Towards a Psychodynamic Theory of Corruption

When it comes to corruption, according to Transparency International's latest index, India is one of the most badly affected countries in the Asian world (CPI, 2020). To compound matters, the recent pandemic has made matters considerably worse (Ganguli, 2020).

The explanations for such rampant acts of bribery and embezzlement tend to involve burdensome regulations and opaque branches of government (Kumar, 2018). Other authors (Tanzi, 2016, for example) suggest that India suffers from a lack of competitive free markets.

These explanations are, of course, valid. However, what the literature appears to lack is a more human-centered explanation for acts of corruption. For example, talking about Kafkaesque-like regulations fails to answer a fundamental question: Why, on a deeply human level, do some people knowingly engage in unethical, and sometimes illegal, acts? More specifically, what factors could play a role in creating a person willing to engage in acts of dishonesty and/or illegality?

From my research, when discussing India specifically, the extant literature lacks a psychodynamic theory of corruption. In this short paper, I attempt to address that problem.

Psychodynamic theory emphasizes the importance of childhood experiences in shaping our thoughts, actions, and behaviors as adults. Events that occur in childhood, especially within the first five years of existence (Yorke, 1996), appear to have a profound impact on our future selves. If one is exposed to a particularly traumatic environment from an early age, for example, such unpleasant memories may be stored in the unconscious, and cause problems in later years (Hora, 1953). But, one asks, how could negative events in childhood create a future self willing to engage in acts of corruption?

The Dark Triad and acts of corruption

The Dark Triad is a collection of three connected, largely unpleasant personality constructs: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Paulhus and Williams, 2002). Not surprisingly, there appears to be a strong, highly credible link between Dark Triad traits and corruption (Zhao et al., 2016).

After all, corruption involves duplicitous or fraudulent conduct. Those who score high on Machiavellianism excel at acts of calculated manipulation and deceit (Borghesi, 2014). For one to successfully engage in an act of corruption, a certain degree of manipulation and disregard for moral conventions is necessary.

Meanwhile, narcissism is characterized by extreme self-involvement. It is positively correlated with excessive egocentricity, delusions of grandeur, conceit, and arrogant pretension (Crysel et al., 2013). As authors have argued (Lakey et al., 2008), narcissists are more likely to engage in behaviors that provide immediate gratification, sometimes at the expense of others' wellbeing.

The last component of the unholy trinity is psychopathy; it involves high levels of impulsivity, cold-heartedness, and socially destructive behaviors (Rauthmann, 2011). It is a disorder characterized by evident emotional deficits, as well as a fundamental lack of remorse.

Those who score high on Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy tend to employ the "fast life strategy," which is characterized by both a present-oriented mindset and a lack of respect for social norms (Mishra et al., 2017). Unlike a slow-life strategy, which is underlined by a deliberative, future-oriented mindset, people who engage in fast life strategies are more impulsive and prone to acts of greed (Csathó and Birkás, 2018). Furthermore, they are more likely to endorse deviant behaviors (Chua et al., 2016). Corruption, by its very definition, is an act of deviancy.

Childhood years and the emergence of the Dark Triad

The development of psychopathic traits is positively correlated with early exposure to a dysfunctional environment (Tuvblad et al., 2013). The term dysfunctional environment is somewhat vague, so for clarity, I wish to define such an environment as one that lacks what it is expected to provide. Children who receive inadequate nutrition and are deprived of access to basic healthcare are victims of a dysfunctional environment. Furthermore, children who find themselves born into homes where physical abuse and persistent neglect prevail are also victims of a dysfunctional environment. India, sadly, is home to high degrees of dysfunctionality.

Somewhere in the country, every 15 minutes, a child is sexually abused (Pandey and Reddy, 2020). That works out at close to 100 children a day, 700 a week, 2800 a month, and 33,600

each year. India is home to some of the worst cases of child abuse in the world (Choudhry et al., 2018).

Psychopathy

When it comes to the emergence of psychopathic traits later in life, a history of childhood abuse is often a contributing factor (Dargis et al., 2016). Though victims of sexual abuse are more likely to be female, the sexual abuse of young boys in India occurs with alarming frequency (Subramaniyan, 2017). As males in India make up a significant majority of the workforce (Singh, 2020), and males appear to have significantly lower moral standards than females (Kennedy et al., 2017), the widespread abuse of young boys is a valid point to include when discussing possible catalysts for corrupt behavior. An environment where moral standards are lacking allows corruption to flourish (Hoseah, 2014).

Narcissism

Meanwhile, narcissism develops at a young age, with some authors identifying its manifestation in children as young as 4 (Carlson and Gjerde, 2009). Regarding its development, a traumatic environment where "excessive deviations" from ideal parenting practices occur appears to play a significant role (Stone and Ellison, 1994). Neglect or abuse is a prime example of excessive deviation. Abusive parents view their child in an unrealistic manner, which only serves to devalue the youngster's worth as an individual.

This is not to say that Indian parents are more abusive than, say, Nepali parents; it's to say that far too many children in India are products of environments where "excessive deviations" from ideal parenting practices are too common.

Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism is inextricably linked with corruption (Shumer, 1979). Those who score high on the personality trait tend to prioritize money and power over commitments to the broader community (Biddulph, 2014).

Machiavellianism's manifestation appears to have strong associations with childhood trauma (Láng and Lénárd, 2015). In addition, Machiavellianism has a genetic component attached to it (Vernon et al., 2008). Of course, the environment one is exposed to also plays a significant role.

For example, the *identification hypothesis* suggests that children imitate the behaviors and actions of their primary caregivers (Láng and Birkás, 2015). A couple of intriguing studies (Abell et al., 2015; Láng, 2018) suggest that children of parents who score high in Machiavellianism go on to display high levels of the trait later in life.

Negative childhood events (sexual abuse, extreme cases of neglect, etc,) are closely associated with the emergence of Dark Triad characteristics. This is not a controversial point to make; exposure to childhood trauma can have harmful, lifelong effects.

Poverty and Corruption

Children are at a high risk of physical abuse in poverty stricken environments (Featherstone et al., 2019). 60% of India's citizens live on less than 227 Rupees (about $3.10) a day; meanwhile, 21%, or a quarter of a billion people, survive on less than 147 Rupees ($2) a day (World Bank, 2020). One of the consequences of poverty is malnutrition. Across the Asian continent, Indian children are among the most malnourished (Panda et al., 2020).

When compared with well-nourished children, malnourished children are more likely to experience emotional dysregulation (Kleinman et al., 1998); in addition, they are more prone to aggressive outbursts (Weinreb et al., 2002). Additionally, malnourished children struggle with inhibitory control and display higher levels of impulsive behaviors (Jasinka et al., 2012). Malnutrition, in extreme cases, can cause irreversible brain damage. Such damage can have a profound impact on an individual later in life, effecting everything from decision making to overall life satisfaction (Levitsky and Strupp, 1995).

A malnourished child is also at high risk of being maltreated (Hock et al., 2017). Of course, one can argue, justifiably so, that malnourishment is a form of maltreatment. In this case, however, I am referencing physical and/or emotional abuse(s). Like malnourishment, the chances of maltreatment in the form of physical and/or emotional abuse are far greater for children in poverty-stricken areas than children in more affluent areas (Drake and Pandey, 1996). The effects of exposure to such stressors at an early age can have deeply negative effects on a child's brain development (Hart and Rubia, 2012). Exposure to trauma at an early age has been shown to have a shrinking effect on the hippocampus (Stevens et al., 2018), a cortical region

responsible for the regulation of emotions and motivation. Hippocampal abnormalities have been identified in antisocial individuals, including those of whom are diagnosed with psychopathy (Boccardi et al., 2009).

Poverty has a devastating effect on humans, both collectively and individually. Corruption thrives where poverty thrives. In fact, corruption and poverty share a bidirectional relationship: the latter encourages the former, while the former entrenches the effects of the latter (Rahayu and Wlidodo, 2013). As outlined above, poverty provides fertile ground for various abuses to occur.

Conclusion

To clarify, this short paper was not intended as a criticism of Indian people or Indian culture. Across the Indian nation, too many innocent children, through no fault of their own, are exposed to inhumane treatment. Exposure, especially if prolonged in nature, may very well play a role in creating adults more willing to engage in acts of deviance and duplicity. A society where corruption flourishes may benefit a small minority (i.e. those who benefit from corruption), but the majority suffers. India is a country of extreme inequalities (Oxfam, 2019), where a select few enjoy the riches (Mourdoukoutas, 2019). Millions of people, meanwhile, struggle to feed their families.

When merely surviving is a struggle for millions of Indians, the adoption of a "fast-life" strategy is, in many ways, to be expected. If the main aim of each day is to keep bread on the table, a "slow-life" strategy simply won't work. Addressing the issue of corruption in India requires a more humanistic approach. Lest we forget that corruption is, after all, carried out by humans, all of whom were once children. It would serve us well to keep such an obvious assertion at the forefront of our minds.

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