruption as a cultural phenomenon: (1) corruption as a transgressive act, (2) corruption as an anti-value, (3) corruption as a *viveza* or *criollada*, and (4) corruption as a normalized act.

> "Trying to break the law or the rules in a State institution [...] in order to obtain a personal objective, which could have a negative impact on society or any institution". (Student 6, Male, 19 years old).

Both groups of participants (students and graduates) conceive corruption as an act in which norms are transgressed or laws are broken or normative loopholes are exploited for particular ends, which in turn harms those who do not participate in the act. Beramendi and Zubieta (2013) point out that the lack of control and sanctions, the distrust in the regulatory system, the existence of incoherent rules, corrupt practices, and the infringement of laws by the authorities, contribute to a generalized transgression of the rules. This would cause transgressive mechanisms are established in daily life and become the most important tools of interaction among people. Then, the frequent proximity to situations of transgression would be a risk factor that would lead to committing new acts of corruption in the future (Rottenbacher & Schmitz, 2012). Additionally, Mejía Navarrete (2018) states that transgression of norms serves to obtain personal benefits in a sort of egocentric individualism. This means that the transgressive individuals believe they deserve everything they find in their ways, with no limits at all

> "He prioritizes his own interests [...] over the welfare of others [...] and is willing to do whatever it takes to achieve his own goal [...] he does not care if this affects even his own family or [...] people who are innocent of any wrongdoing". (Graduate 5, Female, 25 years old)

The participants understand corruption as a constraint to moral or ethical behavior, made up of 'anti-values' such as dishonesty, disloyalty, and selfishness. Based on this idea, corruption would be harmful to people's moral integrity. Regarding this point, Blasi (2005) and Bock and Samuelson (2014) agree that moral principles and convictions regulate the behaviors of individuals in any situation, but phenomena such as corruption undermine self-regulation and moral identity built around people's ethical sense. Then, things do not work under what they should be but through unmoral ways that force people to tolerate or adapt to a socially corrupt functioning (Beramendi & Zubieta, 2013; Quiroz, 2013)

> "[...] it is an act supported by the law of the most devious, where [one] wants to take advantage at any cost, either to benefit a close friend [...] or yourself [...] it is the criollada that we live almost daily, the lack of respect [...] for others... those foundations of conduct are the ones that make corruption [...]. It is so much so that it has become part of Peruvian customs. [...] there is always going to be a tendency to look out for one's own interests before those of others because it is part of our culture". (Graduate 2, Male, 31 years old)

From the narrative of the participants, particularly the graduates, corruption is part of Peruvian history and society. Corruption would be acknowledged with resignation when recalling passages of colonial history, highlighting the *viveza criolla* or *criollada* as a characteristic feature of being Peruvian (Ubilluz, 2010; Portocarrero, 2005). Despite being a problematic phenomenon, *viveza criolla* has gained acceptance and is represented with some positive characteristics in Peruvian society. On this point, it could be added that if the *viveza criolla* is positively valued as a mean of survival or adaptation in a society where transgressions of the

norms are exalted, it could lead to adherence to corrupt behaviors (Quiroz, 2013; Aliaga, 2012; Portocarrero, 2005). Corruption is rationalized by justifying it (Arellano Gault, 2017; Ashforth & Anand, 2003), to such an extent that if it is not penalized, it could be internalized in the social identity (Cabezas & Paredes, 2020; Espinosa, 2003)

> "[...] in Peru I have sometimes felt that repudiable acts have been normalized [...] people do not understand the consequences of what they do and they normalize it... in Peru it is normalized to bribe a policeman... I feel that this is changing a little, but not enough. [...]". (Graduate 1, Male, 28 years old)

Previous descriptions show that corruption would be part of the culture and everyday life in Peru. Sihombing (2018) notes that, for young people, corruption is perceived as an everyday problem that occurs in themselves and their environment, and is not necessarily a specific problem of the public sector. The historical image of corruption in Peru would have validated the normalization of corrupt behaviors in society over time (Quiroz, 2013). It is worth mentioning that the normalization of corruption would be triggered, among other conditions, by the perception of a corrupt environment (Alva et al., 2021; Janos et al., 2018), the justification of transgressive acts (Wenzel et al., 2017; Gächter & Schulz, 2016) and moral disengagement (Zhao et al., 2019a; Zhao et al., 2019b; Bandura, 1999).

The third category *Straight corruption* is defined as an outcome of the corrupt structure and corrupt culture. According to Cabezas and Paredes (2020, p. 45), "any visible or perceptible manifestation of corrupt acts typified by positive legislation" is straight corruption. This dimension incorporates offenses such as bribery, fraud, misappropriation of funds, trafficking of influence, among others, which are applied in both the public and private sectors and provide benefits to those who carry them out, even when they have negative effects on society. Consistently, the results show that straight corruption is represented as a criminal act.

> "[...] corruption is a crime that includes different areas, whether it is collusion... misappropriation of funds... influence trafficking and so many crimes that occur not only at a private level but also that predominate, and we perceive it, in the public aspect, in our institutions... and they end up affecting us [...]" (Student 4, Female, 19 years old)

This would be linked to the idea of corruption as an action in which the actors involved collaborate with each other and execute a criminal act for a common purpose. Corrupt practices are therefore associated not only with reprehensible moral acts but also with the activities of criminal organizations (Poeschl & Ribeiro, 2010). The dimensions of corruption become interconnected when corrupt structures are institutionalized and internalized in the culture to produce recurring corruption offenses such as bribery (Cabezas & Paredes, 2020).

In sum, it can be inferred from the participants' responses that, in Peru, corruption has a historical legacy of normalized and institutionalized transgressions, which finds its maximum expression in a criminal act, which includes the abuse of power and 'anti-values' serving private, individual, and collective, ends, with negative social consequences for society. This conceptualization coincides with the conceptual elements taken from the literature, but also incorporates cultural components of the participants' own context.

The second objective of the study seeks to investigate the characteristics attributed to corruption. In this sense, 3 categories are identified from the participants' responses: (1) beliefs about what motivates people to engage in acts of corruption, (2) personality types and the characterization of the actors involved in acts of corruption, and (3) the consequences attributed to this phenomenon.

The first category *Corruption motives* starts from the idea that the motivation to perform an action is key in understanding why there is a willingness to behave immorally or perform illegal behaviors (Chugh, 2012). The literature related to Self-Determination Theory refers those individuals can have intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Ryan & Deci, 2000), being extrinsic motivations those enhancing tendencies towards corrupt behaviors (Agbo & Iwundu, 2016). For this study, participants emphasized that extrinsic and external regulation motives such as customs and child-rearing styles, and extrinsic and identified regulation motives

such as ambition for power, money, or social status were conditions conducive to corruption. Additionally, they pointed to the absence of control and necessity as motives for individuals to engage in corruption

> "I think they are already used to do it, it may be the power, it may be the quick profit they can get. [...] those who aspire to more and are not very clear about their values because they only want to survive, to improve their quality of life, will tend to be unethical [and] corrupt [...]". (Graduate 2, Male, 31 years old).

For the participants, individuals engage in corrupt acts motivated by certain child-rearing styles and customs that are learned through interaction with the environment and constitute a socialization process that influences behavior. Thus, individuals can learn since childhood that corruption is a common behavior and, even, authority figures and peers can validate these actions by approving them, so that corruption becomes something habitual in the society (Dong et al., 2012).

Ambition for power, money and improved social status are extrinsic motivators that stand out in the participants' narratives. Ambition that involves unrealistic achievement goals and distorted values based on wealth and social status is a pathology that leads to antisocial emotions and behaviors (Casallas, 2020). Moreover, although power and money act as external incentives that motivate participation in corruption, experiences of having observed a successful corrupt act are what make individuals anticipate a successful outcome as well (Chugh, 2012)

> "[...] at some point they committed that and there were people who saw it and did not say anything, so if they do it again, nobody will say anything [...] they know they will not be punished". (Graduate 5, Female, 25 years old).

The lack of control is added as an opportunity that individuals find leading them more easily to acts of corruption. While perceived impunity allows individuals to underestimate the consequences of being caught by a transgressive act (Nordin et al., 2013).

> "[...] I think people do it because it is extremely necessary, even though they may have moral dilemmas, many times the decision to perform a corrupt action is linked to the survival of one's own family or that the next day one can eat, continue working in a company, continue studying [...]" (Student 7, Male, 18 years old).

Finally, participants identify that necessity leads to corruption. In developing countries, there is a reduced capacity of States to fulfill basic needs (Núñez & Flanagan, 2015), which motivates, for example, the payment of bribes to be able to access to basic public services, therefore, individuals would have the incentives to engage in corruption in order to protect themselves from situations of deprivation (Dimant & Tosato, 2018, Justesen & Bjørnskov, 2014). On the other hand, environmental pressure and the need for acceptance in society can lead to engaging in dishonest acts. In this regard, Goldschmidt and Anonymous (2008) find that officers in a police department in Chicago engage in dishonest acts due to peer pressure, the need to be productive and to represent an identity of effective officers.

The second category refers to the *Personality of the corrupt*. According to Ajzen (1991), personality traits influence behavior through cognitive mechanisms related to behavioral, normative and control beliefs. There are, then, certain personality traits that are associated with participation in dishonest, transgressive, and corrupt acts. For the present study, 6 subcategories emerge referring to the personality traits of the actors involved in corruption. The interviewees mainly characterize the personality of the corrupt subject with dark traits and only made a brief mention of the weakness of the corruptible subject and the lack of interest of the subject affected by corruption.

> "Envy, greed, non-humility, constant competition [...] they are immediatists". (Graduate 8, Male, 33 years old).

Psychopathy and Machiavellianism are traits of dark personalities that manifest themselves in selfishness, low self-control, and other antisocial personality traits, which are linked to accelerated lifestyles and tend to immediacy (Jonason et al., 2010); an issue that could be aligned with the outcomes offered by acts of corruption. Likewise, this inclination towards immediate results would be linked to an unstable environment

of uncertainty, in which there would be less adherence to norms (Brumbach et al. 2009), as occurs in developing countries, given the dissatisfaction of basic needs and the search for survival that affects their citizens.

> "[...] I describe them as cynical [...] hypocritical in a general way... and ambitious." (Graduate 12, Female, 28 years old).

In sum, participants characterize the corruptor as unscrupulous, unethical, with a distorted view of what is morally right and wrong, someone who likes to stand out, selfish, self-centered, hypocritical, dishonest, cynical, disloyal, a liar, eloquent, manipulative, and ambitious. Such characteristics are consistent with the personality traits of the dark triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Jonason et al., 2010).

The third category named *Corruption consequences* reflects from the perspective of the participants a consensus regarding the long-term negative impact of corruption in economic growth, equality of opportunities, effectiveness of public institutions and quality of governance (Transparencia Internacional, 2014). The effects of corruption, however, are not only on a large scale (Myint, 2000) but also in a diversity of sectors and spheres of civil and political society (Miranzo, 2018). In this sense, 2 subcategories were identified that concentrate (1) the macro-social consequences and (2) the individual consequences that the interviewees pointed out with respect to corruption. In relation to the consequences of corruption, 5 additional subcategories emerge and their impacts are associated with the loss of social welfare, loss of prestige, normative distortion, lack of opportunities and distrust among citizens

> "[...] every act of corruption diminishes growth, the economic development of the country, affects the provision of public services that are very important, health, education, justice [...]" (Graduate 6, Female, 29 years old).

In terms of macro-social consequences, the participants mainly pointed out the damage that corruption generates in the society's prosperity. At the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the study was conducted, the deficiencies of the institutions and the ethical shortcomings of the people who make up these institutions were revealed. On the one hand, public institutions related to public health were the reflection of years of accumulated deficiencies resulting from the corrupt practices of different governments, with the poorest citizens being the most affected during the health crisis. On the other hand, citizens themselves, who lived with corruption before the pandemic, showed transgressive behavior and resistance to regulatory measures aimed to control the health crisis.

> "Corruption generates a feeling that things can work without the need to pay attention to the law... it is not surprising that most people do not know what the law says or know it to the extent that they can get some benefit from it [...]" (Student 7, Male, 18 years old).

Thus, during the first and second year of the pandemic, both citizens and authorities transgressed norms and committed acts of corruption, with their own individual interests or needs prevailing over collective interests or the rights of others. Cepeda (2021) notes that the COVID-19 crisis has allowed corrupt actors to benefit through mismanagement of funds, overpricing of medicines, political corruption and extortion to families seeking access to Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds. In this regard, Dezecache et al. (2020) point out that, in the face of a situation that threatens integrity, people become rivals by nature and brutality and misery emerge

> "[...] reduction of opportunities, because there is influence trafficking in which many people who are capable of holding public positions do not obtain them because priority is given to those who have influence at the political level". (Student 4, Female, 19 years old).

Regarding individual consequences, participants point to the lack of opportunities caused by corruption. In certain ways, they are aware of the different cases of traffic of influence shown by the media and, particularly, the graduates highlight having experienced situations in which the positions were named and their abilities had no value when applying for positions in both the public and private sectors. As Almagro

(2020) points out, the permanent corruption in politics means that public positions are not occupied by people with a service vocation and, rather, discourages the adhesion of people with a true vocation. Thus, the new generations could be more sensitive to developing a generalized distrust in the political system, which translates into cynicism, given the wave of corruption scandals in Latin America that are also exposed in social networks. It is worth noting that the interviewees did not indicate positive consequences of corruption, but they did justify corrupt practices in certain circumstances. These aspects will be developed in the following section.

Theme 2: Intentions to engage in corruption

The literature points out that attitudes toward an object, action, or event are constructed from (1) cognitions or beliefs that go through an evaluative process, (2) affects or feelings that are experienced directly or indirectly, and (3) actions or behaviors (Petty et al., 2003; Crano & Prislin, 2006). If a person presents a favorable attitude toward an object, action or event, there will be an intention to incline his or her behavior positively toward the attitudinal object. Considering this relationship between attitudes and behavioral intentions, we analyze 4 categories that emerge from the narrative of university students and graduates in relation to the valuation of corruption and the intention to engage in corrupt acts.

The first category, *Experience with transgression*, according to Dalton (2002), shows that norms and transgression coexist in societies. The transgression of norms in society grounds phenomenons such as corruption (Arellano Gault, 2017; Zaloznaya, 2014). It is the experience, direct or indirect, with transgressive acts which are part of the construction of attitudes towards corruption (Cuellar, 2016). Also, fraudulent acts become accepted when they are not considered harms or victims, such as illegal downloading of movies and music (Ribeiro et al., 2020). In this sense, this category identifies direct and indirect experiences of participants with acts of transgression that in some cases could predispose them to engage in corrupt acts.

> "[...] now seeing the social distancing, the quarantine... I have seen in the news many authorities who have been breaking this rule, this law!... because I understand that a law was [enacted] saying that from such and such region they cannot go out at such and such time and everything... and the same authorities have been found drinking alcohol, holding social events [...] walking without a mask, without social distancing... and they continued going about their daily lives as if nothing was happening". (Student 2, Female, 20 years old).

When references are made to non-compliance of the norms stipulated to contain COVID-19, the authorities themselves are seen in the media as actors that delegitimize the norm through non-compliance and lack of respect for the institutions, of which they are also part. As Beramendi et al. (2020) point out, transgressors base their actions on a lack of legitimacy because they perceive that the norm is unfair and, therefore, not respectable. This distorted perception of norms eventually gives rise to thoughts such as "if the other person does it, why can't I?". In this sense, young people perceive an abuse of the position held by the authorities, in which private desires and interests take precedence over the work of the public officer. There would be, then, an amplifying connotation of generalized disrespect in a sort of vicious circle of transgressions that are not sanctioned and whose exemplifying agent is an authority. In this regard, Dalton (2002) points out that when human behavior breaks the rules, one order is transgressed and another is generated, in which morality is contaminated, bad examples emerge and the breaking of rules continues.

> "[...] the abuse of leisure hours within the office when they celebrate a holiday... the hours they stop working... in some way they are stealing working hours from the State [...]". (Graduate 11, Female, 29 years old).

On the other hand, there is a clear abuse of trust in the practice of public functions. The use of working hours for other activities would be something commonly seen in government officials. According to

Rottenbacher and Schmitz (2012), the norm is interpreted as a matter of convenience and its transgression is even justified and accepted depending on the context.

In the case of direct experiences, most of the graduates reported situations related to copying or cheating in the university and workplace

> "I took it as a joke, it was like planning something bad, there is a combination of nerves and adrenaline because you are going to do something against the rules... but when the time came I was really scared and I started to think about the consequences [...] they could cancel the exam and even withdraw me from the course and ruin my record, in the end I felt more relieved that I had not done it." (Graduate 5, Female, 25 years old).

In the narrative of young university students, the attraction of engaging in a transgressive act stands out, this is associated with the feeling of adrenaline, but, at the same time, there are negative emotions such as nerves and fear, and a potential social control, which makes the act not occur. Facing risky activities, individuals will seek to maximize their benefits and minimize their costs (Prabowo, 2014). Hu et al. (2021), for example, find that when individuals, particularly those who possess power, are faced with the temptation to transgress, they take into account the moral costs of the agreement, the benefits to receive, as well as the harms that may be caused. Moreover, not only monetary gains provide incentives to commit transgressive acts, but also non-monetary aspects such as pleasure, excitement or status are considered, given that in human nature the aim is to maximize pleasure and avoid pain (Gorsira et al., 2018; Prabowo, 2014). Likewise, Wu and Zhu (2015) argue that experience with transgressive acts damages individual satisfaction due to feelings of shame, guilt, or victimization; however, these psychological costs can be minimized in corrupt environments.

> "[...] the work [the consultant] did not comply with the characteristics required by the investment system, but the consultant refused to correct it... it was up to me to notify [the consultant] that he would no longer continue with the service, but my boss asked me to 'help him to solve these observations'... what does it meant to help him?, to put me to do that work [. ...] that situation was quite uncomfortable because I practically had to complete the consultant's work [...]" (Graduate 11, Female, 29 years old).

Facing a situation in which one is asked to participate in a deception generates surprise and discomfort. Although in the reported experiences, the majority of participants tends to refuse, in the above-mentioned situation a non-voluntary participation was executed under pressure from a superior. In this regard, Tepper (2010) finds that many superiors pressure their employees to behave unethically because they do not know another way of doing things. Erosion of values such as honesty or integrity, means that anyone who is not complicit in the dishonest act will be treated as an outcast (Goldschmidt & Anonymous, 2008). Likewise, when the individual is forced to transgress, moral emotions such as shame and guilt emerge. In particular, guilt is more effective in guiding the individual to moral behavior, as opposed to shame that is linked to illegal and risky behaviors (Tangney et al., 2007).

The second category *Experience with corruption* shows that personal and vicarious experiences with corruption, build attitudes towards this phenomenon (Sautu, 2002). In particular, corruption in everyday life, such as observing or giving bribes to public officials, is a more direct source to shape attitudes towards corruption than the news about corruption (Li & Meng, 2020). In this sense, this category includes different experiences that the participants have carried out or observed, which are similar to some crimes committed by officials who, according to the Defensoría del Pueblo (2013), are classified as acts of corruption in the Peruvian Penal Code.

> "I know people who have been harmed in a court ruling for not paying a judge... or because the other party paid a judge [...]" (Graduate 1, Male, 28 years old)

Although the interviewees have referred to various crimes of corruption, in particular, situations related to bribery have been identified mainly in their daily experience. In terms of direct experiences with corruption,

it is identified that interviewees report daily events in which the people who usually encourage corrupt acts are officials such as police officers, doctors, lawyers, judges and, in general, any person in a position of power in both public and private institutions.

> "Well, a few years ago my dad was sick and he needed to be operated in ESSALUD [...] this doctor who was treating him gave us to understand that he could do something for him, asking for money in exchange... so our position would have been 'we have to sanction this doctor because he is asking us for money'... but my dad had a very unfavorable diagnosis... we had to agree to this act of corruption because in reality it was my dad's life, because if he was not treated, he could die" (Student 1, Female, 25).

It is noteworthy that one of the participants did bribe because, according to her, she was in an emergency situation; nevertheless, the majority of the interviewees did not recognize having participated in any act of corruption. De Klerk (2017) notes that individuals use rationalization to mitigate moral anxiety when engaging in corruption. In particular, the denial of responsibility as a rationalization technique allows directing blame for the corrupt act to another object, hence absolution is found (De Klerk, 2017; Gannett & Rector, 2015; Rabl & Kühlmann, 2009). Moreover, while attaining a better job is attractive, interviewees reflect on the damage to their prestige if they choose to develop their careers dishonestly. Graduates, in particular, think about their career and prestige before seeking to engage in corrupt practices to improve their professional situation.

> "Once I was offered in a project to receive 10% of all carbon steel materials purchased [...] it was more or less like 20 thousand dollars that I could have earned, but at the end I asked myself 'if I get used to this I will not stop and those 20 thousand dollars will cost me my career', then I started to think 'is my career worth 20 thousand dollars? The tranquility... the fact that I was a very young professional, was it worth 20 thousand dollars to ruin my career?'... and the answer was no, so I did not accept [...]" (Graduate 2, Male, 31 years old)

Experience with corruption can affect the perception of this phenomenon in two opposite directions. On the one hand, those who have experienced bribes may be inclined to forgive corrupt officials, given that they become beneficiaries of corruption, which has allowed them access to better treatment in the public sector (if individuals find a benefit from corruption, they are more likely to participate in bribery and even take the initiative); on the other hand, people who experience corruption in the role of victim and not as a beneficiary may increase their negative perception of this phenomenon. In this regard, Li and Meng (2020) find in China that daily experience with corruption impacts political attitudes toward corruption and anti-corruption, to the extent that they can problematize corruption, but also reinforces it.

The third category *Justifications of the corrupt act* identifies positions that justify the corrupt act, but only in some circumstances. Through rationalization, individuals convince themselves that acts of corruption can be justified and even accepted (Anand et al., 2004). The rationalization mechanism, as Rabl and Kühlmann (2009) point out, allows highlighting the positive nature of corruption by appealing to the fact that the result of the action should compensate for the wrongdoing. Thus, the literature distinguishes two strategies that individuals follow to rationalize corruption, that is, highlighting the positive intentions behind corrupt actions or blinding the negative ones (Gannett & Rector, 2015; Rabl & Kühlmann, 2009). In this line, for the present study, 4 subcategories that gather the justifications that the young participants give to acts of corruption emerge: (1) just cause or Robin Hood, (2) necessity, (3) bureaucracy and (4) no justification.

> "[...] I believe that fighting corruption with the same weapons could be valid. As I already mentioned, in the case of Domingo Perez, I think that, for example, if he committed acts of corruption to obtain evidence, as long as he did not murder anyone, nor affected anyone's dignity, I think it could be justifiable". (Student 4, Female, 19 years old).

In the participants' narratives, a positive tone is highlighted with respect to corruption when those involved have an altruistic motive, in which the desire to help a common good cause is pursued. According to Wall and Fogarty (2018), behavioral motivations would be more complex when self-interest is no longer the principal thing, so that motivational variants such as Robin Hood syndrome emerge. Expressions such

as "thief who steals from thief has 100 years of forgiveness" denotes the above, in which a bad action is justified when the cause is considered as just (De Sousa, 2012), and even those who act under these parameters are considered as virtuous individuals (Brytting et al., 2011). Through the Robin Hood effect, tolerance to corruption prevails in a context of needs and inequalities. This means that expressions such as "if it is about protecting someone in the family, it is okay to do something a little corrupt" or "if one is in need and a politician offers benefits in exchange for the vote, it is not wrong to accept", justify corruption in situations of scarcity (Filgueiras, 2016, p.178). Thus, the justification of the corrupt act becomes stronger when it is attributed to the need, the context, or the behavior of others (Delgado, 2013). Thus, evading responsibility or guilt, denying the damage and the victims of the corrupt act, allow to cover up the immorality of this (Gannett & Rector, 2015).

> "Look, I'm not going to deny that many administrative systems are quite slow... now they are changing, but while they were not changing, there were things that were not speeding up... and the fact that there were small acts of corruption, all of a sudden they have speeded up the work and you see results... like the classic 'He steals, but he does' [...]" (Graduate 11, Female, 29 years).

Establishing systems of corruption, because of weak law enforcement, results in a habit when people know that, for example, bribery is the way to get things done (Fisman & Miguel, 2010). Consequently, arguments arise to support a positive impact of corruption in the absence of effective governance systems, so that corruption can compensate for bureaucracy, institutional weaknesses and even activate the economy. (Transparencia Internacional, 2014).

> "I think it is not justifiable because in the end you affect others" (Graduate 8, Male, 33 years old).

Although it is emphasized that corruption makes it possible to facilitate processes, the moral damage and ethical distortions that have repercussions on society are not ignored. Deficiencies can be mitigated with corruption, as a placebo in the short term, but the consequences of corruption remain latent in the long term, undermining the moral of a society. For this reason, the majority of respondents were inclined not to consider any justification for acts of corruption. Similarly, Ribeiro et al. (2020), in his study on fraud towards insurers, finds that people who consider fraud as unacceptable and unjustifiable would have a low tolerance for fraudulent behavior and, in turn, a lower willingness to engage in fraudulent acts.

Finally, the fourth category *Acceptance of participating in a corrupt act* is closely linked to the previously discussed justification of corruption. The acceptance or willingness to participate in acts of corruption would derive from the positive aspects that respondents identify with respect to corruption. In this point, 2 subcategories are identified, which include the reasons why the participants would accept to participate in acts of corruption, although in some cases the impossibility of engaging in corruption was also mentioned.

> "[...] it has occurred to me that I would do it if the life of a loved one is at risk, only in that case [...]." (Graduate 5, Female, 25 years old).

In particular, it stands out that the context of need and the perspective of justice under the figure of Robin Hood prevail in the narrative of the participants when they are asked about the possibility of getting involved in acts, they consider corrupt. In this regard, the acceptance of a corrupt act is adjusted according to a subjective estimation of how much the person involved or their loved ones lose by doing it or not (Pop, 2012).

> "No, I would definitely not do it, impossible...I wouldn't even think about it...I would be going against my principles totally...I would feel exhausted, tired, I wouldn't sleep...I imagine it as an agony for me." (Graduate 8, Male, 33 years old).

In sum, most of the participants' narratives were in denial, arguing that it would cause personal and family harm to become involved in corrupt acts. However, there remains the idea that under two circumstances they might consider engaging in corrupt acts: in the face of an injustice and to face their own needs or those of third

parties. It should be noted that the participants indicated negative elements regarding corruption in their position as observers, but when their experiences with corruption as well as transgressions were involved, justifications emerged such as solving bureaucratic problems with corruption because the system does not operate well, or commit acts of corruption if it is for the common good, an issue that contrasts with the search for individual or private benefits to which the definitions of corruption are associated.

Conclusions

The participants' conceptions of corruption are based on three main ideas: corruption is a structural problem due to its presence in institutions, it is a cultural problem that defines the social identity of Peruvians, and it is expressed daily through different transgressions and crimes.

The conceptions of corruption are mostly negative, and this discourages participants from engaging in corrupt acts. On this point, Poeschl and Ribeiro (2010) find, in a sample of Portuguese, that corruption is portrayed negatively in terms of corrupt practices and corrupt people. However, there are some benevolent or legitimizing representations that could eventually stimulate participation in corrupt acts, especially small-scale corruption. It is worth noting that the participants provide a justification that instrumentalizes corruption with a Machiavellian sense of "the end justifies the means" to give themselves license to carry out large-scale transgressions. Those representations where corruption is perceived as a search for a greater good, when it helps to overcome a situation of need or when it solves the problem of inefficiency of institutions and authorities, are risk factors.

The participants recognize that corruption has important costs for life in society because it generates distrust in the political system and its institutions, and affects coexistence. Due to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which the research was carried out, references to the costs of corruption in the public health system have been frequent. As Ribeiro et al. (2020) point out, when the institution is not a symbol of trust, perceived injustice in its processes or is not valued positively, gives rise to the justification of fraudulent acts. In particular, there is a negative evaluation of the service provided by the Peruvian public health system, even more so during the pandemic (Vivar-Mendoza, 2020).

Although in Latin America and, specifically, in the Peruvian context, democracy is still conceived as being in formation and prone to weaknesses, Brussino and Alonso (2021) argue that support for democracy coexists with the perception of poor performance and distrust of democratic institutions, which produces a niche for corruption and institutional weakening. Consequently, there is a progressive generalized distrust and a low level of citizen engagement in public affairs. Thus, corruption not only generates disappointment and erosion of trust toward institutions but even fosters cynicism among them (Park & Blenkinsopp, 2011).

Implicitly, the results validate the idea that (1) the problematization of corruption, (2) the emotional and moral costs it produces, and (3) the presence of control mechanisms would be protective factors to inhibit acts of direct corruption, reducing the socialization models that feed structural and cultural corruption that undermine democratic principles.

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