

Social Norms and Corruption in South Africa: The Struggle Beneath the Surface

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Abstract

Despite extensive legal reforms and institutional oversight mechanisms, corruption remains a persistent challenge in South Africa. Conventional anti-corruption strategies tend to emphasise legal frameworks and economic deterrence, often overlooking the role of social norms that shape everyday behaviour. This article examines how socialised and informal expectations surrounding loyalty, reciprocity and silence inform how corruption is interpreted and responded to in daily interactions. Drawing on the distinction between empirical and normative expectations, the study argues that corruption frequently persists because individuals perceive participation as socially expected or fear the social consequences of deviation. The study employs a vignette-based qualitative approach involving twelve purposively selected participants. Respondents were presented with hypothetical scenarios reflecting common governance encounters, including police roadblocks, procurement processes, nepotism in hiring, sextortion and small facilitation payments. This approach enabled participants to evaluate situations indirectly, allowing for a more candid exploration of social expectations surrounding corruption. Thematic analysis revealed several interrelated norms that shape behaviour. These include the stigma attached to reporting corruption, commonly framed through the label *impimpi*;¹ codes of silence rooted in loyalty to family or social networks; admiration for visible wealth that normalises corrupt enrichment; and the use of euphemistic language such as “cool drink” to soften the perception of bribery. The findings demonstrate that corruption is frequently sustained by social pressures rather than simply by individual opportunism. The article, therefore, argues that anti-corruption strategies focusing solely on institutional reform are unlikely to achieve lasting change. Addressing corruption effectively requires engaging with the social norms that structure everyday interactions. Policy responses should, therefore, complement legal reforms with interventions aimed at reshaping public narratives, strengthening ethical socialisation and promoting cultures of accountability within both institutions and communities.

Keywords: Social norms, corruption, anti-corruption, South Africa, whistleblowing, nepotism; sextortion.

1. Introduction

Few issues have shaped South Africa’s post-apartheid experience as profoundly as corruption, which continues to impose significant political, economic and social costs on the country (Thusi, Matyana and Jili 2023). Its effects are visible in weakened state capacity, declining public trust and the erosion of resources intended to address deep structural inequalities. In response, successive governments have adopted a range of reforms aligned with internationally endorsed “best practice” approaches to anti-corruption. These efforts have included the enactment of anti-corruption legislation, the strengthening of administrative oversight in high-risk areas such as public procurement and the establishment of anti-corruption institutions (Chivandire, Saruchera and Pillay 2024).

Despite these institutional developments and legal frameworks, corruption remains a persistent feature of public life. This persistence presents a puzzle for both scholars and practitioners. As Kubbe, Baez-Camargo and Scharbatke-Church (2024) observe, many countries experiencing high levels of corruption already possess legal and institutional frameworks that formally align with internationally recognised standards. The challenge, therefore, often lies in the difficulty of translating these frameworks into effective practice. This phenomenon is commonly described as the “implementation gap”, referring to the disconnect between the formal adoption of anti-corruption measures and their consistent enforcement (Stahl, Kassa and Baez-Camargo 2017). The persistence of such gaps has become a central concern

¹ An *impimpi* is a South African slang term for a police informer, spy or collaborator, particularly originating from the apartheid era where it designated a “sell-out” within communities. It is a Xhosa/Nguni word commonly used to denote a traitor or snitch who betrays others. Historically during the apartheid liberation struggle, *izimpimpi* (plural) were often perceived as traitors working with the state against township residents. The modern usage of the concept is that it is still used to describe a snitch, or someone viewed as a collaborator against community interests.



in contemporary anti-corruption debates, highlighting the limitations of reforms that focus primarily on institutional design without addressing the broader social and political contexts in which corruption occurs.

Mainstream anti-corruption strategies continue to focus primarily on legal and institutional reforms. This represents an important gap in literature. If corruption is partly sustained by social norms that define what is expected or tolerated in society, then reforms that target formal institutions alone are unlikely to produce lasting behavioural change. Recent South African evidence reflects this shift in thinking. Gordon and Pienaar (2025) argue that understanding the social norms and values that shape corruption is essential to supporting the implementation of the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS), emphasising that anti-corruption interventions should address behavioural expectations alongside legal and institutional reforms. Building on this emerging perspective, the current study examines the social norms that influence how individuals interpret corruption, loyalty and responsibility in everyday governance interactions. By shifting analytical attention from institutional structures to the unwritten rules governing everyday interactions, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of why corruption persists despite the existence of extensive legal frameworks in South Africa.

2. Social norms and corruption: A conceptual lens

Social norms refer to the shared expectations that shape what individuals perceive as typical and appropriate behaviour within a given social group or community. Unlike formal laws, social norms operate through informal understandings that guide behaviour by signalling what others do and what others expect one to do. These expectations create powerful incentives for conformity, because individuals anticipate approval for compliance and social sanctions for deviation (Varraich, Köbis and Lange 2025). In governance and corruption scholarship, norms are therefore understood as collectively sustained behavioural rules that influence decision-making even in the absence of formal enforcement.

Traditional approaches tend to treat corruption as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain, focusing primarily on legal frameworks and individual ethical failings. However, emerging research suggests that corrupt practices are often embedded within broader social environments shaped by expectations of reciprocity and loyalty (Köbis, Jackson and Carter 2020; Kubbe et al. 2024). From this perspective, corruption cannot be fully understood as an isolated act of defiance, but rather, it may reflect patterns of behaviour that are perceived as normal or even socially appropriate within relational contexts.

According to Varraich et al. (2025), when individuals believe that corrupt behaviour is widespread, norms may normalise participation by framing such behaviour as typical or unavoidable. Moreover, some norms may signal that refusing to engage in such practices risks social exclusion, reputational damage or the loss of valuable relationships (Bicchieri 2017; Köbis et al. 2020). Under these conditions, individuals may comply with corrupt practices despite privately disapproving of them, leading to conditional conformity. Recognising corruption as a norm-governed practice, therefore, shifts attention from formal institutional design to the informal expectations that structure everyday interactions. This perspective has gained increasing traction in South Africa, where Gordon and Pienaar (2025) argue that anti-corruption efforts should focus not only on changing formal rules, but also on reshaping the social norms and values that sustain corrupt behaviour.

2.1. *Types of social norms*

Literature distinguishes several useful types of norms that shape behaviour in distinct ways.

- Descriptive and injunctive norms

A widely used distinction in social norms research is between descriptive and injunctive norms. According to Agerberg (2022), descriptive norms refer to individuals' perceptions of what most people do in a particular situation. They capture beliefs about typical behaviour within a social group. For example, individuals may believe that everyone gives a small payment to speed up a service when interacting with public officials. In such cases, behaviour becomes normalised, because it is perceived as common practice. In contrast, injunctive norms refer to perceptions of what behaviours are socially approved or disapproved of within a group (Agerberg 2022; Bicchieri 2017). These norms communicate what individuals believe others think they ought to do. For instance, strong injunctive norms may discourage individuals from reporting wrongdoing if whistleblowing is interpreted as betrayal within a community.

- Reference group norms

Social norms do not operate uniformly across society, but are anchored within specific reference groups. A reference group consists of the individuals or communities whose opinions and behaviours are most salient when a person makes a decision (Heinicke, Köning-Kerstig and Schmidt 2022). These groups may include family networks, workplace colleagues or broader social circles (Habib, D'Costa and Al-Hadi 2023; Kubbe et al. 2024). According to Habib et al. (2023), individuals often belong to multiple overlapping reference groups, and the norms that guide behaviour may shift depending on which group is most relevant in a given situation. For example, a public official may recognise formal professional standards within the workplace while simultaneously feeling pressure to meet expectations within family or community networks.

2.2. *Empirical literature on social norms and corruption*

Studies consistently demonstrate that perceptions of what others do and what others approve of can significantly influence behaviour in corruption-prone environments (Köbis et al. 2020; Kubbe et al. 2024). These insights build on broader behavioural research showing that individuals often align their actions with perceived group expectations even when such behaviour conflicts with their private preferences. As a result, corruption is increasingly understood as a culturally and socially embedded practice rather than solely as a consequence of institutional failure.

Furthermore, empirical research suggests that corruption is embedded within patterns of reciprocity and social obligation. In several African contexts, for example, practices such as preferential hiring and informal payments are often interpreted through the lens of family and community responsibilities rather than purely as acts of misconduct (Kubbe et al. 2024; Varraich et al. 2025). Similar dynamics have also been documented in other regions where cultural expectations surrounding gift-giving or mutual assistance blur the boundaries between legitimate social exchange and bribery (Habib et al. 2023; Heinicke et al. 2022). These findings suggest that the meaning of corruption itself may be shaped by local normative environments. Behaviour that appears clearly unethical from a legal perspective may be perceived differently within social networks where loyalty and reciprocity carry moral significance. These observations are echoed by Gordon and Pienaar (2025), who found that many South Africans would prioritise protecting members of their own social networks over assisting authorities in exposing corruption. Such findings suggest that loyalty to family and social networks may continue to compete with formal expectations of accountability.

Despite the significant advances in existing literature, there are several limitations. Much of the empirical work examines perceptions of corruption through general survey questions or large-scale comparative datasets (Kubbe et al. 2024; Varraich et al. 2025). Recent South African work by Gordon and Pienaar (2025) has significantly advanced understanding by providing nationally representative evidence on social norms and corruption. However, the emphasis is on measuring attitudes and behavioural tendencies at population level rather than exploring the reasoning individuals employ when confronted with concrete corruption dilemmas. While such approaches provide valuable insights into patterns of attitudes and behaviour, they often capture abstract opinions rather than the reasoning individuals employ when confronted with specific situations.

As a result, there is relatively limited understanding of how people interpret corruption in the context of everyday governance encounters. There is a dearth of studies that examine how individuals negotiate tensions between formal rules and social expectations in concrete situations involving interactions with public officials or local networks. By employing vignette-based interviews, the current study contributes to this emerging strand of research by exploring how social norms shape responses to corruption within everyday situations in South Africa.

3. Methodology

The current study employs a vignette-based qualitative approach to examine how social norms shape perceptions of corruption in everyday contexts. As sensitive and potentially incriminating behaviour, corruption is particularly prone to social desirability bias, where respondents provide answers they perceive to be socially acceptable rather than truthful (Asif and Tankebe 2025).

According to Atzmüller and Steiner (2010), vignettes provide a useful alternative by presenting hypothetical scenarios that allow participants to evaluate behaviour without implicating themselves. Vignette methods have been widely used in corruption research as an unobtrusive way of accessing sensitive attitudes (Dickel and Graeff 2018). By shifting discussion toward third-person situations, respondents can express views about morally ambiguous practices without the need to disclose personal involvement.

3.1. Vignette design

The following scenarios were constructed to enhance authenticity and relevance. Realistic scenarios are essential in vignette research, because they encourage participants to engage with situations that closely resemble everyday experiences, thereby producing more meaningful and credible responses (Yenkey, Simpson and Bliese 2026). Accordingly, the vignettes reflected widely recognised interactions with public institutions and social networks, including:

- Encounters with the police
- Administrative services
- Procurement decisions
- Employment and kinship obligations
- South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) grant access
- Sextortion

3.2. Vignette scenarios

To explore how social norms shape perceptions of corruption in everyday contexts, participants were presented with a series of short hypothetical scenarios. These vignettes were designed to mirror situations that are widely recognised in public discourse and everyday governance interactions in South Africa. Each vignette was followed by a standard set of guiding questions that explored what participants believed the hypothetical individual should do, what most people would do in the same situation, what others would expect the individual to do, and the reasons underlying these judgements. The same core interview probes were used across all eight vignettes. The full list of vignette scenarios used in the current study is provided in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1: Summary of vignette scenarios presented to participants

Vignette	Theme	Vignette text
1	Police roadblock	Rialdo is driving home late at night when he encounters a police roadblock. The officer checks his licence and notices a minor issue with his vehicle's registration. Instead of issuing a fine, the officer hints that a small "gift" of R200 could make the problem disappear, saying it is common for drivers to show appreciation for officers' hard work. Rialdo knows many in his community do this to avoid delays or trouble. What do you think Rialdo should do? What would most people in his situation do?
2	Queue jumping (DHA)	Sipho arrives at the South African Department of Home Affairs (DHA) to renew his passport and faces a long queue. An official offers to expedite his application for a R500 "fee" under the table, noting that many applicants do this to save time. Sipho sees others slipping money discreetly and knows complaining might cause endless delays. What should Sipho do? What would others expect?
3	Procurement tender	Nomusa, a municipal official, is evaluating tenders for a road construction project. A bidder who is an old school friend offers a "thank you gift" of R10 000 if awarded the contract, emphasising community ties and mutual favours. Many officials accept such gestures as normal reciprocity and part of getting things done. What do most colleagues expect Nomusa to do?
4	Nepotism	Kagiso manages a government department and has a vacancy. His nephew applies, though less qualified than many other applicants. Family elders pressure him to hire the nephew, citing cultural norms of kinship support and saying refusing would be seen as selfish and disloyal. What should Kagiso do? What do most managers expect in such cases?
5	Admiration of dubious success	Mandla, a local businessman with ties to municipal officials, suddenly buys a luxury car and builds a big house after securing government tenders through kickbacks and connections. Neighbours admire his flashy lifestyle, saying he is "smart" and "successful", and young people look up to him as a role model for getting rich quick. What do you think most people in the community would say if they knew the full story?
6	Sextortion	Bianca visits the South African Department of Transport to process her driver's licence. The male official delays her application and hints that meeting him privately for "favours" could speed it up, noting that many women do this quietly to get services. Bianca hears from friends that it is "normal" in such offices and refusing might lead to endless delays. What would most women in her situation expect or do?

Vignette	Theme	Vignette text
7	SASSA grant abuse	In a township, neighbours know that Tanja is fraudulently claiming SASSA child support grants for ineligible relatives. Despite knowing it is wrong, no one reports her to officials, as speaking up would be seen as betraying your own people and causing unnecessary trouble in the community. What should the neighbours do?
8	Community normalisation of petty corruption	In a neighbourhood, residents regularly pay small bribes or “tips” to officials for basic services like electricity and water connections. Most people see it as just the way things work and part of living in the area, rather than serious corruption. What do you think most residents would do?

Source: Authors' illustration

4. Participants and data analysis

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to capture perspectives from individuals likely to encounter or observe informal expectations surrounding everyday governance interactions. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research where the objective is to obtain analytically rich insights rather than statistically representative samples (Ahmad and Wilkins 2025). A maximum variation purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure diversity in participants' social backgrounds and lived experiences, thereby capturing a broad range of perspectives on how corruption is interpreted across different social contexts. Potential participants were identified through professional and community networks and selected against predefined inclusion criteria to ensure variation in demographic and socio-economic characteristics. Recruitment was guided by the objective of achieving information-rich cases rather than representativeness or prior knowledge of corruption. Twelve participants from four different race groups (Black African, Indian, Coloured and White), provinces, socio-economic and educational backgrounds and gender were included in the study. This sample size is consistent with qualitative research that prioritises analytical depth, information richness and detailed exploration of participants' reasoning rather than statistical representativeness (Ahmad and Wilkins 2025; Saunders et al. 2018). The diversity of the sample was intended to broaden the range of perspectives captured rather than to achieve representativeness across demographic categories. Interviews were conducted individually to allow participants to reflect on the scenarios without peer influence.

All participants were assured of anonymity and were informed that the discussion would centre on hypothetical situations presented through vignettes rather than personal experiences, thereby reducing the sensitivity associated with discussing corruption. Moreover, given the sensitive nature of corruption, the researchers adopted a reflexive approach throughout the study to minimise their influence on participants' responses and the interpretation of the data. The use of vignette scenarios and neutral questioning encouraged participants to discuss hypothetical situations rather than personal experiences, thereby, reducing social desirability bias. Interview responses were analysed using thematic analysis following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves systematically identifying and interpreting recurring patterns within qualitative data. This approach enabled the study to examine how participants reasoned through the scenarios and how social expectations influenced their evaluations of corrupt practices.

5. Findings

Thematic analysis of the twelve vignette-based interviews revealed a range of social norms that shape how corruption is interpreted and responded to in everyday interactions. Responses reflected empirical expectations about what most people would do in similar situations as well as injunctive expectations concerning what others would expect from them. Participants often acknowledged that certain practices were technically wrong while simultaneously explaining why individuals might still comply to avoid conflict, maintain relationships or secure opportunities.

5.1. *Impimpi culture*

A prominent theme concerned the stigma attached to reporting corruption, particularly through the label “impimpi” which, as detailed above, carries significant stigma and undesirable negative social identity. Participants repeatedly described this term as carrying strong negative connotations of betrayal and disloyalty. In discussions on the police roadblock scenario, Participant 1 remarked that ‘Rialdo should just give the R200 and leave. Reporting the officer will make him an impimpi. People will say he thinks he is better than everyone else.’ Participant 3 expressed a similar sentiment, stating that ‘once you report someone like that you are known as a snitch. People will not trust you again’.

Participant 7 also suggested that reporting would bring unnecessary trouble, explaining that ‘if you expose the officer, you create problems for yourself. Next time you are stopped they will remember you’. Across these responses, the fear of being labelled *impimpi* functioned as a powerful informal sanction discouraging individuals from reporting corruption even when they personally disapprove of it. The responses reflected both empirical expectations, whereby participants believed that most people would remain silent, and injunctive expectations, whereby communities were perceived to expect loyalty over reporting. In this context, the local community functioned as the principal reference group shaping behaviour.

5.2. *Codes of silence and loyalty to social networks*

Closely related to the *impimpi* stigma was a broader expectation of silence when wrongdoing involves acquaintances or family members. Most of the participants (eight) suggested that exposing someone known personally would be regarded as morally questionable behaviour. In the vignette involving nepotism in a job appointment, Participant 5 explained that ‘Kagiso helping his nephew is something many families would understand. Family obligations come first’. Participant 6 offered a similar perspective, remarking that ‘reporting him would make you look disloyal because people expect you to support your relatives’. Participant 12 reflected on a similar dilemma, observing that ‘even if people know it is wrong, they might stay quiet because speaking out will damage the relationship’. These responses illustrate how expectations associated with loyalty and social solidarity override institutional norms. The reluctance to report wrongdoing stemmed less from support for corruption itself, but more from the perception of reporting violating relational obligations. Here, normative expectations were primarily generated within family and kinship reference groups, where loyalty was perceived to outweigh formal obligations to report wrongdoing.

5.3. *Material aspirations and admiration of visible wealth*

Material aspirations and the admiration associated with visible wealth emerged as another recurring theme. Participants described a social environment in which success is frequently measured through displays of material prosperity such as expensive cars, large houses or other visible signs of financial success. In the vignette involving a contractor offering a “thank you gift” after receiving a government tender, Participant 10 commented that ‘people respect those who have money. When someone lives well others admire them even if they suspect something is not right’. Participant 4 similarly remarked that ‘wealth brings status, and people rarely question how it was obtained’. Participant 11 added that ‘many people aspire for that kind of success, so they do not criticise it too much’.

These responses suggest that admiration for material success may contribute to a social environment in which corrupt enrichment is quietly tolerated and admired. Visible prosperity was often interpreted as a sign of competence or success rather than as evidence of unethical conduct. As a result, individuals who accumulate wealth through questionable means still receive social recognition and respect from sections of communities, notably those from historically disadvantaged Black communities. These responses were largely driven by empirical expectations, with participants perceiving admiration for visible wealth as common within their communities, thereby reinforcing material success as a socially desirable outcome irrespective of its origins.

5.4. *Perceptions of widespread corruption in everyday life*

Participants also described corruption as a routine feature of everyday interactions. Several responses suggested that practices such as small bribes are widely perceived as normal ways of navigating bureaucratic processes. Reflecting on the police roadblock scenario, Participant 4 observed that ‘most drivers would just pay and move on because that is what people normally do’. Participant 6 referred to administrative services, explaining that ‘people sometimes give money to speed things up because the queues are very long’. The responses illustrate how perceptions of widespread participation can reinforce descriptive norms that normalise corrupt behaviour. When individuals believe that others engage in such practices, resisting them appears impractical or socially unusual. At the same time, these practices may also be understood as pragmatic responses to the contradictions between formal rules and everyday state functioning, where citizens navigate inefficiencies in service delivery. The dominant norm in this theme was empirical as participants repeatedly justified corrupt behaviour by referring to what they believed most people routinely do in similar situations.

5.5. *Normalisation of the “cool drink” culture*

Another theme concerned the normalisation of euphemistic language that obscures the corrupt nature of petty bribery. Participants frequently referred to the term “cool drink”, a colloquial expression used to describe small payments to officials to expedite services or avoid

penalties. Participant 4 explained that ‘when an officer mentions a cool drink everyone understands what is being asked for’. Participant 7 similarly remarked that ‘it is not spoken about openly, but people know it means a small bribe’. These responses suggest that euphemistic language reduces the perceived seriousness of bribery by reframing it as a routine social exchange, rather than a corrupt act. Within these service-delivery contexts, participants described shared understandings that normalised petty financial facilitation, reinforcing both empirical expectations about what people commonly do and normative expectations regarding what is considered socially acceptable.

5.6. *Sextortion as a gendered form of corruption*

Sextortion also emerged as a distinct form of corruption characterised by the abuse of institutional authority for sexual coercion. Participant 6 observed that ‘sometimes officials ask for sexual favours in exchange for assistance and people know it happens even though it is rarely discussed’. Participant 8 similarly reflected that ‘women may feel pressured in those situations because they need the service’.

Participants described sextortion as rooted in unequal power relations, where access to essential public services creates conditions for exploitation. The reluctance to discuss such experiences openly suggests that social norms surrounding silence and stigma may further contribute to the hidden nature of this form of corruption. Within these institutional settings, organisational reference groups appeared to reinforce both empirical and normative expectations that discouraged victims from challenging such abuses.

6. Discussion

The findings of the current study reinforce the growing body of literature that views corruption not merely as a legal or institutional failure, but as behaviour embedded within social expectations. Participants frequently evaluated the vignette scenarios through the lens of what others were perceived to do and what others were expected to approve of. This pattern closely reflects the conceptualisation of social norms advanced by Bicchieri (2006, 2017), where behaviour is shaped by empirical expectations about the actions of others and normative expectations regarding what others consider appropriate. This confirms the argument that individuals conform to corrupt practices even when they privately disapprove of them, particularly when deviation carries social costs (Köbis et al. 2020; Varraich et al. 2025). This is also consistent with the findings by Gordon and Pienaar (2025), who argue that corruption in South Africa is sustained not only by institutional weaknesses, but also by prevailing social norms and values that shape behavioural expectations. However, the findings also suggest that empirical and normative expectations rarely operated independently. Participants frequently justified corrupt behaviour by simultaneously referring to what “most people do” and what they believed others expected of them. Rather than functioning as separate influences, these expectations appeared to reinforce one another, transforming corruption from behaviour that is merely widespread into behaviour that is perceived as socially appropriate under particular circumstances.

One of the most striking findings concerned the strong stigma attached to reporting corruption through the label “impimpi”. Participants consistently described reporting as behaviour that would attract social disapproval and lead to social isolation. This finding supports the broader literature which emphasises that norms can be sustained through anticipated social sanctions rather than formal enforcement (Varraich et al. 2025). Within the framework proposed by Bicchieri (2017), such reactions represent injunctive norms that signal what individuals are expected to do within their social environment. Similarly, Gordon and Pienaar (2025) report that many South Africans remain reluctant to report corruption despite condemning it, suggesting that anticipated social and personal consequences continue to discourage whistleblowing. This suggests that strengthening whistleblowing mechanisms alone is unlikely to be sufficient, unless interventions also address the informal sanctions associated with reporting corruption.

Furthermore, the expectation of silence within social networks further illustrates how reference group norms shape responses to corruption and other social and political vices. This aligns with the literature suggesting that corruption often emerges within relational contexts characterised by expectations of reciprocity and loyalty (Kubbe et al. 2024; Varraich et al. 2025). As noted by Habib et al. (2023), individuals belong to multiple reference groups, each of which may generate different normative expectations. The findings suggest that these reference groups exert different forms of normative pressure. Family and kinship networks encourage loyalty and reciprocal obligations, while workplace relationships normalise favour exchange and silence regarding misconduct. Community reference groups, by contrast, reinforce expectations associated with the impimpi stigma and discourage reporting. This implies that anti-corruption interventions may be more effective when they are tailored to the specific reference groups within which corrupt practices are embedded.

Moreover, the theme of admiration for visible wealth provides additional insight into how social norms may indirectly encourage corruption. This resonates with the broader literature suggesting that corruption can become normalised in environments where wealth

accumulation is highly valued and publicly visible (Köbis et al. 2020; Kubbe et al. 2024). The significance of this finding lies in the way visible prosperity appears to weaken the informal social sanctions that would ordinarily discourage corrupt enrichment. Where communities celebrate material success irrespective of its origins, corruption risks becoming socially legitimised.

7. Policy and practice recommendations

Anti-corruption strategies in South Africa must move beyond a narrow and punitive focus on legal enforcement and institutional reform. Addressing corruption requires interventions engaging directly with the social environments in which these behaviours occur.

7.1. *Reframing public education*

Anti-corruption education should be incorporated into school curricula from primary through secondary and tertiary levels to cultivate a culture of integrity among younger generations. Educational initiatives should engage learners with everyday ethical dilemmas like those illustrated in the scenarios examined in this study. Such approaches align with social norms interventions that seek to reshape expectations by influencing how individuals perceive acceptable behaviour within their reference groups (Bicchieri 2017; Tankard and Paluck 2016).

Efforts to strengthen ethical awareness should also extend beyond the formal education system. Families and community institutions often function as primary sites of moral guidance, shaping how individuals interpret concepts such as loyalty and fairness. Community dialogues and civic education initiatives that engage parents, religious leaders and local organisations may therefore provide complementary spaces for fostering discussions about integrity and accountability in everyday life.

7.2. *Strengthening trust in anti-corruption institutions*

The persistence of corruption is often reinforced by perceptions that wrongdoing carries few consequences. Consistent enforcement of anti-corruption laws and visible accountability for misconduct can signal that ethical standards apply across all levels of authority. Public communication regarding investigations and prosecutions should be transparent and accessible; demonstrating that corruption leads to tangible consequences, particularly in cases involving politically connected individuals may help counter perceptions of impunity.

7.3. *Professionalising the public service*

The findings relating to nepotism and favour exchange, highlight the importance of strengthening merit-based governance structures. The full implementation of the Framework for the Professionalisation of the Public Sector, alongside initiatives such as Batho Pele (People First), which emphasises service delivery standards and responsiveness to service users, represents an important step toward establishing a politically neutral and competency-based administrative system. Transparent recruitment processes and clear performance standards can reduce opportunities for patronage and reinforce ethical norms within public institutions. Strengthening formal institutional norms may also help shift reference group expectations within organisations, reinforcing professional conduct as the expected standard (Habib et al. 2023).

7.4. *Addressing gendered forms of corruption*

The normalisation of sextortion highlighted in the findings underscores the need for targeted interventions that address gendered abuses of power. Institutional reforms should incorporate confidential reporting systems and investigative procedures that are sensitive to the vulnerabilities faced by victims of sexual exploitation. Clear policies defining sextortion as a form of corruption must be accompanied by mechanisms protecting complainants from retaliation. Training programmes within public institutions should also challenge patriarchal norms that contribute to the abuse of authority. Addressing such practices requires shifting both descriptive and injunctive norms that currently normalise or silence these experiences (Bicchieri 2017).

7.5. *Encouraging active citizenship and social accountability and behaviour change*

Strengthening civic participation can contribute to shifting social expectations surrounding corruption. When citizens actively engage in monitoring service delivery, participating in local governance processes and supporting civil society initiatives, they help reinforce norms of transparency and accountability. Encouraging citizens to participate in community forums and social accountability mechanisms can foster an enhanced sense of collective responsibility for safeguarding public resources. Norm-based approaches emphasise the role

of collective action in correcting misperceptions about the prevalence and acceptability of corruption, thereby encouraging behavioural change (Agerberg 2022; Tankard and Paluck 2016).

8. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how social norms shape everyday understandings of corruption in South Africa. By using vignette-based interviews, the study moved beyond abstract attitudes toward corruption and explored how individuals reason about concrete situations involving public officials and social networks. The findings demonstrate that corruption is frequently interpreted through the lens of prevailing social expectations, rather than solely through legal or institutional frameworks. Norms associated with loyalty and admiration for visible wealth often shape how individuals evaluate behaviour and respond to ethical dilemmas. In many instances, participants recognised that certain practices violated formal rules, yet still regarded them as understandable responses to the social pressures present within their communities and professional environments. These findings reinforce the argument that corruption cannot be fully addressed through institutional reforms alone. Addressing corruption requires approaches that engage directly with these social expectations by incentivising the fight against corruption, rewarding integrity and promoting cultures of integrity within both public institutions and society more broadly.

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