

# The Role of Storytelling and the Methodological Challenges Encountered as a Mitigation Strategy in Combatting Anti-Corruption in South Africa: A Narrative Review

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## Abstract

This paper examines the role of storytelling in anti-corruption efforts in South Africa, highlighting both its potential and its limitations. Storytelling is increasingly recognised as a people-centred approach that makes complex issues such as corruption more visible and relatable by drawing on lived experiences. Grounded in social constructivism and narrative theory, it shapes how individuals understand and respond to corruption within their social contexts. The study adopts a qualitative narrative literature review, analysing interdisciplinary scholarship to explore how storytelling influences perceptions, social norms and behavioural responses. The findings show that storytelling helps humanise corruption, fosters emotional engagement and can contribute to shifts in attitudes by challenging the normalisation of corrupt practices. However, important limitations are identified, including the subjectivity of narratives, difficulties in measuring impact and the need for contextual adaptation in a diverse society such as South Africa. The study concludes that storytelling is a valuable, however, insufficient tool on its own. Its effectiveness depends on its integration with broader anti-corruption strategies, including institutional reforms and context-sensitive interventions. When carefully designed and ethically applied, storytelling can complement conventional approaches by addressing the social and behavioural dimensions of corruption and supporting more inclusive and sustainable anti-corruption efforts.

**Keywords:** Anti-corruption, storytelling, narrative theory, social constructivism, public perception, qualitative methods

## 1. Introduction

Corruption remains a major challenge to governance and development in South Africa, affecting public trust, service delivery and institutional performance. Since the transition to democracy, the country has faced persistent corruption across sectors, including public administration, procurement systems and political institutions. Studies show that corruption in South Africa is deeply rooted in structural and historical factors, including inequality, weak accountability mechanisms and political interference (Mlambo, Mubecua and Mlambo 2023; Vyas-Doorgapersad 2024). Despite the introduction of various anti-corruption frameworks, progress has been limited, with many interventions failing to deliver meaningful, sustained change (Labik Amanquandor 2024).

Traditional anti-corruption approaches in South Africa have largely focussed on legal, institutional and policy-based solutions. While these are important, they often overlook the social and behavioural dimensions of corruption. Corruption is not only about rules being broken, but also about how individuals and communities understand, justify or resist such practices. This highlights the importance of exploring approaches that address public perceptions and social norms. Emerging research on governance and social change suggests that corruption is sustained not only by weak institutions, but also by shared beliefs and everyday practices that normalise it (Mkhize and Nel-Sanders 2026).

Within this context, storytelling has begun to attract attention as a potential tool for influencing social norms and promoting behavioural change. Storytelling allows individuals to share lived experiences of corruption in ways that are relatable and emotionally engaging. It can make abstract governance issues more visible and meaningful, thereby encouraging reflection and dialogue within communities. While storytelling has been widely used in fields such as public health and education to support awareness and behaviour change (McCall et al. 2021; West et al. 2022), its application within anti-corruption research, particularly in South Africa, remains underdeveloped.

At the same time, the use of storytelling raises important methodological questions. Narrative-based approaches are often subjective and context-dependent, making it difficult to generalise findings or measure impact. In addition, much of the existing literature on corruption narratives is drawn from contexts outside Africa, such as Gupta's (2005) study of the Indian state. While such work provides useful insights, it cannot be applied directly to South Africa without accounting for contextual differences in its political systems, history and social dynamics.



The current study addresses these gaps by conducting a qualitative narrative literature review that brings together insights from anti-corruption studies, narrative theory and qualitative research. It critically examines both the potential and the limitations of storytelling as a mitigation strategy against corruption in South Africa. In doing so, the study contributes to a more balanced understanding of how storytelling can be used alongside existing governance approaches to promote accountability, shift social norms and support long-term behavioural change.

## 2. Conceptualising corruption and anti-corruption in South Africa

Corruption is widely conceptualised as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain, yet this definition captures only part of its complexity, particularly within the South African context. Corruption manifests across multiple levels of society, ranging from high-level political misconduct to everyday administrative interactions between citizens and public officials. In South Africa, it takes diverse forms, including bribery, fraud, patronage, nepotism and the misappropriation of public resources. These practices not only undermine institutional effectiveness, they also erode the legitimacy of governance systems and democratic accountability (Vyas-Doorgapersad 2025).

Importantly, corruption in South Africa cannot be understood solely as an institutional or legal failure. It is deeply embedded within broader socio-political and historical dynamics. The enduring legacy of apartheid has produced structural inequalities, economic exclusion and uneven access to resources, all of which create conditions conducive to corrupt practices (Hyslop 2005). In such contexts, corruption may become normalised or rationalised as a survival strategy, particularly among marginalised populations facing limited socio-economic opportunities. This highlights that corruption is not only a matter of individual wrongdoing, but also shaped by social norms, perceptions and systemic inequalities (Katarova 2015).

The drivers of corruption in South Africa are similarly multifaceted. Weak accountability mechanisms, insufficient transparency, political interference in administrative processes and inconsistent enforcement of legal frameworks all contribute to an environment that enables corruption (Cloete and Auriacombe 2007). Furthermore, governance gaps, particularly at local government levels, exacerbate vulnerabilities within public institutions. Socio-economic pressures, including high levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality, further complicate the issue by incentivising corrupt behaviour to access resources or secure livelihoods.

The consequences of corruption are extensive and deeply damaging. Economically, corruption distorts resource allocation, reduces efficiency, and discourages both domestic and foreign investment. Socially, it undermines service delivery in critical sectors such as healthcare, education, housing and infrastructure, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable populations. Politically, corruption erodes public trust in government institutions, weakens democratic participation and contributes to a broader crisis of legitimacy. In the South African context, these effects are particularly acute, as corruption reinforces existing inequalities and limits the state's capacity to fulfil its developmental mandate.

In response, anti-corruption efforts in South Africa have traditionally focussed on legal and institutional mechanisms, including the establishment of oversight bodies, regulatory frameworks, and investigative commissions. While these approaches remain essential, they have proven insufficient on their own. Increasingly, scholars argue that combating corruption requires a more holistic approach that incorporates social, cultural and communicative dimensions. Anti-corruption strategies must, therefore, engage with how corruption is understood, experienced and narrated within society.

This shift in perspective creates space for alternative approaches, such as storytelling, as a complementary anti-corruption strategy. Storytelling can play a critical role in shaping public perceptions, raising awareness and fostering ethical norms by making abstract issues of corruption more relatable and emotionally resonant. However, the use of storytelling as a methodological and practical tool also introduces challenges, including issues of subjectivity, representation and the difficulty of measuring impact. These challenges highlight the need for careful methodological consideration when integrating narrative-based approaches into anti-corruption frameworks.

## 3. Theoretical framework: Storytelling, power and anti-corruption in South Africa

Storytelling is increasingly recognised as a powerful interpretive and methodological tool within governance and anti-corruption scholarship. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge, narratives are not merely descriptive, but constitutive of social reality, shaping how corruption is understood, legitimised or contested (Foucault 1980). In the South African context, this dynamic is especially evident in the framing of "state capture", a term popularised in public discourse and formalised in the Zondo Commission Report (Zondo Commission 2022).

From a narrative policy perspective, Roe (1994) argues that complex policy problems, such as systemic corruption, are mediated through competing stories that simplify uncertainty. These narratives influence policy responses by privileging certain actors and explanations over others. In South Africa, dominant narratives of corruption often oscillate between individual blame (for example, corrupt politicians) and systemic critique (for example, institutional failure), each with different implications for reform (Chipkin and Swilling 2018).

Complementing this, Polkinghorne (1988) conceptualises storytelling as a method of meaning-making, in which lived experiences are organised into coherent accounts. This is particularly relevant in anti-corruption efforts that rely on whistleblower testimonies and public inquiries. Testimonies presented during the Zondo Commission, for example, transformed abstract corruption into personal, emotional and credible narratives that mobilised public awareness (Zondo Commission 2022). However, storytelling is not neutral. Tobin and Snyman (2008) highlight how dominant narratives can marginalise alternative voices. In South Africa, this raises important methodological concerns: whose stories are amplified, and whose are silenced? Grassroots accounts of corruption, particularly from marginalised communities, often remain underrepresented in formal anti-corruption discourse (Dhlamini 2024).

The framework also integrates insights from governance and corruption scholarship. Rose-Ackerman and Palifka (2016) emphasise that corruption persists where institutional incentives and weak accountability structures enable it. In South Africa, these conditions were evident in procurement abuses involving entities such as Eskom and Transnet during the state capture era (Chipkin and Swilling 2018; Zondo Commission 2022).

Importantly, storytelling emerges as a mitigation strategy by fostering transparency and civic engagement. Corruption Watch uses citizen-reported narratives to document everyday corruption, demonstrating how storytelling can democratise accountability processes (Corruption Watch 2023). Similarly, media narratives around the VBS Mutual Bank Scandal illustrate how investigative storytelling can expose complex financial misconduct and mobilise public outrage (Freund 2019; Pauw 2017). Nevertheless, methodological challenges remain. Narratives are inherently subjective, potentially biased and difficult to verify. As Riessman (2008) notes, narrative analysis requires careful interpretation to avoid overgeneralisation. In corruption research, this challenge is compounded by political sensitivities and the risks whistleblowers face.

In all, this theoretical framework positions storytelling as both an analytical lens and a practical tool in anti-corruption efforts. It highlights the dual role of narratives in exposing corruption while also cautioning against their limitations. By situating storytelling within broader theories of power, governance and policy narratives, the framework provides a nuanced foundation for examining anti-corruption strategies in South Africa.

## 4. Methodology

The current study adopts a qualitative narrative literature review to examine the role of storytelling and the methodological challenges associated with its use in anti-corruption research, with particular reference to South Africa. Rather than employing a systematic literature review, which requires exhaustive search procedures, formal screening protocols and statistical synthesis, this study uses a narrative approach that allows for interpretive, theory-driven engagement with diverse bodies of literature. Narrative reviews are particularly suited to exploring complex, context-dependent phenomena such as storytelling, where meaning is shaped by social, cultural and political dynamics rather than by easily quantifiable variables (Baumeister and Leary 1997; Green, Johnson and Adams 2006).

The choice of this approach is grounded in the nature of the research problem. Storytelling operates as both a methodological tool and a social practice through which individuals make sense of their lived experiences, including experiences of corruption. As such, it cannot be adequately captured through rigid inclusion protocols alone. Instead, a narrative review enables the integration of insights from multiple disciplines, including governance studies, anthropology, political science and qualitative research methodology (Creswell and Poth 2016). Foundational works on corruption, such as Gupta's (2005) analysis of the everyday state and Rose-Ackerman and Palifka's (2016) institutional perspective, are combined with key contributions from narrative theory, including Polkinghorne (1988) and Roe (1994), to provide a robust conceptual foundation. These are further complemented by South African scholarship on state capture and governance, including Chipkin and Swilling (2018), Heckel and Ensign (2026), and the findings of the Zondo Commission (Pienaar and Bohler-Muller 2023; Zondo Commission 2022).

The literature used in the current study was identified through targeted searches of major academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus and Web of Science. Search terms included combinations of “storytelling”, “narratives”, “corruption”, “anti-corruption”, “governance” and “South Africa” as well as related concepts such as “state capture”, “public accountability” and “qualitative methods”. In addition to keyword searches, backward and forward citation tracking was employed to identify influential and widely cited works, thereby ensuring that the review captures both foundational and contemporary contributions to the field (Green et al. 2006).

The selection of sources was guided by clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, which were applied flexibly and interpretively, consistent with narrative review methodology. Studies were included if they engaged with storytelling or narrative approaches related to governance, corruption or social change; demonstrated clear theoretical or methodological grounding and were relevant to the Global South or the South African context. Peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and credible institutional reports were prioritised. Studies were excluded where they relied solely on quantitative corruption indices without interpretive analysis, lacked sufficient methodological transparency or were not accessible in full text.

Importantly, the current study does not attempt to provide an exhaustive catalogue of all available literature on storytelling and corruption. Instead, it aims to synthesise key themes, identify conceptual linkages and highlight methodological challenges in the existing scholarship. This approach allows for a more critical and context-sensitive understanding of how storytelling functions within anti-corruption efforts, particularly in a complex and highly politicised environment such as South Africa.

## 5. Storytelling as a tool in anti-corruption efforts

Storytelling is increasingly recognised as a powerful tool for communication, education and social change. Within the framework of social constructivism, storytelling plays a central role in shaping how corruption is understood, interpreted and normalised within society. Corruption is not only a legal or institutional issue, but also a socially constructed phenomenon, shaped by shared meanings, everyday experiences and public discourse. Storytelling contributes to this process by framing corruption in ways that influence how individuals and communities perceive its causes, consequences and acceptability (Katzarova 2015; Riessman 2008).

From a narrative theory perspective, storytelling functions as a mechanism through which individuals organise and communicate their experiences. Narratives help simplify complex and abstract issues, such as corruption, by grounding them in personal and community realities. This aligns with Polkinghorne’s (1988) argument that people make sense of the world through stories, as well as Roe’s (1994) view that narratives are essential for interpreting complex policy problems. In the context of anti-corruption, storytelling transforms corruption from an abstract governance issue into a lived and emotionally resonant experience, thereby making it more accessible and meaningful to broader audiences.

One of the key strengths of storytelling lies in its ability to generate emotional engagement, which is critical for reshaping social norms. Within a constructivist framework, norms are sustained through repeated social interactions and shared beliefs. Where corruption has become normalised, as in many parts of South Africa due to persistent exposure to governance failures, storytelling can disrupt these patterns by introducing alternative narratives that challenge the status quo. McCall et al. (2021) emphasise that storytelling can function not only as a method of inquiry, but also as an intervention that influences behaviour. Similarly, West et al. (2022) highlight that personal narratives deepen understanding and can shift attitudes towards social issues, including corruption.

In South Africa, the importance of storytelling in shaping public understanding of corruption is evident in both formal and informal contexts. Testimonies presented during the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture (Zondo Commission) transformed public discourse by providing detailed, personal accounts of how corruption operates within state institutions (Zondo Commission 2022). These narratives did not merely present evidence; they actively constructed a shared understanding of corruption as systemic and deeply embedded within governance structures. This illustrates the intersection of narrative theory and social constructivism: stories both reflect and shape social reality (Pienaar and Bohler-Muller 2023).

Beyond formal inquiries, storytelling has also been used in community-based and sectoral interventions (DeMarco, Cooley and Kim 2025). Uwah and Cheteni (2024) demonstrate how theatrical storytelling has been used effectively in public health campaigns to influence behaviour and raise awareness. From a theoretical perspective, such approaches work because they embed messages within culturally relevant narratives, thereby enhancing their resonance and impact. Applied to anti-corruption, similar strategies can be used to illustrate how corruption affects access to essential services such as healthcare, education and infrastructure, linking individual experiences to broader governance challenges.

Storytelling also aligns with participatory and inclusive approaches to governance by amplifying the voices of those often excluded from formal decision-making processes. Narrative theory emphasises the importance of voice and lived experience, while social constructivism highlights the role of diverse perspectives in shaping social meaning. Walker (2025) argues that storytelling can empower individuals, particularly young people, to engage in discussions on social justice and advocate for change. In the anti-corruption context, this means that storytelling can democratise knowledge production by allowing citizens to articulate their experiences of corruption and contest dominant narratives.

Furthermore, storytelling contributes to the transformation of social norms by exposing the everyday realities of corruption and challenging its normalisation. Gupta (2005) shows that corruption is often embedded in routine interactions between citizens and the state, making it appear ordinary or unavoidable. Narrative interventions can disrupt this perception by reframing corruption as unjust and unacceptable, thereby contributing to normative change. This aligns with broader anti-corruption scholarship, which emphasises that sustainable reform requires not only institutional change, but also shifts in social attitudes and expectations (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016).

The rise of digital platforms has further expanded the reach and influence of storytelling. Digital storytelling enables narratives to be widely disseminated through multimedia formats, increasing accessibility and engagement. From a constructivist perspective, this amplifies the circulation of meanings and norms across different social groups. Ahada et al. (2024) and West et al. (2022) note that digital platforms enable the rapid sharing of stories, making them powerful tools for advocacy and public engagement in anti-corruption efforts.

However, the effectiveness of storytelling depends on its contextual relevance and ethical application. Narratives must be sensitive to local cultural norms, languages and power dynamics. From a theoretical standpoint, this reflects the constructivist emphasis on context and the narrative emphasis on interpretation. Stories can be interpreted in multiple ways, and their impact is shaped by the audience's social and cultural background. This highlights the need for carefully designed storytelling approaches that are inclusive, context-specific and aligned with broader anti-corruption strategies.

In sum, storytelling is not merely a communication tool, it is a socially embedded practice that shapes how corruption is understood and contested. By linking emotional engagement with norm transformation and meaning-making, storytelling provides a powerful mechanism for advancing anti-corruption efforts. When grounded in social constructivism and narrative theory, it becomes clear that storytelling can influence not only awareness, but also the deeper social norms and collective understandings that sustain or challenge corruption.

## 6. Methodological challenges of storytelling

While storytelling offers valuable insights and engagement in anti-corruption research, it also presents several methodological challenges that must be carefully considered. These challenges relate to issues of subjectivity, interpretation, bias, validity and the difficulty of measuring impact. One of the main challenges of storytelling is its subjective nature. Stories are based on personal experiences, emotions and perspectives, which means they are often influenced by individual beliefs and contexts. This makes it difficult to treat storytelling as an objective source of data. Different individuals may recount the same events in very different ways, depending on how they interpret their experiences. As a result, storytelling may not always produce consistent or generalisable findings (Arekion 2023). Roulston and Shelton (2015) argue that subjectivity and bias are inherent in qualitative research and should be recognised rather than ignored.

Another key issue is variability in interpretation. Stories do not have a single fixed meaning; instead, they can be understood differently by different audiences. Factors such as culture, education and personal background influence how people interpret narratives. Sheard (2022) highlights that storytelling involves both the act of telling and the act of interpreting, which can lead to multiple meanings. This creates a challenge for researchers who aim to draw clear conclusions from narrative data. Cultural and contextual differences also affect the effectiveness of storytelling. A story that resonates strongly in one community may not have the same impact in another. This is particularly important in a diverse society like South Africa, where cultural backgrounds and social experiences vary widely. Wheeler (2018) shows how storytelling shapes political identities differently across contexts, suggesting that narratives must be carefully adapted to local realities. Without this sensitivity, storytelling may fail to achieve its intended purpose.

Another methodological concern relates to bias and representation. Researchers play an active role in selecting, interpreting and presenting stories, which can introduce bias into the research process. Decisions about which stories to include and how to analyse them can influence the overall findings. Gupta (2005) points out that narratives of corruption are shaped by both everyday experiences and broader social structures, underscoring the need for researchers to avoid oversimplification and misrepresentation of these complexities.

Issues of validity and reliability also arise when using storytelling as a research method. Traditional research often relies on measurable, replicable data, however, storytelling does not easily fit within these standards. It can be difficult to verify the accuracy of personal narratives or to ensure consistency across different accounts. This creates challenges in assessing the credibility of the findings and in comparing results across studies.

In addition, there is the challenge of measuring impact, particularly behavioural change. While storytelling can raise awareness and influence attitudes, it is not always clear whether these changes lead to concrete actions. McCall et al. (2021) suggest that although storytelling can be used as an intervention, evaluating its outcomes remains complex. Changes in perception may be gradual and difficult to track, especially when they occur over a long period.

Ethical concerns also form part of the methodological challenges. Storytelling often involves sharing personal or sensitive experiences, especially in the context of corruption. This raises issues related to consent, confidentiality and potential risks to participants. Researchers must ensure that stories are collected and presented in ways that respect participants' dignity and safety. Despite these challenges, storytelling remains a useful qualitative approach when applied carefully. Recognising its limitations enables researchers to design better studies, combine storytelling with other methods and develop more reliable ways to interpret narrative data.

## 7. Storytelling, behavioural change, and the limits of narrative influence

While storytelling plays a significant role in shaping awareness and attitudes towards corruption, its ability to produce sustained behavioural change is more complex and conditional. Moving beyond its communicative function, this section critically examines how storytelling interacts with social norms, institutional constraints and power relations to influence behaviour.

From a social constructivist perspective, behavioural change is not simply the result of increased awareness but is embedded within socially constructed norms and expectations. Although storytelling can reshape how corruption is understood, individuals operate within environments where corrupt practices may be normalised or even necessary for survival. As Gupta (2005) demonstrates, corruption is often embedded in everyday administrative practices, making it difficult for individuals to act against it even when they recognise its harmful effects. This highlights a key limitation: changing narratives does not automatically translate into changing behaviour.

Narrative theory further helps explain this gap. While stories can influence how individuals interpret corruption, they do not necessarily alter the structural conditions within which decisions are made. Roe (1994) argues that narratives simplify complex realities, however, this simplification can obscure the institutional and political constraints that shape behaviour. In the South African context, this is evident in the persistence of corruption despite widespread public awareness generated by high-profile processes such as the Zondo Commission. While the Commission played a crucial role in reshaping public discourse, its impact on everyday practices has been uneven, particularly in contexts where accountability mechanisms remain weak.

The gap between awareness and action can also be understood through the lens of normative and institutional constraints. Individuals may be aware of corruption and even disapprove of it, yet still participate due to fear of retaliation, lack of alternatives or social pressure. This is particularly relevant in local governance contexts, where access to services may depend on informal payments or personal connections. In such cases, storytelling may raise awareness but does not sufficiently alter the incentive structures that sustain corrupt behaviour (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016).

Moreover, storytelling can have ambivalent effects. While it can challenge dominant narratives and promote accountability, it can also reinforce cynicism if it repeatedly highlights corruption without demonstrating pathways for change. Continuous exposure to stories of corruption, especially in the media and public discourse, may normalise the perception that corruption is inevitable, thereby reducing the likelihood of collective action. This underscores the importance of not only exposing corruption, but also constructing counter-narratives that emphasise resistance, accountability and successful reform.

At the same time, storytelling can contribute to behavioural change when it is embedded within broader institutional and social interventions. Walker (2025) shows that participatory storytelling approaches can empower individuals, particularly young people, to engage with social justice issues and act. Similarly, West et al. (2022) argue that storytelling is most effective when combined with opportunities for dialogue, collective reflection and civic engagement. In such contexts, storytelling functions not as a standalone tool, but as part of a wider ecosystem that supports behavioural change.

In the South African context, this suggests that storytelling initiatives must be linked to institutional accountability mechanisms, community engagement processes and accessible reporting channels. Without these enabling conditions, storytelling risks remaining at the level of awareness-raising rather than driving meaningful change.

## 8. Discussion: Storytelling, social norms and the limits of anti-corruption interventions

The current study examined the role of storytelling in anti-corruption efforts and the methodological challenges associated with its use, with particular reference to South Africa. Rather than treating storytelling as simply a communication tool, the findings suggest that it operates more fundamentally as a mechanism for constructing, reinforcing and contesting social norms around corruption. This shifts the analytical focus from what storytelling *does* (raising awareness) to how it *works within broader social and institutional systems*.

Drawing on social constructivism, the findings demonstrate that corruption is not only a legal or institutional failure, but also a socially embedded practice shaped by shared meanings and everyday experiences (Katzarova 2015; Riessman 2008). Storytelling contributes to this process by framing corruption in ways that make it intelligible and relatable. In the South African context, public narratives, particularly those emerging from high-profile inquiries such as the Zondo Commission (2022), have played a significant role in constructing corruption as systemic, rather than incidental. These narratives have helped shift public discourse; however, they have also revealed the depth of institutional and social entrenchment that makes corruption resistant to change.

At the same time, narrative theory highlights that stories do not simply reflect reality; they actively shape how individuals interpret and respond to it (Polkinghorne 1988; Roe 1994). This helps explain why storytelling is effective in influencing perceptions, but less consistent in producing behavioural change. While narratives can generate emotional engagement and moral reflection, they do not automatically alter the structural conditions—such as weak accountability systems or unequal access to resources—that sustain corrupt practices. As a result, storytelling operates most effectively at the level of meaning-making, however, less predictably at the level of behavioural transformation.

A key contribution of this study is its identification of the gap between awareness and action as a central limitation of storytelling-based anti-corruption strategies. Although storytelling can reshape attitudes and increase public understanding, individuals often remain constrained by institutional and social realities. In many South African contexts, engaging in or tolerating corruption may be linked to survival strategies, social obligations or fear of retaliation. This aligns with institutional perspectives on corruption, which emphasise that behaviour is shaped not only by values, but also by incentives and constraints (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016; Vyas-Doorgapersad 2024). Consequently, storytelling alone cannot overcome these structural barriers.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that storytelling can have ambivalent effects. While it can challenge dominant narratives and promote accountability, it may also reinforce perceptions of inevitability if it repeatedly highlights corruption without presenting viable alternatives. Continuous exposure to corruption narratives, particularly through the media and public discourse, can foster cynicism and disengagement, thereby weakening the potential for collective action. This underscores the importance of developing counter-narratives that not only expose corruption, but also highlight examples of resistance, accountability and institutional reform.

The South African context provides a particularly important lens for understanding these dynamics. The prominence of corruption in public discourse, combined with persistent governance challenges, creates an environment in which storytelling is both highly visible and highly contested. While national-level narratives have been effective in raising awareness, their translation into local-level behavioural change remains uneven. This suggests that storytelling interventions must be context-sensitive, locally grounded and linked to tangible opportunities for action to be effective.

Methodologically, the study also highlights important challenges associated with using storytelling in research. Narratives are inherently subjective, shaped by the perspectives of both participants and researchers (Roulston and Shelton 2015). Their interpretation is context-dependent and may vary across audiences (Sheard 2022). While this does not undermine their value, it requires careful reflexivity and methodological transparency. Storytelling should therefore be understood not as a source of objective truth, but as a means of accessing situated knowledge and lived experience.

Largely, the discussion positions storytelling as a necessary, yet insufficient tool in anti-corruption efforts. Its primary strength lies in its ability to shape meanings, challenge norms and amplify lived experiences. Its impact, however, is contingent on the broader institutional and social environment in which it operates. For storytelling to contribute to meaningful anti-corruption outcomes, it must be integrated with structural reforms, accountability mechanisms and participatory governance processes. In this sense, storytelling is most effective not as a standalone intervention, but as part of a multi-level strategy that addresses both the cultural and institutional dimensions of corruption.

## 9. Recommendations

Building on the findings of the current study, the following recommendations emphasise that storytelling should not be used as a standalone intervention, but as part of a broader strategy that addresses both social norms and structural constraints in anti-corruption efforts in South Africa.

First, storytelling initiatives should be grounded in context and culturally embedded. From a social constructivist perspective, meanings of corruption are shaped by local experiences, values and social interactions. Therefore, anti-corruption narratives must reflect the lived realities of specific communities, including language, cultural norms and everyday encounters with governance systems. Context-sensitive storytelling is more likely to resonate with audiences and influence how corruption is understood and evaluated (Wheeler 2018). This also requires engaging local actors, such as community leaders, activists and civil society organisations, in co-creating narratives to ensure legitimacy and relevance.

Second, storytelling should be explicitly linked to norm change strategies rather than limited to awareness-raising. As the study demonstrates, awareness alone does not lead to behavioural change unless supported by shifts in what is socially accepted or expected. Anti-corruption storytelling should, therefore, aim to construct and reinforce counter-narratives that challenge the normalisation of corruption while promoting values such as accountability, transparency and collective responsibility. This can be achieved by highlighting stories of resistance, ethical leadership and successful accountability processes, rather than focussing solely on exposure of wrongdoing.

Third, storytelling must be institutionally integrated into broader anti-corruption frameworks. While narratives can reshape perceptions, they are unlikely to produce sustained behavioural change without supportive institutional conditions. Governments and anti-corruption agencies should incorporate storytelling into public communication strategies, civic education programmes and accountability initiatives. For example, insights from public inquiries and whistleblower testimonies can be translated into accessible narratives that connect institutional processes with everyday experiences. This integration helps bridge the gap between formal governance mechanisms and public understanding.

Fourth, there is a need to develop robust and mixed-method evaluation frameworks to assess the impact of storytelling interventions. As identified in the study, measuring behavioural change remains a key challenge. Researchers and practitioners should combine qualitative approaches such as narrative analysis and participatory feedback, with quantitative tools, including surveys and behavioural indicators to track changes over time (Bailey and Tilley 2002; McCall et al. 2021). This will improve methodological rigour and strengthen the evidence base for storytelling in anti-corruption work.

Fifth, ethical considerations must remain central to storytelling practices. Given the sensitive nature of corruption, storytelling initiatives should prioritise informed consent, confidentiality and responsible representation of participants' experiences. There is also a need to avoid reinforcing harm or exposing individuals to risk, particularly in contexts where speaking out against corruption may lead to retaliation. Ethical storytelling should, therefore, balance visibility with protection.

Finally, storytelling should be used to foster participation and collective agency. Participatory storytelling approaches can empower individuals, particularly young people and marginalised groups, to engage in anti-corruption discourse and action. By creating spaces for dialogue and shared reflection, storytelling can help build trust, strengthen civic engagement and encourage collective responsibility for governance outcomes (Walker 2025). However, for such participation to translate into meaningful change, it must be supported by accessible reporting mechanisms and responsive institutions.

## 10. Conclusion

The current study examined the role of storytelling in anti-corruption efforts in South Africa, focussing on both its potential and its limitations. The findings show that storytelling is not merely a communication tool, but a powerful mechanism for shaping how corruption is understood, experienced and contested. Through the lens of social constructivism and narrative theory, the study demonstrates that corruption is socially embedded and that storytelling contributes to the construction and transformation of meanings, norms and public perceptions. However, the study also highlights a critical limitation: storytelling alone cannot produce sustained behavioural change. While narratives can raise awareness, foster emotional engagement and challenge the normalisation of corruption, they do not automatically alter the institutional and structural conditions that sustain corrupt practices. The gap between awareness and action remains a central challenge, particularly in contexts where weak institutions, social pressures and economic constraints limit individual agency.

The study, therefore, argues that storytelling's effectiveness depends on its integration into broader anti-corruption strategies. Storytelling is most impactful when it contributes to norm change, reinforces values of accountability and is supported by strong institutional frameworks and opportunities for action. Without these enabling conditions, storytelling risks reinforcing cynicism, rather than promoting change. By reframing storytelling within a wider system of social and institutional transformation, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of anti-corruption strategies in South Africa. It highlights the need to move beyond awareness-based interventions towards approaches that integrate narrative, norms and governance. Future research should further explore how storytelling can be systematically combined with institutional reforms and participatory approaches to support long-term behavioural and societal change.

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