

**MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING
NATIONAL ECONOMICS UNIVERSITY**



TRAN HONG NHUNG

**ANALYZING THE DYNAMICS OF BRIBERY-PRONE
RELATIONSHIP IN VIETNAM: A PERSPECTIVE OF
MORAL DISENGAGEMENT THEORY AND THE
NORM OF RECIPROCITY**

**PHD DISSERTATION
IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION**

HANOI - 2025

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DECLARATION

I have read and understood the University's policy on plagiarism, I hereby declare on my honor that this research literature review is my own work and does not violate the regulations on good academic practices.

Hanoi, , 2025

PhD candidate

Tran Hong Nhung

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABBREVIATIONS	FULL FORM
GIRI	Government Inspectorate Research Institute
HCMC	Ho Chi Minh City
Nat. Resources	Natural Resources
Transp.	Transportation
Inspect.	Inspection
VCCI	Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry

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INTRODUCTION

1. Rationale of the research

Across the world, the business environment suffers substantial negative effects due to extensive bribery-based corruption. The practice of bribery has multiple detrimental effects, as it interferes with fair market competition and reduces market efficiency. At the same time, corruption harms professional reputations while maintaining a trust-eroding social environment that undermines lasting economic growth (Khan, 2006; Transparency International, 2023). For businesses facing this challenging environment, it is urgent to understand the mechanisms of bribery. Why bribery-prone relationships occur, how they evolve, and how they become normalized are among important questions for businesses and lawmakers. Answers to these questions will help businesses develop strategies to mitigate bribery's negative effects and improve operational integrity. This understanding is particularly crucial for business entities going through an environment where proper law enforcement fails to secure equitable practices (Gouldner, 1960; Gillespie et al., 2020).

Traditionally, scholars have mostly employed rent-seeking and social norm perspectives to explain the initiation and perpetuation of bribery. According to the rent-seeking perspective (Rose-Ackerman, 1978; Shleifer & Vishny, 1993; Svensson, 2003), parties can actively engage in bribery with an expectation of abnormal rents. Regulation loopholes, monitoring shortages, and government officials' discretions contribute to the rise of bribes (Aidt, 2009; Dreher & Gassebner, 2013; Fisman & Golden, 2017; Khan, 2006; Rose-Ackerman, 1978). However, this approach leaves the interpersonal and social dimensions of bribery largely underexplored. Viewing bribery through such a purely transactional lens underestimates the complex role of cultural norms, social obligations, and emotional processes in sustaining corrupt behaviors (Fisman and Miguel, 2007). In literature, research on "guanxi" or relations in China has touched on the socio-cultural aspect of bribery (Cheung, 2004, (Luo, 2008; Steidlmeier, 1999; Sun and Ai, 2020; Wang, 2016; Wu et al., 2006). However, this body of research only focuses on contexts where cultures and/or institutions are conducive to the use of personal relationships in businesses. In other words, in these studies, reciprocal bribery is often viewed as occurring within close kinship and acquaintance networks where trust already exists among members. This study differs from "guanxi" research as it seeks to unravel the complex nature of bribery exchanges between parties who do not belong to the same close networks.

On the other hand, the social norm perspective suggests that parties commit bribery acts to adhere to the norms of corruption in the environment (Dong, Dulleck, & Torgler, 2012; Uhlenbruck, Rodriguez, Doh, & Eden, 2006; Venard, 2009). Here, engagements in bribery are for survival rather than efficiency. In this approach, the role of agents in interpreting and translating external pressures into practices has been well acknowledged (Scott, 2014; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008), however, individual psychological processes leading to bribery acts have rarely been examined in the literature (Moore, 2008; Smith-Crowe & Warren, 2014). Consequently, bypassing these individual psychological processes in theorizing corruption leaves important questions unanswered.

Addressing these significant theoretical and empirical gaps, this dissertation offers three core contributions. First, it provides a novel theoretical synthesis by approaching bribery as a deeply embedded social and psychological phenomenon among partners who may not belong in the same network, focusing specifically on the interplay between norms of reciprocity and the moral disengagement processes. The norm of reciprocity, a foundational concept in social exchange theory, explains how individuals feel obligated to return favors, whether legal or illegal, when they receive an initial gesture of goodwill (Gouldner, 1960); while moral disengagement framework proposes that individuals may utilize cognitive mechanisms to disengage their moral self-sanctions to ease themselves into committing corruption acts. By integrating these two frameworks, this study makes a unique academic contribution: it reveals the hidden "social grammar" of corruption that remains invisible in purely economic models.

Second, the study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing "obligation-based bribery." This dynamic creates conditions in which illicit exchanges are not only rooted in instrumental cost-benefit calculations but also in social and moral obligations to reciprocate. These obligations, whether pragmatic (aiming to achieve tangible benefits) or moral (aiming to maintain relational harmony or uphold personal loyalty), drive individuals, who may not belong to the same network, to offer or accept bribes, even when such actions conflict with broader ethical or professional standards (Puffer et al., 2010). This distinguishes the research from traditional "guanxi" studies, as it unravels how bribery exchanges function between parties who lack pre-existing trust or kinship.

Beyond the social exchange mechanisms, the psychological processes employed by individuals in corrupt relationships are also crucial to understand bribery's resilience. The parties, pressured by personal connections or incentives, experience emotional

discomfort when engaging in corrupt acts that contradict their role expectations or professional values (Moore, 2008). To manage this discomfort, these actors often rely on rationalization strategies, which allow them to disengage from moral principles while justifying their participation in bribery. Additionally, the lack of a direct, transparent link between initial bribes and reciprocal favors often enables participants to reframe corrupt exchanges as gestures of friendship rather than illicit transactions. Over time, such rationalizations reduce emotional discomfort, allowing bribery-prone relationships to deepen and perpetuate. In advanced stages, these relationships may evolve into mutually reinforcing alliances where trust and identification between parties suppress the need for rationalization altogether (Bandura, 1999; Karhunen et al., 2018).

The third contribution of this research is methodological and contextual. The present study addresses the research gaps by integrating two complementary qualitative datasets: semi-structured interviews with public officials and in-depth interviews with business people. In doing so, the research constructs a dual-perspective model of bribery-prone relationships that captures the interplay between both sides of the exchange including the bribe-giver and the bribe-taker. In developing economies such as Vietnam, where rules-based institutions are often underdeveloped and informal networks dominate business-government interactions, bribery has become an insidious feature of daily operations (Malesky et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding these dynamics is vital for organizations operating in Vietnam, especially businesses that interact with public officials and regulatory agencies.

The implications of this research are particularly significant for business practitioners. By merging theoretical insights from social exchange theory and moral disengagement theory, the study equips businesspeople and leaders with knowledge to better identify and navigate corruption risks. For example, businesses can use the findings to proactively assess and reduce their reliance on transactional favor exchanges that may evolve into long-term corrupt relationships. Furthermore, the insights into emotional and rationalization processes can serve as tools to promote ethical behavior within their organizations, by integrating training programs or codes of conduct that emphasize the dangers of moral erosion (McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield, 1996). Practical anti-corruption measures stemming from this research include fostering integrity-based organizational cultures, adopting transparency frameworks, and building partnerships with government officials on shared platforms of ethical governance (Transparency International, 2023). While individual organizations benefit from these

strategies, their implementation also produces broader systemic changes in the rules that direct business-government relationships.

In summary, this dissertation provides an integrated view of how bribery evolves and persists, offering a triad of theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions. Its focus on Vietnam provides valuable context-specific insights into how socio-cultural norms influence bribery dynamics. By helping businesses understand and address the root causes of corruption, this study offers a clear roadmap for fostering ethical and transparent relationships in environments prone to bribery. This research is thus a critical contribution to the field of business administration, offering actionable insights to help businesses operate with integrity in complex, corruption-prone environments.

2. Research Objectives

This research dissertation seeks to bridge existing gaps by integrating social and psychological frameworks to offer a holistic understanding of bribery-prone relationships. In other words, this research will explore the dynamics of bribery by integrating insights from social exchange theory and moral disengagement theory, applying them to the specific context of Vietnam. By examining how social norms and individual emotional processes sustain bribery-prone relationships, the study aims to provide both theoretical contributions and practical solutions to combat corruption in business-government interactions.

The objectives of the research are threefold:

1. To examine the dynamics of obligation-based reciprocity in bribery exchanges occurring outside of pre-existing, close-knit networks in the Vietnamese context.
2. To investigate the individual-level psychological mechanisms, particularly emotional discomfort and rationalization strategies, and the role of moral disengagement in the initiation and perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships.
3. To develop an integrated framework that explains the interplay between the norm of reciprocity and moral disengagement in shaping the evolution of bribery-prone relationships in Vietnam.

3. Research questions

The research objectives are addressed through the following research questions:

1. How does the norm of reciprocity shape the formation and maintenance of obligations in bribery exchanges beyond pre-existing close-knit networks?

2. How do Vietnamese public officials and businesspeople experience and navigate the ethical and psychological dimensions of developing and sustaining bribery-prone relationships?

3. How do the dynamics of obligation-based reciprocity and the psychological mechanisms identified in this study integrate to explain the initiation and perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships?

4. Subject and Scope of the Research

The research focuses on bribery-prone relationships between businesses and government officials in the Vietnamese context, where informal networks and social ties heavily influence social and organizational behavior. More specifically, the study investigates how norms of reciprocity create obligations that facilitate bribery exchanges and how public officials use moral disengagement to rationalize their actions and mitigate the conflict between professional ethics and social obligations.

The scope of research will primarily focus on:

The Vietnamese context: Vietnam as an emerging economy with unique cultural and institutional conditions that make it an ideal case study for understanding bribery through norms of reciprocity and moral disengagement. However, the theoretical frameworks and insights gained from the study have broader applications, particularly for businesses operating in other emerging markets or regions where informal practices dominate formal rules.

Public officials and business people as the primary actors: The study will center on the perspectives and experiences of both parties involved in bribery-prone relationships, exploring their motivations, rationalizations, and the evolution of their obligations.

The initiation and perpetuation phases of bribery-prone relationships: The research will examine the stages of how these relationships begin and how they are sustained over time, paying attention to the shifting dynamics of obligations and the evolving use of moral disengagement mechanisms.

The integration of the norm of reciprocity and moral disengagement: The core of the research lies in understanding how these two theoretical constructs intersect and influence each other in the context of bribery. This includes exploring how reciprocal exchanges might lead to the internalization of obligations and how moral disengagement facilitates participation and continuation of bribery.

Exclusions: This research does not focus on large-scale or systemic macro-level corruption, such as grand corruption involving political elites. Instead, it highlights micro-level interactions that define the business-government relationship at the operational level.

5. Research Method

The research design follows qualitative methods to study the social patterns alongside emotional processes that drive business and official bribery relationships in Vietnam. A qualitative approach enables a rich and detailed understanding of the social dynamics and individualized experiences often missing in quantitative studies. This choice was necessitated by the exploratory nature of the research, which seeks to understand the 'how' and 'why' behind the formation and perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships. The phenomenon under investigation is deeply sensitive, and interwoven with complex social and cultural norms, particularly in a Vietnamese context. Consequently, a quantitative approach, such as a survey, would be inadequate for capturing the lived experiences, subjective sense-making, and ethical navigation crucial to this research. A qualitative design, however, allows for the in-depth exploration of these human dimensions, providing the rich, contextual data necessary to build a grounded understanding of how these relationships are initiated, maintained, and psychologically justified by the individuals involved.

Data collection involves conducting in-depth and semi-structured interviews with business people and public officials to gather perspectives on bribery, the norm of reciprocity, and moral disengagement processes. Participants are carefully selected from diverse industries in Vietnam to ensure a comprehensive examination of bribery's role across different sectors. The interviews are complemented by a review of secondary data, including reports, court cases, and existing studies on corruption in Vietnam.

The research further employs thematic analysis to reveal repeated patterns that emerge within the gathered data. Subsequently, researchers construct a theoretical model regarding the cultural norms of obligation and psychological rationalization of corrupt practices through examining participant descriptions of motives, experiences and emotional factors. The combination of primary and secondary data ensures a robust understanding of the phenomenon, while the thematic analysis approach highlights key factors that perpetuate bribery-prone relationships.

6. Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into six main chapters:

Introduction: Provides an overview of the research rationale, objectives, and structure of the dissertation, along with its significance to business administration.

Theoretical Foundations and Literature Review: Explains the application of social exchange theory and moral disengagement theory in the context of bribery, detailing how these frameworks inform the study's research design and analysis. ;discusses existing research on the norm of reciprocity, moral disengagement, and bribery, focusing on their relevance to Vietnam and the business-government nexus.

Research methodology: Outlines the research approach, including data collection, sampling, and analysis techniques used to investigate the research questions.

Research findings: Present the results of the data analysis, highlighting the socio-cultural and psychological mechanisms that drive bribery-prone relationships in Vietnam.

Discussions of Results and Recommendations: Interprets the findings in the context of the existing literature, making connections to theoretical frameworks and business practices.

Conclusion: Summarizes the research contributions and practical implications, providing actionable recommendations for business leaders and policymakers while suggesting future research directions.

CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Key concepts

1.1.1. Bribery-prone relationship

The relationship between business people and government officials is often characterized by a complex system of interactions. Unfortunately, these interactions, under some circumstances, can involve unethical practices such as bribery. A bribery-prone relationship can start as a normal, benign, and perfectly legal one between a government official and businesspeople. However, over time, this relationship can be prone to turn into a corrupt one, occurring when businesses provide financial compensation or gifts or favors as a way to influence governmental decisions. In successfully doing so, the government official benefits while the business gains an advantage that, without the offering of such incentives, they would not be able to obtain. Bribery-prone relationships between business people and government officials emerge from various factors, including weak governance structures, economic pressures, and the lack of transparency, among many others. Bribery-prone relationships between business and government officials produce consequences such as competitive inequality and public institution distrust, thus demanding extensive reforms for mitigation.

Bribery-prone relationships exist between different parties in numerous formats. Some businesses pursue bribes towards governmental officials who must endorse their contract applications and granting of licenses and permits. The process of obtaining a major infrastructure project contract through a bribe payment to government officials is typical according to Nicholson & Ferguson (2017). In other cases, government employees may seek financial compensation from enterprises both for official benefits and to help these companies escape enforcement actions (Rose-Ackerman, 1999). In this research, the author will focus on the former scenario when a business person is the initiator of this bribery-prone relationship.

Bribery-prone relationships can also involve other forms of corruption, such as nepotism, cronyism, and embezzlement. Business and professional affairs show nepotism when people grant benefits to their relations and friendship network (Lambsdorff, 2007). According to Khan (2006) cronyism describes the business practice

when organizations show preference to their associates in professional matters. Embezzlement indicates the unauthorized stealing or mismanagement of funds along with assets that one controls due to their entrusted role (Cameron, 2007). The different forms of corruption maintain similar destructive power as bribery because they both damage institutions and block economic progress.

In this research, a bribery-prone relationship refers to a relationship between a government official and another party in which bribery acts may emerge and mingle with legal/moral exchanges. A bribery-prone relationship takes place at the very first instance in which one party offers or receives a material favor, be it a gift, payment, or service, with an implicit expectation of future reciprocation. This conceptualization is based on Cressey's (1953) classic study of embezzlers, who found that when someone accepts an unauthorized benefit, they feel obligated to do something illegal in the future. As Cressey pointed out, what starts out as a temporary "loan" or gift quickly becomes a psychological debt that needs to be paid back, which takes away guilt and opens the door to more corrupt behavior. In the same way, Umphress and Bingham (2011) argues that workers who help with "special deals" or side payments often frame these transfers as necessary investments in the success of the organization. This is a form of moral neutralization that shows how the initial favor can make later corrupt acts more acceptable. Shu, Gino, and Bazerman (2011) confirms that calling an unfair advantage a "gift" or "token of appreciation" ease both the giver and the receiver into engaging in this kind of exchange. This confirms that the first transfer of money activates important moral disengagement processes. This dissertation focuses on the cognitive and normative changes that happen because of that first favor, rather than assuming that there were earlier stages in the relationship. From the time the relationship starts, each new exchange strengthens the emerging obligation and changes the way the relationship is built to make it more likely to lead to bribery.

A bribery-prone relationship differs from normal relationships in its potential to improperly influence the performance of the official's duties and responsibilities. The parties engage in a bribery-prone relationship not only for personal gains from bribery exchanges. They may also do so to respond to their own sense of obligation and/or emotional attachment to each other (de Jong, Tu, & van Ees, 2015; Köbis, van Prooijen, Righetti, & Van Lange, 2017; Zhan, 2012). Studying bribery-prone relationships would contribute insights into why and how bribery persists despite many efforts to improve the regulatory environment (Khan, 2006; Luo, 2002).

1.1.2. Personal Favor

In the realm of public administration and corrupt transactions, a “personal favor” refers to a discretionary act of aid, service, or benefit provided by an official to an individual or organization that falls outside the boundaries of formal, legally mandated responsibilities. These kinds of favors are not required by law, but are based on unwritten social norms. They take use of the officeholder’s power or access to resources. Emerson (1976) indicates that these social transactions are informal, interdependent, and free from implicit contracts. Instead, people forge relationships by talking a great deal to one another, but not based on rules or market principles (Emerson, 1976).

When giving personal favor to a party, it is a more abstract type of exchange than a negotiated or strictly reciprocal exchange in which one’s obligations, timing, and rewards are spelled out. In this form of exchange, one person gives something to another without expecting anything in return immediately. The favor receiver has a moral debt that they can hardly ever fully pay off. Comparing these three kinds of exchanges, Molm (2003) argues that because the expectation of return is dispersed and postponed, generalized exchanges strengthen rules of obligation: “Benefits flow around a network rather than directly back to the original benefactor, fostering long-term commitments and uncertainty about repayment” (Molm, 2003).

This open-ended obligation can be especially powerful in bureaucratic environments where cultural values emphasize harmony, gratitude, and fidelity in relationships. Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) observe in their multidisciplinary review of social exchange theory that spontaneous favor-granting creates “strong social obligations that extend beyond the immediate dyad, embedding actors in networks of mutual expectation,” so it is harder to refuse subsequent requests without incurring social penalties (Cropanzano, Mitchell, 2005). This trend enables euphemisms “gifts” to become real bribes in cases of corruption because the sense of the recipient’s obligation and inclusion in the group increasingly destabilizes strict formal ethical norms.

1.1.3. Gift versus Bribe

In corruption studies, the difference between a “gift” and a “bribe” tends to be dependent on mutual perception by both parties regarding purpose, timing, and

anticipated return. To a large extent, a “gift” is something that is bestowed in anticipation of nothing being returned, for example, an expression of gratitude or a sign of social courtesy. In contrast, a “bribe” has an implicit or explicit *quid pro quo*: the benefit is meant to change the recipient’s official decision or action. As Rose-Ackerman (2008) notes in her survey of corruption definitions, “bribes” are distinguished from ordinary gifts by the actor’s intention to alter the normal execution of public duties, whereas gifts occupy an ethically neutral zone unless linked to such intent (Rose-Ackerman, 2008).

Experimental evidence shows how subtle shifts in framing can change perceptions of identical transfers. Frank and von Lamsdorff (2012) presented participants with otherwise identical offers labeled either “gifts” or “bribes” in a corruption-game setting; they found that participants treated “gifts” as significantly more acceptable and less blameworthy than “bribes,” even when the objective consequences were held constant. Rivas (2013) further demonstrates that communication channels influence whether an exchange is construed as a benign gift or as illicit bribery. In a multi-stage corruption game, “givers” who use vague references to “courtesy” or “token of appreciation” reduce the recipient’s moral resistance, whereas explicit requests for “a favor in return” sharply increase the perception of wrongdoing. Together, these studies show that the “gift–bribe” boundary is not determined solely by the benefit’s size or timing, but rather by shared understandings of intention and expectations which are understandings that corrupt actors deliberately manipulate through euphemistic labeling.

1.2. Theoretical framework

The central aim of this dissertation is to build an integrated theoretical model explaining the interpersonal dynamics that initiate and perpetuate bribery-prone relationships in Vietnam. The observed phenomenon is not a simple, anonymous economic crime. Rather, it is a highly relational and socio-psychological practice, based on localised cultural environments and sustained by the complicated inner lives of the participants (Ledeneva, 2018). To disentangle such a complex phenomenon requires theory that is able to account, at once, for both the external forces of society shaping behavior and the internal mental tactics making so complex behavior feasible for the actors themselves. One theoretical perspective would be inadequate, capturing only in part the dynamic interplay involved.

This study therefore deliberately adopts a twofold theoretical approach that integrates the norm of reciprocity social exchange theory with Bandura's (1999) moral disengagement theory. The combination is not coincidental but is methodologically imperative. The norm of reciprocity is selected to explain the social mechanism (the empirical behavioral script of obligation and exchange) whereas moral disengagement theory is employed to explain the psychological mechanism (the covert mental script that allows individuals to justify their participation). Both provide a synergistic model to deconstruct how these morally complex relationships are established, sustained, and justified.

If we are to understand the architecture of bribe-prone relationships, we must first understand the social grammar that governs them. The norm of reciprocity is one of the most powerful explanatory concepts for this reason. First developed as a universal principle by Gouldner (1960), this norm maintains that individuals are inclined to return favors received from others, and it is an intricate web of social debt that ensures co-operation and upholds social structures. Based on the broader Social Exchange Tradition of Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958), it moves the analysis of bribery away from the simplistic quid pro quo transactional approach. Instead, it situates bribery as a long-term process of relationship cultivation, where trust and obligation are intentionally fostered over time (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

This model is particularly relevant to the Vietnamese context, in which gift and favor exchange holds powerful cultural meaning. The norm of reciprocity allows us to analyze the ambiguous boundary between a culturally appropriate gift and a bribe intended to create an obligation. It explains the *timing* (e.g., gift-giving around festivals), the *patience* (expecting future, unspecified returns), and the powerful feeling of *indebtedness* that compels officials to act. In essence, it provides the essential conceptual tool to map the *social choreography* of the relationship—how it is initiated, how its unspoken rules are established, and why it persists over time.

While the norm of reciprocity expertly explains the external actions and social pressures, it does not fully address a fundamental paradox: how do individuals, most of whom hold themselves to be moral people, willingly participate in and perpetuate a system they know is corrupt? This question moves from the social to the psychological realm, and it is here that moral disengagement theory becomes not just helpful, but necessary.

Developed by Albert Bandura (1999, 2016), moral disengagement theory explains the extremely specific cognitive mechanisms through which individuals can switch off their internal moral self-sanctions, hence allowing them to engage in unethical acts without any feelings of guilt or self-blame. These mechanisms include cognitive restructuring of harmful behavior (e.g., euphemistic labeling, helpful comparison), shielding individual responsibility (e.g., displacement or diffusion of responsibility), and providing a misleading representation of the results of one's activities (e.g., ignoring or distorting results). The theory has been applied vigorously to explain a wide variety of unethical behaviors, ranging from business corruption to institutional abuse (Moore, 2008; Tang, 2018).

The applicability of this theory to the current research is quite profound. It gives the language and constructs for examining the justifications provided by the participants. When a businessperson states the need to "*find ways to ease your mind so you can sleep at night*" (BP-17), they are describing the very work of moral disengagement. This theory allows us to understand why calling something a "facilitation fee" bribe is more than semantics, but a powerful psychological move that sanitizes the act. It allows us to grasp how bureaucrats are able to cast themselves as victims of a bureaucracy, thereby neutralizing direct blame. Without moral disengagement, these are empty words; with it, they become pieces of evidence for an intricate psychological mechanism.

The selection of this two-lens framework was preceded by a detailed comparison of other prominent theories used for the comprehension of corruption that were ultimately determined to be less suitable for the specific scope of this research.

Rational Choice Theory: This leading paradigm contends that individuals engage in corruption when perceived benefits outweigh the perceived risks and costs of detection (Klitgaard, 1988; Rose-Ackerman, 1978). While it is a model of motivation, it makes behavior a difficult, utilitarian calculation. It is ill-equipped to explain the powerful role of social obligation, cultural norms, emotion, and relational entanglement that are so evident in the qualitative data. It explains how a choice is made, but it does not adequately explain the rich, socially embedded and psychologically rationalized world in which that choice occurs.

Institutional Theory: This macro-theory convincingly theorizes that corruption thrives where there are weak quality formal institutions (e.g., rule of law, transparency) and strong, substitute informal institutions (e.g., patronage networks) (North, 1990; Scott, 2013). Although technically necessary to understand the context in which bribery

occurs, Institutional theory is somewhat less interested in the micro-level interpersonal dynamics between the parties. It explains the stage, but not the detailed performance of the actors on it. The focus of this dissertation is precisely on that performance (the initiation and sustenance of the relationship) requiring more psychologically and socially nuanced theory.

Principal-Agent Theory: A cornerstone of corruption studies, this theory defines corruption as a betrayal, in which an "agent" (the public official) behaves in his own interest rather than that of the "principal" (the public or the state) which he is supposed to serve (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). This model is at its most robust where the boundaries and interests are set. But it does not capture the co-created, symbiotic relationships of this research, where actors' boundaries are dissolved in an extended process of mutual obligation and collective rationalization. It is more a reality of complex entwinement rather than one of simple betrayal, and one that principal-agent too readily oversimplifies.

In general, bringing together the Norm of reciprocity and Moral disengagement theory provides a specific and useful model for this study. It allows full analysis that is sensitive to the richness of the phenomenon, taking into account both the social justification of the exchange and the psychological justification of its moralization.

1.3. Moral disengagement theory

Moral Disengagement Theory (MDT) stems from social cognitive theory because it studies how cognitive environmental and behavioral factors affect human conduct (Bandura, 1986). Initially developed to explain why individuals engage in actions that violate their moral principles, MDT argues that certain cognitive disengagement mechanisms help people make or soften judgments about their wrongful behavior (Bandura, 1999). Early studies focused on aggression and prosocial behavior, but subsequent research expanded its explanatory reach to phenomena such as organizational unethical behavior and warfare.

According to moral disengagement theory people who commit inhumane acts display no apparent signs of distress (Bandura, 1999, 2016; Bersoff, 1999; Hindriks, 2015; Johnson & Buckley, 2015). The theory assumes that people, including criminal and corrupt ones, do not want to see themselves as criminal (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Cressey, 1953). Furthermore, even individuals engaged in corrupt acts tend to not

abandon the values that society espoused, i.e., they continue to value fairness, honesty, integrity and so forth (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Thus, when engaging in inhumane behaviors, people apply some “rationalization” (Cressey, 1953), “neutralization” (Sykes & Matza, 1957), “normalization” (Umphress & Bingham, 2011), or moral disengagement mechanisms to justify for their behaviors. According to the social cognitive paradigm, moral disengagement mechanisms show how, in situations of high situational stress, cognitive processing can take precedence over emotional responses and moral standards. Bandura (1986) discusses self-regulatory systems encompassing self-monitoring, judgment formation, and self-punishment. Individuals turn off or make these systems inactive when they utilize disengagement methods. This helps individuals do things that would normally be morally incorrect without feeling guilty (Bandura, 1999). This idea has a big impact on both understanding aggression and figuring out interventions to promote moral engagement.

In his studies on social cognitive theory, Bandura (1999, 2016) positions moral self within a broader social cognitive self. The socio-cognitive system functions through four fundamental regulatory components: self-organizing abilities, proactive activity, self-reflective processes, and a self-regulatory mechanism. In this social-cognitive framework, a person uses moral norms to figure out what to do and why they did it. High-level moral disengagers deactivate the self-regulatory process through cognitive procedures that control moral behavior.

Bandura’s more thorough social cognitive theory, which emphasizes how behavioral, environmental, and personal factors interact to form human conduct, serves as the basis for moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1986). Moral agency is the foundation of this technique because the ability to maintain one’s own ethics dictates how decisions are made. Bandura posits that individuals do not passively absorb environmental influences; rather, they actively govern their conduct through self-reactive processes, such as self-sanctions and moral self-evaluation (Bandura, 1991).

1.3.1. Moral disengagement mechanisms

Moral agency gets activated or deactivated through specific mechanisms of moral disengagement. Moral disengagement provides people the capability to do damage yet remain morally unaffected. Bandura (1999) establishes eight approaches of moral

disengagement which he groups into four fundamental processes: cognitive restructuring, minimizing agency, distorting consequences and dehumanizing or blaming victims.

Bandura (1999) proposed eight moral disengagement mechanisms, including moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregard or distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame. These mechanisms are categorized into behavioral, agency, outcome, and victim (Table 1). Previous studies on rationalization (Cressey 1953) and neutralization (Sykes and Matza 1957) show considerable similarity with these mechanisms. The process of cognitive restructuring requires people to reshape immoral conduct into behavior they view as acceptable. This process includes:

- *Moral justification* is the framing of detrimental actions as serving a higher moral purpose, such as violence committed for a perceived "greater good." Bandura (1999) explains that this reframing allows individuals to see their actions not as ethical violations. Instead, they are seen as necessary actions to protect values or groups. By redefining the context of the act, moral justification minimizes the emotional dissonance that usually accompanies immoral actions (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996).
- *Euphemistic labeling* uses innocent language to describe harmful actions (e.g., "collateral damage" instead of "civilian deaths") in order to conceal its true moral implications (Bandura, 1999). This mechanism reduces the psychological burden associated with the act by masking it with softened terminologies (Bandura, 1999). In doing so, individuals can participate in wrongful behaviors without the immediate guilt, easing their internal moral conflict (Bandura, Barbaranelli et al., 1996).
- *Advantageous comparison* compares harmful actions with that of others who are perceived to have far worse actions, thus reducing the wrongfulness of their own actions (Bandura, 1999). This approach psychologically diminishes the perceived severity of one's wrongdoing by juxtaposing it with more egregious immoral actions (Bandura, 1999). Therefore, people feel less cognitive dissonance as their behavior is perceived in a relatively positive light, which allows them to preserve their self-esteem even when they are not acting appropriately (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996).

- *Displacement of responsibility* takes place when individuals reduce or eliminate personal responsibility by attributing their wrongdoing to orders or commands given by a mandate of authority (Bandura, 1999). The actor reduces his sense of guilt and moral obligation by delegating control to an outside mandate (Bandura, 1999). This approach not only makes it easier to justify immoral behavior, but it also supports the idea that following orders is more important than making own moral decisions (Bandura, Barbaranelli et al., 1996).
- *Diffusion of responsibility* occurs when group members share responsibility through spreading individual accountability. According to Bandura (1999), diffusion of responsibility is a process that distributes responsibility among multiple parties so each party carries less direct moral accountability. The distributive strategy commonly appears in group settings because many actors make it more challenging to identify personal responsibility (Bandura, 1999). Psychological detachment, which helps avoid self-accusation about group actions, is facilitated by shared decision-making among group members (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996).
- *Disregarding or misrepresenting consequences* refers to the self-deception process whereby individuals justify, repudiate, or deny detrimental outcomes of actions in order to reduce internal shame and self-sanction (Bandura, 1999). The process allows an individual to redefine negative occurrences such that they become less severe or significant, thereby reducing the psychological sting of own unethical behaviors (Bandura, 1999).
- *Dehumanization* happens when the victim loses their human characteristics, making them unworthy of ethical treatment (Bandura, 1999). This mechanism works to erase human emotional responses, which generally prevent aggressive actions toward fellow humans (Bandura, 1999). Through psychological procedures that turn the victim into a non-human entity, moral obligations are mitigated (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996).
- *Attribution of blame* refers to holding victims accountable for their harm (e.g., “they deserved it”). In this situation, people blame their unethical behavior on the victims or external factors, which reduces responsibility for themselves

(Bandura, 1999). This externalization of blame not only serves to justify the behavior for the actor but also can diminish the potential empathic responses for such conduct (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996).

Table 1.1: Moral disengagement mechanisms (based on Bandura, 1999)

Loci	Mechanism	Definition
Behavioral	<i>Moral justification</i>	Immoral conduct is justified as being acceptable by the perpetrator as serves social or moral purpose
	<i>Euphemistic labelling</i>	The use of language to verbally sanitize the immoral conduct, making it seem respectable
	<i>Advantageous comparison</i>	Compare immoral conduct against perceivably worse conduct to make the immoral conduct more acceptable
Agency	<i>Displacement of responsibility</i>	Perpetrators stress that they are not responsible for immoral conduct and attribute to other people or factors
	<i>Diffusion of responsibility</i>	The perpetrator argue that he/she does not feel personally liable for that conduct
Outcomes	<i>Disregard or distortion of consequences</i>	Perpetrators choose to ignore the harm they have caused, point out to others that the harm is less serious than it actually is, or argue that they have not caused harm
Victim	<i>Dehumanization</i>	Perpetrator justifying the victim as being worthy of harm or of being less human than others
	<i>Attribution of blame</i>	Perpetrators seek to blame others for the immoral conduct

Source: Author

1.3.2. Review of moral disengagement theory in the existing bribery literature

1.3.2.1. Moral disengagement theory in corruption literature

Moral disengagement theory, first proposed by Bandura (1999), offers a cognitive framework for comprehending how individuals reconcile their immoral behavior with their personal ethical standards. Bribery remains an unethical practice which affects both public and private sectors because it creates major economic and social and political consequences (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016). Recent advances in the bribery literature have begun to incorporate moral disengagement theory to explain the psychological mechanisms that allow people to engage in corrupt exchanges without experiencing guilt or moral conflict (Bandura, 1999; Kaptein, 2008).

Moral disengagement offers a compelling theoretical framework for elucidating the emergence of unethical decisions. Corporate players and individuals engaged in corrupt behaviors may utilize moral justification by framing bribes as necessary instruments to rectify inefficiencies or to confer benefits upon larger entities, such as organizations or communities. Similarly, responsibility displacement, a mechanism whereby individuals blame their actions on external pressures or organizational demands, can negate personal accountability (Treviño, Weaver, & Agle, 2003). This rationalization process is central in understanding why actors who otherwise would be predicted to have strong moral convictions permit themselves to become corrupt.

Moral disengagement theory has also been used recently in studies of bribery in a new context, which demonstrated its universality across various social, cultural, and organizational settings. One quantitative laboratory experiment conducted by Tanner, Linder, and Sohn (2022) provides empirical data that indicates high levels of moral commitment and factors such as Honesty-Humility are negatively correlated with intentions to bribe. Those who endorsed integrity as a sheltered value were more resistant to endorsing bribery, indicating that moral disengagement processes are connected with susceptibility to corruption. The study highlights the mediation role of moral disengagement in uncovering individuals' money vs. ethics trade-offs.

On the basis of these findings, Haines (2021) studied the involvement of moral disengagement mechanisms in politically corrupt Central and East European countries. The study revealed that participants utilized euphemistic language and diffusion of responsibility as their main excuse when defending bribes on the grounds of cultural acceptability or economic needs. Haines' findings support that cultural norms constitute the degree to which moral disengagement occurs, and the significance of system explanations over behavior.

Zhao et al. (2017) examined the correlation among perceived descriptive norms, individuals' judgments of the frequency of corrupt practices, and moral disengagement. High levels of workplace corruption lead to high levels of moral disengagement and bribery involvement. This suggests that descriptive norms serve two functions by authorizing bribery and prompting people to use moral disengagement as a defense mechanism.

Additionally, moral disengagement theory specifies that according to moral disengagement theory people do not possess predetermined fixed moral self-regulation abilities because various situational factors can change this ability. Factors such as organizational culture, peer norms, and broader societal conditions can either trigger or inhibit disengagement processes (Bandura, 1999). This component of the theory is in conjunction with research showing that environments where moral norms remain unclear or have survived with corruption will necessarily prompt officials to adopt ways of disengagement from ethics. Kish-Gephart et al. (2010) highlighted that moral disengagement finds its initial rise in scenarios that present opposing motivations such as financial profit vs ethical behavior. In some studies, organizational cultures that justified bribery by euphemistic descriptions (for example, describing bribes as “facilitation fees”) or positive comparison (for example, comparing oneself to more openly corrupt actors) were shown to minimize ethical distress and facilitate disconnected ethical thinking. Johnson and Buckley’s (2013) conceptual model of organizational moral disengagement generalized these notions by asserting that moral disengagement is always collective and social at higher hierarchy levels. They contended that moral disengagement processes, including distribution of responsibility or dehumanization, are exacerbated under organizational power structures characterized by a lack of monitoring. For instance, when immoral acts are presented by managers as a strategic imperative, the subordinates will more readily justify and accept bribes as they feel that responsibility gets diffused or shifted.

National and cultural environments strongly influence the relationship between moral disengagement and bribery behavior. According to moral trade-off theory, Dungan, Waytz, and Young (2014) scholars utilized moral trade-off theory to demonstrate that people tend to select cultural group-based norms (e.g., loyalty) over universal moral norms (e.g., fairness). Individuals, in certain situations, will justify their actions of bribing as an expression of their loyalty to employers, family, or business networks because it is safeguarding a greater cause, i.e., collective interests. This shows how hard it is to foresee moral disengagement when universal ethics and values that are specific to a situation are at odds with one other. Zhao et al. (2017) affirm the mediating effect of moral disengagement in poor ethical institutions with widespread bribery. In

such a situation, people are less inclined to punish themselves because they think dishonest deeds are acceptable owing to descriptive norms. The research vindicates the importance of moral education and anti-corruption programs that address cultural facets as well as contextual factors and individuals' internal psychological processes.

Collectively, this body of research substantiates that moral disengagement serves as a significant predictor of an individual's propensity to commit isolated acts of corruption. Still, these studies have two major flaws in common. First, people usually think about corruption as separate, unrelated events instead of as processes that are part of ongoing, two-way relationships. Second, while researchers acknowledge the social framing of corrupt acts (e.g., as "gifts" or "investments"), they seldom unpack how culturally distinctive norms of reciprocity shape which disengagement mechanisms become more prevalent. In short, while the existing research convincingly shows how actors use cognitive strategies to justify individual corrupt exchanges, it does not look at how moral disengagement changes and evolves over time. This thesis fills that gap by exploring how cognitive neutralisations and affective responses interact with one another during bribery-prone relationships to offer a fuller explanation of how seemingly benign favours develop into long-term obligation-based corruption.

1.3.2.2. Methods used in literature

The diverse empirical research focusing on bribery-related moral disengagement utilizes multiple methodologies which provide distinctive perspectives about corruption mechanisms. Different empirical research methods including qualitative in-depth interviews and large-scale surveys along with experimental designs and longitudinal case studies appeared throughout the studies. These dual methodologies permit various perspectives through which academics have viewed the role of cognitive rationalizations and more general socio-organizational contexts in facilitating illegal transactions. Haynes and Rašković (2021), for instance, utilizes qualitative approaches (expert interviews) to investigate how people in Central and Eastern European countries that are affected by widespread corruption trade their own ethics in giving or receiving bribes. The research approach applies firsthand personal observations so that researchers can learn about the social environment of moral disengagement in actual settings. Through the inclusion of knowledge from corrupt environments, the study elucidates the

relational and structural foundations of bribery, explaining how the norms of groups and identity-based justifications influence moral disengagement. The interview network approach demonstrates the way bribery is an ongoing process by showing how corrupt behavior turns into mundane life and how peer pressure and social solidarity can keep corrupt behavior ongoing over a long period. This qualitative approach provides the richness needed to examine the contextual embeddedness of moral disengagement, but it is constricted in generalizability due to the absence of large-scale cross-context data.

Quantitative approaches, on the other hand, provide a broader picture of bribery study on moral disengagement in that they provide results that replicate and present statistical reliability. For instance, Tang (2018) employs large-scale surveys to examine the mediating role of moral disengagement in the relationship between perceptions of organizational justice and ethical behaviors (bribery included). This methodology uncovers reveals common patterns throughout numerous operational settings thus identifying standardized factors which lead to ethical misconduct through operational justification. By analyzing responses from hundreds of participants across different organizational settings, the review found evidence through participant data from various workplaces that employees who experience injustice tend to use unethical conduct including bribery as their way to fight against unfair systems. The survey method enables researchers to detect major patterns within large populations thus allowing broad application of research findings across groups and main coverage of variable relationships. Tang's quantitative approach is also subject to a general limitation in that it does not expose some of the psychological processes underlying survey responses. When descriptive richness of qualitative research is converted into numerical measures and quantitative measurement strategies, moral decision-making processes begin losing vital context information.

Experimental designs represent a third methodological position, constructing controlled environments to delineate and quantify the machinery of moral disengagement. Moore (2008), for instance, performs experimental research to investigate moral disengagement mechanisms by analyzing cognitive processes of immoral decisions, e.g., bribery, under laboratory-controlled conditions. Experimental research offers study subjects simulated bribery situations and two different conditions

to activate or deactivate moral disengagement. Empirical evidence indicates that individuals who are employing moral disengagement strategies to minimize the sanctions of their actions or to make their behavior constructive to society tend to use bribery. The research design helps researchers confirm cause-effect relationships to show that certain corruption prevention methods affect directly the probability for unethical conduct. Experimental research allows scientists to control environment variables such as performance stressors to discover when and why some people dissolve their moral ties. Additionally, experimental research approaches generally deal with problems related to external validity. However, the isolated study of psychological mechanisms works best in controlled environments but cannot fully explain the complex factors at play in real-world bribery since these cannot be properly duplicated in laboratory conditions. Another paper by Shu, Gino, and Bazerman (2011) conducted experiments that demonstrate how self-serving biases and moral disengagement mechanisms enable unethical decisions, such as lying or cheating. They discovered that individuals utilize justification processes to reconcile their behavior with a favorable self-concept and avoid cognitive dissonance caused by violations of moral standards. This is consistent with Bandura's (1999) claim that moral disengagement is an extremely valuable mechanism for overcoming internal ethical resistance. These experiments show that rationalization is essential to the understanding of corruption but also that experimental methods are unable to always capture the richness of real-world complexity. In experiments, individuals tend to have to rationalize their findings under strict conditions, and thus artificially placing a greater emphasis on rationalization. Conversely, actors within existing corruption systems, especially individuals in long-term bribery-prone relationships, may engage in moral disengagement intermittently as the routine becomes more automatic or implicit (Ashforth & Anand, 2003).

Process-oriented longitudinal research is a comparatively new approach to doing research exploring how moral disengagement emerges and how it leads to repeatedly occurring corrupt actions. Moore's (2007) research illustrates this research strategy to explore how continued exposure to unethical decision-making erodes resistance to morality and results in entrenched corruption. Longitudinal designs assist in illustrating how offers of bribes become routine ways of behavior in repeated interactions between

bribe-payers and bribe-takers. These types of study designs are particularly helpful in the analysis of large-scale bribery-prone relationships because they illustrate how resistance to cognition generally becomes entrenched unethical behavior after immunity has taken hold. Research conducted across multiple time points allows scientists to understand the effects that changes in leadership or regulatory standards have on moral disengagement behavior of participating actors. While this approach provides exceptional insight regarding bribery evolution in time yet it demands costly extended research periods that may create barriers for practical real-world deployments.

Another methodological approach found in the literature is cross-national comparison. This approach employs both qualitative and quantitative techniques to explore cultural variability in moral disengagement processes across different countries. Haines (2021) applies ethics surveys along with interviews to examine systemic corruption in emerging markets. The study elucidated how moral disengagement strategies are used depending on social norms and values. In collectivist society, bribery may be perceived as fulfilling reciprocal social obligations rather than ethical transgressions, hence diminishing the necessity for active rationalizations. The study's methodological approach offers quantitative evidence of cross-national patterns. However, cross-national approaches often face with issues in standardizing methodologies, making it a challenge to ensure comparability, particularly when posed with language barriers, incomparable regulatory scenes, and cultural sensitivities.

Lastly, mixed-method studies provide an available method for empirically testing moral disengagement and bribery. Scholars can make the weakness of each methodology stronger by merging the quality of qualitative and quantitative approaches. In addition, researchers can create a better understanding of the phenomenon. Kish-Gephart, Harrison, and Trevino (2010) employed a meta-analytic approach to consolidate findings from diverse research that investigated ethical decision-making, including inquiries into organizational bribery and moral disengagement. Their approach compiles data from several research methodologies, situating findings from prior experiments within overarching trends identified in survey data and case studies. This meta-synthesis reveals common identifiers of moral disengagement alongside a description of the experimental differences which create study variability. Mixed-

method approaches not only enhance theoretical integration but also provide practical recommendations. The research was able to capture both the micro-level cognition driving bribery and the macro-level systems that sustain it.

In summary, several methodological approaches identified in empirical studies on moral disengagement in bribery exhibit distinct advantages and disadvantages. Qualitative interviews provide depth and contextual understanding of real-world bribery settings. Meanwhile, quantitative surveys identify broader population-level patterns, and experimental designs establish causal relationship between disengagement mechanisms and corrupt behavior. In addition, longitudinal studies monitor changes in moral disengagement over time, cross-national methods capture cultural variation, and mixed-method designs bring together findings from multiple data sources. These different research methods collectively encompass the overall picture of moral disengagement in bribery by elucidating individual cognitive processes as well as cultural and system features to support corruption.

1.3.2.3. Moral disengagement theory on bribery as an isolated corrupt act

The knowledge regarding why individuals justify corrupt behavior, including bribery, has been greatly enhanced by application of such terms as moral disengagement. However, research within the field has focused much on the cognitive mechanisms individuals employ in defending their single acts of corruption instead of the processes involved in creating and sustaining bribery relationships. While moral disengagement theory has shed light on how individuals suppress inner-self ethical voice and help justifying unethical actions (Bandura, 1999; 2002), it has mostly considered corruption as an isolated act rather than as evolving relationship. Consequently, gaps remain in the literature around how bribery-prone relationships emerge, maintain, and persist across personal, organizational, and cultural contexts, despite evidence suggesting that bribery often thrives in systems of relational interdependence and hierarchical exchange.

Currently, moral disengagement studies in bribe literature have sought to explain why people rationalize their own wrong behaviors. It is Bandura's (2002) contention that people's moral codes can be dissuaded by processes such as moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and positive comparison. For example, those who take bribes may justify what they did by describing it as "necessary survival tactics" in dangerous

situations (moral justification) or lower their moral benchmark by calling the ill conduct “facilitation fees” (euphemistic labeling). The study conducted by Zhao, Zhang, and Xu (2017) demonstrates, both theoretically and empirically, that moral disengagement is a partial mechanism in mediating perceived descriptive norms to corrupt intentions. According to their research findings people who operate in areas with widespread bribery beliefs exhibit stronger moral disengagement because they accept such actions as essential to their particular environment. Although the research provides valuable insight about the relationship between corruption perceptions and disengagement it fails to explore how these awareness and acts manifest inside particular relationship situations involving bribe-givers, bribe-takers, and third-party enablers.

Likewise, Haines (2021) underscores the significance of moral disengagement in quotidian corrupt practices, with a specific focus on situational norms within Central and Eastern European (CEE) settings. The study demonstrates that strategies such as diffusion of responsibility and advantageous comparison facilitate the normalization of bribery by framing it as a shared cultural norm or as a lesser evil in comparison to more significant systemic corruptions. But Haines has little to say on the extent to which social relational systems are engaged in normalizing corruption, without reference to how these social arrangements develop and change. The paper does not consider how long and personal relationships influence commitments between bribers and bribees, although expert interviews suggest that such relations encourage corruption in Central and Eastern European nations.

Other research must examine bribery-prone relationships as systems since current studies have been predominantly limited to examining individual offenders committing isolated cases. This shortcoming underscores the need for more analysis of bribery-prone relationships as systems and not merely looking at corruption in terms of an individual actor’s discrete actions. One of the causes of underdevelopment of relational dynamics in bribery-prone situations is that most literature unwittingly conceptualizes bribery as an isolated event triggered by quick returns. Most studies of relational development in bribery-prone situations largely assume bribery as an isolatedized encounter. Academic research looks at mostly isolated instances of bribery even though such offenses build up step by step as two parties exchange bribes in a repetitive cycle

within an evolving process of relationship building. Johnson and Buckley (2013), for instance, focus on moral disengagement mechanisms in employee-manager dynamics to explain unethical acts like bribery. This research supports hierarchical systems with power distribution as elements that create moral disengagement yet their analysis concentrates on structural corruption pathway instead of continuous personal relationship development causing unethical conduct. The assumption that bribery is episodic, rather than relational and enduring, limits insights into how repeated moral disengagement reshapes the interpersonal trust and dependence that underpin long-term corruption networks.

The research of Tanner, Linder, and Sohn (2022) provides additional insights regarding the association between individual traits such as Honesty-Humility and corruption resistance outcomes through experimental methods. Their research indicates that persons with strong moral commitment, who prioritize integrity over financial gain, exhibit reduced vulnerability to bribery. Although the study uncovers important anti-bribery personal attributes but it still views bribery as a single fixed event and within experimental boundaries which reduces its scope to real-world corruption systems that establish through complex social interactions. In fact, long-term bribery relationships between parties are usually motivated by repeated exchanges that reinforce power imbalances, breaches of trust, and obligations profound. This reinforcement percolates insidiously into the domain of relational networks, embedding corrupt behavior deep within. Tanner et al.'s experimental design fails to establish these sophisticated factors.

Some studies address systemic and relational factors associated with bribery; however, they tend to extrapolate in a stereotypical manner, lacking a close observation of the way bribery-prone relations emerge over time. Dungan, Waytz, and Young (2014) employ the conflict between fairness and loyalty as a model of moral trade-off to account for bribery. The authors contend that organizational loyalty is a key source of corruption and typically replaces a general perception of fairness. The research highlights the significance of group-based norms in facilitating bribery, while being ambiguous on how loyalty-driven corrupt acts are converted to long-term relational patterns and how these relational patterns are formed over a period. Mutual advantage gained through

trust relationships between bribe takers and bribe givers and its influence on future corruption is an area of study which must be investigated.

In order to learn how such easily corruptible relationships change over a period of time, more than one act must be monitored. Moreover, it is needed to look at how they fit within social and structural systems. Ashforth and Anand (2003), in their model of normalized corruption, highlight how relational exchanges within organizations can normalize unethical behavior over time. The author maintains that corruption develops institutional foundations because organizations build shared principles that support rituals alongside dependency networks which protect participants from outside evaluation and self-condemnation. However, the author did not provide detailed explanations about how specific relational elements particularly trust and reciprocity and mutual dependency work together towards bribery continuation. For instance, the transformation of a singular corrupt deed into a pattern of recurrent corrupt trades through trust and collaboration among players is largely unexamined in the literature.

In summary, moral disengagement research has yielded essential insights into the ways individuals rationalize specific instances of bribery, it does not adequately elucidate the development of connections susceptible to bribes that perpetuate systemic corruption. The primary emphasis on isolated events overlooks the dynamic, relational processes that integrate bribery within social and organizational contexts.

1.3.2.4. Moral justifications in long term bribery-prone relationship

The literature on moral disengagement and corruption largely assumes unethical actors use rationalization methods for each corrupt behavior they perform. As Bandura (1999) established in his original moral disengagement framework, this key assumption maintains that people disconnect ethical values before justifying their unethical conduct to overcome internal conflicts. Bandura demonstrates that actors employing all three elements of moral justification and euphemistic labeling and diffusion of responsibility serve as essential mechanisms. According to Bandura, mechanisms like moral justification (reframing unethical actions as serving a higher purpose), euphemistic labeling (using sanitized language to obscure unethicality), and diffusion of responsibility (attributing blame to collective groups) are tools that bribers consciously or subconsciously utilize when participating in moral transgressions such as corruption.

But this theoretical foundation normally presupposes that rationalizations need to occur virtually every occasion that corrupt action is being taken. This is an assumption, albeit central in much of the research on moral disengagement, that disregards several dimensions of habituation, organizational culture, interpersonal trust, and cultural norms governing corruption. Research conducted on moral disengagement and corruption shows that rationalization strategies function as central elements of moral disengagement but their uses might not occur with the same frequency and consistency as previous studies indicate.

For instance, Moore (2007) directly applies moral disengagement theory to to explain how rationalization strategies support unethical decisions made by employees in high-pressure organizational settings. Moore identifies a sequential process whereby individuals disengage morally before engaging in corruption. Her experimental work confirms that moral disengagement strategies help people overcome psychologic discomfort when they make decisions leading to decreased psychological distress. Moore explains how employees participating in unethical activities within normalized corrupt organizations use external factors such as competitive pressures and resource limitations to defend their unethical practices (e.g., financial report manipulation and bribe acceptance). One area of this explanation remains unclear about whether employees actually need to utilize these justifications throughout all instances of unethical conduct. Moore's assumption of a linear and structured disengagement process overlooks the fact that repeated participation in corruption may lead to habituation, reducing the need for repeated rationalizations over time. For example, an employee who provides kickbacks to clients normally uses rationalizations initially because the behavior becomes automatic to the point where their moral disengagement methods stop being mandatory in their mind. Moore's work displays the widespread assumption that rationalization recurs constantly but academic findings indicate this process might occur sporadically mainly in organized corruption contexts.

Tang (2018) provides a good example of this assumption in the area of moral disengagement literature through the way employees' attitudes towards distributive and procedural injustice direct their strategic application of rationalization. Tang's study uses survey methods to demonstrate that employees who view their corporate world as

inequitable are significantly more likely to morally disengage and engage in unethical acts, such as bribery or embezzlement. Tang's linking of moral disengagement and being the target of injustice is indicative of a transactional model of ethical breakdown. This model says that when people think the system is bad, they need to make moral excuses anytime they act corruptly to protect themselves. However, Tang's findings, while significant, are limited in that his methodology of self-report moral disengagement behavior and does not directly assess whether these rationalizations occur every time corrupt acts take place. For example, when corruption exists throughout organizations with toxic workplace cultures workers might continuously follow unethical patterns as a pattern of action instead of consciously developing rationalizations. In these contexts, moral disengagement methods may be particularly prominent during the "initiation phase" of corruption, becoming less essential in following repetitive or regular behaviors, where the psychological obstacles to corruption have been diminished.

Haynes and Rašković (2021) utilize a qualitative methodology using expert interviews to investigate moral disengagement and identity dynamics in corruption across Central and Eastern Europe. Similar to numerous studies in this field they conclude that people use justifications to merge conflicting morals and selves in the moment of unethical conduct. Political and corporate officials who operate within corrupt systems utilize moral rationalizations to justify their immoral acts either in terms of assertions about acting for a nobler reason or by rationales that their actions are the results of structural pressures. Bandura (1999) explains that moral disengagement is one of the ways in which people avoid feelings of guilt and preserve their self-image. Yet Haynes and Rašković also highlight an important, albeit underexplored, nuance in their findings: in highly normalized corrupt settings, actors increasingly rely on socially embedded narratives to justify corruption, rather than continuously deploying individual rationalizations. For example, a public official who is part of a network where bribery is common may try to excuse their actions at first, but subsequently they may follow the network's rules to make themselves less reliant on their own ways of avoiding moral responsibility. Over time, these systemic narratives eliminate the need for continuous personal rationalization, indicating that moral disengagement may not consistently function as a distinct cognitive process but can transition into implicit assumptions or

“moral blind spots” within such contexts. This dynamic complicates the assumption that actors rationalize corrupt acts every time they occur.

Kish-Gephart, Harrison, and Treviño (2010) offer further meta-analytic evidence for the consistent rationalization assumption in unethical behavior but also suggest variations associated with situational and contextual influences. The meta-analysis of ethical decision-making indicated that both individual attributes, including personal features and moral reasoning abilities, as well as the overarching professional environment, encompassing leadership misconduct and organizational standards, significantly influence ethical disengagement behaviors. Like Moore (2007), Kish-Gephart et al. argue that rationalization strategies like moral justification and diffusing responsibility are key to enabling unethical actions like bribery, especially when external pressures demand quick or convenient decision-making. Yet, research confirms that employees likely decrease their application of explicit rationales as they work for companies that perpetuate deep-seated patterns of unethical behavior because such practices approach institutionalized status. When companies accept corruption through practices like offering gifts or paying unofficial fees, employees are likely to consider them as normal business practices instead of unethical behavior needing to be rationalized. This routinization forcefully contradicts the idea that rationalization techniques are necessary for all cases of corruption and shows the difference between the fundamental case of disengagement acts and later patterns of moral decay.

The theoretical premise of repetitive rationalization neglects to consider collective-level processes that could alleviate the burden of individual cognitive disengagement. Ashforth and Anand’s (2003) work on the institutionalization of corruption emphasizes that bribery and similar corruption behaviors become established in organizational cultures through socialization networks followed by normalization routines and normalization of unethical behaviors. The adoption of moral disengagement strategies occurs when personnel first adjust to a corrupt environment though these strategies eventually disappear as organizational cultures become established. Shared organizational narratives and operational norms completely replace the need for justification of corruption activities thus allowing members to perform unethical acts effortlessly. For example, actors who operate in industrial environments

that accept bribery as common practice no longer feel the need to give arguments supporting their actions since such practices become generic business standards.

In a nutshell, the claim that actors use moral disengagement strategies every time they engage in corrupt acts is foundational to moral disengagement theory and much of the empirical research in literature. Bandura (1999) together with Moore (2007) and Tang (2018) provide evidence along with other researchers that show rationalizations serve as a tool to allow corruption by reducing cognitive dissonance and sustaining actors' self-concept. The assumption about systematic rationalization encounters significant obstacles due to important gaps and complex factors within specific settings. According to Ashforth and Anand (2003) and Haynes and Rašković (2021) institutionalized corruption research shows that moral disengagement occurs mainly in the initial phases of corruption involvement but future unethical practices lead to normalization so ongoing rationalization becomes unnecessary. Experimental studies serve as key for proving causation yet their artificial approach cannot fully mirror real corruption scenarios which allow organizational stories and cultural accepted practices to displace personal justification mechanisms. This analysis discovers that moral disengagement strategies form essential elements for understanding corruption yet they do not function with universal or constant effectiveness particularly when unethical practices develop into standard practices through time.

In conclusion, these insightful studies on moral disengagement and corruption, nevertheless, remain either theoretical (Moore, 2008) or exploratory (Kominis & Dudau, 2018). Several questions have not been clearly examined. First, do actors experience different psychological processes between the initiation and perpetuation of bribery relationships? Most of previous works have explained how actors justify their discrete corrupt acts, leaving the evolvement of bribery-prone relationships unexplored. As social exchanges generate a sense of obligation (Gouldner, 1960), the nature of rationalization for development of a bribery-prone relationship may differ from those for discrete corrupt acts. Second, does the need for rationalization retain as a bribery-prone relationship evolves? The works on moral disengagement and corruption tend to assume that an actor uses some rationalization strategies every time he/she engages in a corrupt act. This assumption may not hold for the exchanges between long term partners

in a bribery-prone relationship. Then the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960) is taken into consideration, specifically the norm of reciprocity, for more insights about these issues.

1.4. Norm of reciprocity

Social exchange theory serves as a core theory for understanding interpersonal interactions in business ethics, implying that people build connections through reward-cost exchanges (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958). According to this theory, people participate in social exchanges to reach their maximum advantage by receiving recognition, support, and tangible resources, yet strive to decrease their investment of effort and risks. This cost-benefit analysis is largely implicit. However, it can drive cooperation, competition, and power within relationships, offering a framework for understanding social behaviors. Social exchange theory serves as a fundamental framework that has successfully explained diverse phenomena between personal relationships and workplace dynamics because it focuses on trust and commitment and reciprocity as main elements (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Within this theoretical framework, the norm of reciprocity acts as a critical mechanism for balancing exchanges. Initially described by Gouldner (1960), the norm of reciprocity implies that when one party provides a favor to another party, it is inherently expected that such favor should eventually be returned. People hold this expectation because they subscribe to essential ethical principles and social values that establish trust and mutual assistance. By acting as a social bonding factor the norm of reciprocity leads people to follow agreement-based rules of fairness and equity in order to establish stable relationships while combating exploitation.

As Gouldner (1960) has established, reciprocal expectation represents a social contract requiring individuals to repay favors because it constitutes both a transactional necessity and a moral obligation. In many business contexts, this norm strengthens team dynamics through operational culture because it motivates employees to serve both their own needs and group ethical norms. For example, according to Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) managers who mentor or assist employees create conditions for employees to strengthen their professional dedication along with improved execution of team assignments. Organizational culture becomes more cohesive and resilient through such reciprocal workplace conduct which builds trust between people.

Moreover, the norm of reciprocity plays an important role in business ethics by promoting fairness and discouraging the exploitation of relationships. This social norm

functions as an ethical balance against transactional aspects of social exchange theory because it adds moral standards to exchange processes. Business relationships should be seen beyond monetary transactions according to this norm so ethical business practices need sustained cooperative relationships based on mutual accountability for reciprocal commitments. This process creates a vital mechanism to stop opportunistic actions while building organization-wide ethical values (Emerson, 1976).

The integration of the norm of reciprocity within the broader framework of social exchange theory provides a better understanding of ethical behaviors in business contexts. The analysis demonstrates how basic social and moral expectations guide human exchanges to develop balanced exchanges which eventually support trust development as well as organizational integrity.

1.4.1. Key features of norm of reciprocity

The norm of reciprocity is a multifaceted construct that plays a critical role in shaping social and business interactions. This norm has a few important elements that differentiate it:

Expectation of Return: The underlying idea behind the principle of reciprocity is that people should repay favors with favors of equivalent value. The social norm surpasses strategic consideration by saying that benevolence should be repaid (Gouldner, 1960).

Moral Obligation: This norm is ethical elements because it exerts ethical pressure on people to do their part of the work. Awareness of obligation comes in the guise of obligation and gratitude, which spurs people to meet society standards of justice (Gouldner, 1960).

Social Stability and Cohesion: Reciprocity is also important for social stability because it fosters trust, which leads to cooperative networks in society. People who are kind to each other form close support groups that rely on each other for help. Reciprocal behavior fosters strong and reliable partnerships while diminishing opportunistic conduct among individuals (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Enforcement through Social Sanctions: Individuals who fail to reciprocate get punished by their social network with emotions of sadness along with isolation and negative impacts on their reputation. Due to negative consequences such as social

sanctions people abstain from neglecting favors to maintain norms across different social settings (Gouldner, 1960).

Universality Across Cultures: Across multiple established cultures and societies the reciprocity norm exists universally to guide social interactions. Marking differences in behavior between cultures stands aside an established universal expectation (Gouldner, 1960).

Enhancement of Cooperative Behavior: Multilateral cooperation flourishes within communities that maintain an exchanging pattern because individuals tend to return received benefits. The business scenario reflects this particular relevance through its ability to create better team collaboration combined with collective problem-solving abilities alongside a supportive workplace atmosphere (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

These features locate the norm of reciprocity as a core element in everyday social acts as well as institutional organizational procedures. Such norm helps promote fairness, trust, and mutual support.

1.4.2. Types of reciprocity

According to social exchange theory reciprocity stands as a core norm which requires that any gift someone receives must be repaid to the provider over time. This principle facilitates stable fair connections between individuals in personal and organizational settings. Multiple researchers throughout the years established different reciprocity types which describe how people conduct their reciprocal transactions. The three basic reciprocation types include balanced or direct reciprocity together with negative reciprocity and generalized reciprocity and some researchers recognize the existence of communal or indirect relationships. This section provides a thorough examination of these types follows with an explanation of their position related to social exchange theory while considering organizational behavioral concepts.

1. Balanced Reciprocity

Balanced reciprocity, often referred to as direct reciprocity, establishes immediate or nearby time-based exchanges of benefits which should be returned proportionally equal between the parties. The conception of balanced reciprocity as described by Gouldner (1960) establishes this form of exchange as the most ideal reciprocal arrangement keeping exchange fairness through swift equal benefit transfers. The interaction relies on symmetrical exchanges because the participants receive equivalent

worth that matches their original contribution. The interpersonal symmetry works as an essential component to build up moral duties to answer contributions proportionally. In business negotiations, balanced reciprocity emerges through concession exchanges which preserve equality during trading processes (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

The practice of balanced reciprocity extends beyond official transactions because it functions as an essential element in social dealings between people. When parties enter balanced exchanges they develop trust and cooperation through extended time. The obligation to give mutual equal exchange creates strong motivation for people to honor social rules and ethical conduct (Gouldner, 1960). The requirement for equal exchanges in balanced reciprocity becomes difficult to determine especially considering intangible value elements. Although implementing this principle results in difficulties, it continues to serve as a basic paradigm for interpreting mutual relationship dynamics between personal and professional contexts.

2. Negative Reciprocity

In contrast to balanced reciprocity, negative reciprocity involves one party trying to reach their benefit maximum points by creating excessively challenging conditions for the other party through negative reciprocal behavior. This form of reciprocity is characterized by an imbalance. The parties keep score to gain higher value than what they initially offer while using competitive and exploitative approaches. Individuals engage in self-serving actions through negative reciprocity when they come to terms with violating the fairness principles of balanced exchanges (Gouldner, 1960).

In competitive environments where resources are scarce or highly valued, negative reciprocity is more likely to take place. In such context, individuals may often decline to give benefits or request excessive returns while trying to decrease their personal costs or minimize potential risks. Business negotiations featuring hard bargaining often prompt one party to think concessions will not receive sufficient returns from the other side (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Negative reciprocity functions as an element that manages organizational power structures even though it typically leads to reduced trust and social unity (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Negative reciprocity functions as an element that manages organizational power structures even though it typically leads to reduced trust and social unity. Research suggests that when negative reciprocity becomes common, professional relationships in organizations will be seriously harmed. Such a scenario will prevent the function of the whole organization.

Some contexts also view negative reciprocity as a method to deter people from taking advantage of generosity without reciprocity. People who see negative reciprocity in operation tend to follow rules of balanced exchange due to the message it delivers about possible opportunistic responses to generosity. Nevertheless, organizations that heavily rely on negative reciprocal strategies create a toxic environment because employees become dangerously wary of opportunistic behavior resulting in lower effectiveness of teamwork and diminished trust and longer-term achievement.

3. Generalized reciprocity

Generalized reciprocity is also known as the “pay it forward” approach. This type of reciprocity is significantly different from balanced reciprocity. In this model, the expectation of receiving reciprocal payments does not target the initial benefactor but targets society or another individual from the same social network. The benefit in this context is given without the expectation of immediate or equivalent repayment. Instead, the beneficiary is encouraged to pass on the benefit to another person in the future. This form of reciprocity is more likely to occur in informal social environments, which value both communal bonds and enduring relationships (Gouldner, 1960; Sahlins, 1972).

Trust plays a vital role in making generalized reciprocity work in society. Organizations typically display generalized reciprocity through mentoring programs and team initiatives that allow benefits given to one member to develop into a collaborative network that serves the entire group. For example, a senior manager may invest significant time in developing the professional skills of a junior colleague without demanding an immediate return. In turn, the junior colleague, as part of a larger network, is likely to eventually reciprocate by contributing to the development of other new members or by contributing efforts that benefit the organization (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

The fundamental advantage of generalized reciprocity lies in its ability to promote a culture of trust since it extends mutual help among individuals without requiring fixed returns in any particular time frame. However, the system faces challenges because its long-term relational approach creates conditions for individuals who benefit but do not offer sufficient return (free-riding). Even if this could be a problem, generalized reciprocity is nonetheless very important for making both organizations and societies better off.

4. Communal and Indirect Reciprocity

Along with the main types of reciprocity mentioned above, researchers have also found communal or indirect types of reciprocity. This type of reciprocity intersects with generalized reciprocity in complex ways. People help each other out without expecting anything in return since they are part of the same community and share a sense of identification with others. This is called communal reciprocity. The exchange mechanism exists within cultural and social norms of a group that uses shared principles to understand reciprocal aid and mutual support (Foa & Foa, 1974).

The main characteristic of indirect communal reciprocity is its spread of accountability responsibility across the entire group. Unlike balanced reciprocity, where the expectation for a return is clearly delineated, In communal reciprocity the expectations for repayment no longer exist in a well-defined manner because they spread out among the entire group. Group members combine their dedication to loyalty with understanding that their assets stem from cooperative work. Current and future organizational loyalty together with commitment to shared goals can become exceptionally powerful because of this mechanism.

The mechanism of indirect reciprocity also maintains a strong connection to how social network members build reputations within their relationships. People who serve the group with no requirement for immediate return gain higher reputation status within their social network. The social enhancement derived from such generosity sets the stage for new forthcoming reciprocal advantages which are separate from the original sharing experience while reinforcing the base social framework where reciprocity exists.

Reciprocity can be balanced, negative, generalized, or communal/indirect, and these many varieties show how the norm of reciprocity affects how people interact with each other. Each type has its own responsibilities for keeping fairness, trust, and social cohesiveness. Balanced reciprocity strengthens direct, immediate interactions, but negative reciprocity indicates competitive inclinations that may jeopardize relationships if not properly managed. Generalized reciprocity, with its “pay it forward” ethos, and community reciprocity, founded on communal responsibility, emphasize the significance of long-term relationship bonds in enabling ethical and collaborative behavior. These types of reciprocity not only account for social interaction, but also offer keen understanding into the manner in which ethical norms are upheld in workplace and

interpersonal settings (Gouldner, 1960; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Sahlins, 1972; Foa & Foa, 1974).

1.4.3. Review of norm of reciprocity in the existing bribery literature

1.4.3.1. Norm of reciprocity in illegal exchanges

Although most studies about reciprocity and corruption focus on negative results but it is valuable to recognize that reciprocity itself does not inherently dictate unethical behaviors. While the norm of reciprocity has been studied for its positive role in promoting fairness and social order, it is especially important to consider reciprocity as a social rule. It is a morally neutral principle that does not inherently exclude the possibility of unethical or even illegal exchanges. Multiple researchers reveal reciprocity functions to establish ethical societal conduct yet it can also help sustain corrupt practices including bribery within social and business environments (Bello, 2014; Tangpong, Li, & Hung, 2016; Wang, 2016).

One of the key issues with reciprocity exists in its ability to create unwritten responsibilities between exchange partners. Anthropologists, sociologists, and organizational scholars have long noted that individuals tend to feel a strong obligation to return a favor no matter what the original context is (Mauss, 1954; Blau, 1964). This sense of indebtedness is particularly useful in prosocial contexts where it promotes cooperation and trust. However, its neutrality serves as the key weakness that permits both ethical and unethical uses of this framework. For example, in the context of bribery, reciprocity transforms from a facilitator of trust into an operating mechanism for corrupt relationships (Wang, 2016). In this way, bribe offers work through first payments of money along with gifts or favors to gain preferential service or illegal favors or unethical benefits from the recipient. The ethical framework of reciprocity provides an environment welcoming corrupt exchanges though their unethical nature remains hidden during early stages.

This is especially true in those societies and cultures where giving and receiving are strongly established as social norms. Social transactions can confuse the boundary between ethical gifting practice and unethical practice. Wang (2016) emphasizes that in studies of corruption in East Asia, it is challenging to distinguish between hospitality and bribery behaviors, people often show the rule of reciprocity by offering gifts. Many corrupt deals depend on the need to return favors since bribes are often seen as normal cultural exchanges instead than breaking the rules. In such context, culture accepts

reciprocity as a reason to do unethical things when such actions would otherwise raise ethical concerns. Even well-intentioned individuals may find themselves caught in moral dilemmas under social expectations to reciprocate, demonstrating the morally neutral nature of this principle in practice (Treisman, 2000).

Bello (2014) expands the knowledge of corrupt transactions by explaining that reciprocal agreements typically operate through implicit mutual understandings instead of formal discussions. This subtlety allows reciprocity to govern bribery exchanges without being overtly recognized as unethical by its participants. For example, a contractor who presents an expensive holiday gift to a government official creates a reciprocal understanding even without demanding future business advantages. In this case, both parties understand that the gift-giving act is reciprocal in nature. It is this implicit understanding, promoted by the law of reciprocity, that generates unethical relationships, even when people involved do not indicate a wish to be unethical. Bello's research describes the "gray area" of reciprocity in which social norms that mix gift exchange and reciprocal behavior within the context of insufficient regulation can degenerate into corrupt exchanges of unethical nature, particularly in contexts that do not have proper supervision or lenient enforcement of ethical norms.

Tangpong, Li and Hung's (2016) research extends reciprocal norms one step further to illustrate their potency in generating organizational relational favoritism. Through case studies, they describe how reciprocity norms can shape employer-employee and client-supplier relationships in such a way as to make personal loyalties paramount over professional ethics. The author illustrates how societies that favor face-to-face interaction and interpersonal relationship facilitate reciprocal obligation systems legitimize such illegal practices as kickbacks and bribes, and discriminatory hiring. Significantly, Tangpong et al. demonstrate that these corrupt practices are not necessarily driven by corruption intent but by the normalization of reciprocity in professional and organizational exchanges. In such settings, reciprocity transforms into an actual relationship management system in these environments thus enabling corruption to persist throughout different levels of organization.

Critically, the relationship between reciprocity and bribery is not confined to specific cultural settings. Evidence from international studies shows that the norm of

reciprocity plays a crucial role in facilitating corruption from African kinship networks to Western corporate environment. In their cross-national analysis of corruption, Fisman and Miguel (2007) demonstrates that well-established norms of reciprocity between societies produce different norms regarding corruption levels between nations and high intuitions of reciprocity generate broader acceptance of bribery practices. For example, the “you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours” ethos can extend beyond individuals to entire institutions, where develop a habit of reciprocal arrangements that create difficulties to separate ethical partnership deals from unethical collaborative networks. This highlights that the universal role of reciprocity in social norms stands out because it exists solely based on participants’ ethical motives and cultural understanding of its application.

1.4.3.2. Methods

Two most common approaches to empirical research on reciprocity and bribery have been experimental studies on corruption games and qualitative/ethnographic studies on reciprocal bribes within close networks in certain cultural and/or institutional settings. Laboratory experiments built on regular games of reciprocity to address the threats of defection in informal contracting (Abbink and Hennig-Schmidt, 2006; Abbink et al., 2002; Lambsdorff and Frank, 2010, 2011; Rivas, 2013). For example, Abbink et al. (2000) designed dyadic gift-exchange games and observed reciprocity in each pair of participants. One participant in a pair could spend resources to punish the other in case of defection. The author found that reciprocal exchanges occur in most cases. More importantly, defections were commonly punished even when it costs the punisher to do so. This finding underscores that reciprocity extends beyond material self-interest because individuals seem to actively conform to informal norms even at a personal cost. Similarly, Lambsdorff and Frank (2010) ran an experiment in which a businessperson gives a bribe to a government employee in order to gain a contract. Participants in the role of government officials could choose between whistleblowing, opportunism, and reciprocity (delivery of a contract). Those acting as businesspeople could call their payment either a gift or a bribe and choose whether to blow a whistle at the end of the game. The author discovered that participants often opted to reciprocate, contradicting the wealth maximizing concept. From this finding, it can be implied that bribery

exchanges rely not only on monetary benefits but also on the obligations to reciprocate shared by both parties. Bribery arrangements that are based on working together and have good verification processes make it harder to fight corruption. Experimental research like this also revealed that trustworthiness, along with collaboration mechanisms, ensures reciprocal interactions between parties, which closely resembles actual corruption transactions. Other studies examined the impacts of gender (Lambsdorff and Frank, 2011; Rivas, 2013), culture (Cameron et al., 2009), and effects on third parties (Abbink and Hennig-Schmidt, 2006; Abbink et al., 2002; Cameron et al., 2009) on reciprocal bribery exchanges.

While providing valuable insights into reciprocity in bribery exchanges, experimental research on corruption has its own shortcomings. First, it does not apply to real-life situations very well because the stakes in real bribery exchanges are considerably bigger than in the games. Laboratory experiments often fail to replicate the psychological stresses and dangers of substantial financial and reputational losses associated with real bribery situations (Puffer et al., 2010; Karhunen et al., 2018). For instance, risks involved in real corrupt deals can include severe legal punishment, professional destruction, and personal safety hazards, dimensions that are hardly present in the experimental context. Secondly, the games mainly touched upon calculative reasons as a reciprocity mechanism (Karhunen et al., 2018; Puffer et al., 2010), while moral issues were under-investigated. Real corrupt encounter situations commonly incorporate social and ethical nuances, including moral uncertainty and emotional concerns, which laboratory-based studies inadequately investigate.

Qualitative studies on reciprocal bribery were mostly conducted in contexts where cultures and/or institutions have familiarized personal relationships in businesses (Tonoyan et al., 2010; Welter and Smallbone, 2011). Stakes in real corrupt deals, for instance, can involve consequences such as severe legal penalties, professional devastation, and personal safety threats, aspects not normally present in experiments. Firstly, the experiments mostly focused on calculative reasons as a form of reciprocity (Karhunen et al., 2018; Puffer et al., 2010), with moral issues being less explored. Everyday bribery experiences are more likely to entail social and ethical nuances, including moral ambiguity and emotional issues, which lab-based studies do not cover.

Examples include studies of mutual bribery in the Chinese *guanxi* network (Luo, 2008; Steidlmeier, 1999; Sun and Ai, 2020; Wang, 2016; Wu et al., 2006), *blat* in Russia (Karhunen et al., 2018; Puffer et al., 2010), and personal ties in Vietnam (De Jong et al., 2012; Gillespie et al., 2020), among others. In these studies, a particularistic culture and/or underdeveloped market institutions promote the use of close kinship and acquaintance networks in businesses. These close networks reduce the opportunism of the parties in corrupt deals (Karhunen et al., 2018; Luo, 2008; Steidlmeier, 1999; Wang, 2016), providing opportunities for corruption. In these networks, trust undoubtedly helps to facilitate corruption, as participants rely on reciprocal benefits while trying to minimize risks of defection. Parties of a corrupt relationship feel obligated to return favors partly because going back on promises would be considered an embarrassment or a “loss of face” (Luo, 2008; Sun and Ai, 2020; Tian, 2008). For example, Chinese *guanxi* business culture relies on vague social transactions referred to as “gifts” to enforce loyalty and preclude criminal bribery through emphasizing traditional norms (Luo, 2008). The plan illustrates the influence of cultural aspects on bribery incentives according to research by Achim (2016) and Borlea et al. (2019). Here, it can be seen that application of reciprocity norms in partnership bribery depends on cultural factors and the bribery size in these arrangements (Karhunen et al., 2018; Puffer et al., 2010; Puffer et al., 2013). The *guanxi* system is compared to Russia’s *blat*, where personal relationships build confidence and loyalty in corrupt deals, and weak formal institutions make people more likely to rely on these kinds of deals (Karhunen et al., 2018; Puffer et al., 2010). Kinship- and trust-based systems in Vietnam exemplify the flourishing of informal network-based exchanges within an institutionally deficient context (De Jong et al., 2012; Gillespie et al., 2020). However, reciprocal bribery in these studies is only possible between trusted partners who already are members of a close network.

The findings of such qualitative studies supplement and also augment those of experimental studies in demonstrating how cultural and institutional contexts organize reciprocity in bribery. Ethnographic field research excels over laboratory research insofar as it investigates how emotional obligations, cultural conventions, and personal relationships shape the form of corrupt exchanges. Laboratory studies investigate corruption only from a calculative, individualist point of view. For instance, Bribery

based on reciprocal exchange in *guanxi* serves both as an instrumental transaction and demonstrates ongoing relationship respect and commitment through its embedded link with corrupt behavior (Wang, 2016; Tian, 2008). Similarly, networks that Vietnamese families establish via *blat* constitute relations wherein trust lessens opportunism but simultaneously entrenches ceremonial wrongdoing because members must avoid default by any means because it imposes disastrous social consequences such as spoiled reputation. Qualitative methods involving relational processes and contextual factors between actors enable the provision of a detailed explanation of bribery mechanisms that is impossible with laboratory experiments.

In summary, experimental and qualitative research provides vital data on how reciprocity works in bribery transactions. The experimental design elucidates the fundamental principles of reciprocity, trust, and punishment, but solely within controlled environments. Thus, the complexities of real-life transactions and context are neglected. Ethnographic and qualitative studies, on the other hand, highlight how complex reciprocal relationships function within Chinese *guanxi* and Russian *blat* and Vietnamese relational exchange systems because institutions combined with cultural values determine corrupt conduct. However, both approaches have not sufficiently examined the norm of reciprocity involving partners who may not belong to the same networks. This second section of this research argues that the norm of reciprocity can govern a sequence of bribery deals between partners lacking pre-existing relationships.

1.4.3.3. Reciprocity in bribery exchanges outside close networks

Traditional research has emphasized contexts where reciprocity is reinforced by trust and close-knit social circle. However, its broader applicability suggests it may also govern bribery exchanges among partners who lack close ties. Indeed, reciprocity is not only about trust but also about rewards and punishments. If a briber provides incentives (e.g., money, gifts, or favors) to a public official expecting a return in favor, the official's failure to reciprocate could self-destroy their reputation, be excluded from future exchanges or worst, be abandoned by his community. This highlights that the norm of reciprocity functions through mutual expectations of future benefits despite a lack of personal trust because both parties can enforce cooperation by using subsequent rewards and penalties. Bribery exchanges demonstrate that reciprocity can still function outside

personal relationships since participants base their exchanges on mutual expectations within professional networks rather than relying on individual bonds.

Empirical support for reciprocity guiding bribery among distant or unrelated partners can be drawn from broader examinations of corruption in weak institutional contexts. In these situations, people who are dealing with corrupt institutions learn to follow unwritten laws of reciprocal exchange, even with people they do not know, because not doing so might lead to being left out, getting back at someone, or damaging their reputation (Lambsdorff 2010). For example, Lambsdorff and Frank (2010) looked at an experimental bribery game and found that most of the players who met for the first time used systematized reciprocity to get bribes and favors. Despite not knowing each other beforehand, players stuck to the transactional norm of reciprocity in a bid to uphold mutually gainful agreements. The observation that reciprocity is not only functional through trust within tight networks but also as a deliberate tool to provide reliability outside them is what is exposed by this.

Furthermore, the practice of reciprocity is driven by external incentives of reciprocal sanctions rather than inherent relational standards. Greif (1993) investigated this concept in historical trade networks, where the enforceability of reciprocity in trade networks operated through the threat of punishment that substituted for lacking human links. Reciprocity in bribery exchanges between strangers can occur primarily because of the necessity to uphold image and reputation. Johnson et al. (1998) demonstrated this effect in emerging markets, where firms carry out reciprocal bribery with government officials who are neither relatives nor close friends. Despite the requirement of trust within a closed network, such transactions do take place, showing that the threat of exclusion from future transactions can be sufficient to enforce cooperation even between strangers.

Reciprocity exploitation beyond close networks is especially applicable in the instance of where institutional weakness promotes endemic corruption. In these settings, individuals and businesses participate in bribery exchanges in extensive informal networks rather than in close personal connections. For instance, the practices of bribery based on reciprocity according to Rose-Ackerman and Palifka (2016) also create new relationships between politicians and businesses who enter mutually beneficial

agreements to share public resources. Even when parties lack pre-established relationships, reciprocal bribery functions as a system that offers unspoken guarantees for achieving compliance.

Another mechanism by which reciprocity extends beyond close networks is the cognitive rationalization of bribery. People involved in corruption explain their participation through social responsibilities despite knowing the actions are unethical and illegal. Dong et al. (2012) studied how transitional economy managers defined their corrupt activities as essential gift payments based on reciprocity norms which did not depend on previous personal connections. Bribe participants attain peace of mind about unethical exchanges through their use of reciprocity thus enabling them to maintain relationships within larger corrupt systems.

Conforming to the norm of reciprocity becomes a potent rationalization because it provides a socially acceptable framework for framing bribery as a duty rather than an intentional act of corruption (Ashforth and Anand 2003). This point will be further examined in the subsequent section.

1.4.3.4. Norm of reciprocity as a rationalization strategy

The principle of conforming to the norm of reciprocity becomes particularly problematic when illegal or immoral payments are involved. An official, for instance, may find themselves under immense pressure to give an illegal favor to a business partner purely in order to conform to the norm of reciprocity. Yet, Such actions create a severe conflict because they breach moral principles and professional responsibilities that accompany the official position. In essence, the internal duty generated by reciprocity standards directly contradicts the professional behavioral expectations enforced by public organizations. A number of case studies (e.g., Vian, 2008; Johnston, 2005) illustrate how the pressure to conform to reciprocity norms can lead to ethics violations, damaging trust in public office. As a result, public officials may face ethical breakdowns after conforming to reciprocity norms within high-pressure contexts thereby decreasing their responsibility to the public sector. Public officials experience emotional distress because they must adhere to reciprocal duties with partners while upholding their professional duties. This inner conflict arises from the tension between personal ethical standards and the external pressures imposed by corrupt reciprocal

exchanges. Consequently, the emotional distress leads the impacted official to choose rationalization techniques as a method of pain control. Research indicates that rationalization provides a useful mental mechanism to reinterpret the corrupt deal through normal social norms as opposed to unethical professional violations (Bandura, 1999; Treviño et al., 2003). Such cognitive tactics ensure the official can engage in bribery deals while mitigating guilt or cognitive dissonance. While the psychological mechanisms that underpin these rationalizations have been extensively examined in contexts of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999), a significant deficiency persists in research that explicitly associates these processes with the norm of reciprocity in relationships susceptible to bribery.

In light of the above, it becomes evident that conforming to the norm of reciprocity may be consciously used as a form of rationalization by officials to justify illegal or immoral payments. Despite the normative expectations of reciprocity, when individuals breach legal and ethical standards, they often employ mechanisms of moral disengagement to reconcile their behavior with internal obligations. However, the author *is not yet fully aware of any study that uniquely integrates moral disengagement and the norm of reciprocity to explain bribery-prone relationships*. The bulk of this research will attempt to carry out such endeavor.

1.4.3.5. Obligation to repay

The norm of reciprocity, by itself, does not exclude illegal or immoral payments (Bello, 2014; Tangpong, Li, & Hung, 2016; Wang, 2016). This opens opportunities for bribery exchanges to be governed by the norm of reciprocity. From the view of reciprocity norm, a bribe is given to create an obligation to repay which may or may not be realized in specified times and values. While the goal of any bribe is likely to get illegal/immoral favors in return, the norm of reciprocity emphasizes several aspects.

First, a bribe is paid not necessarily for a specific return. Instead, it can be given to generate a sense of “obligation” or “social indebtedness” which induces future repayments (Steidlmeier, 1999; Tangpong et al., 2016; Wang, 2016). In this context, the main objective behind bribing is not obtaining immediate compensation. Rather, bribe givers hope to be able to establish enduring feelings of obligation to ensure future support from the recipient. Such a strategy can be quite effective in bureaucratic

environments, where the exact nature of the returned favor is usually vague and dependent on situational opportunities. Researchers have observed that such uncertainty, combined with variability in anticipated returns, renders the link between the bribe and the precise value of the ensuing benefits elusive. In other words, the imbalance between the bribe and the eventual repayment rarely ever appears as equivalent from the perspective of both parties. This outstanding balance from the initial obligation triggers a series of mutual interactions. Wang (2016) and others contend that this mismatch is fundamental to the continuation of relationships susceptible to bribery. Here, outstanding debt compels continued exchanges in an ongoing cycle of moral and social obligation. Steidlmeier's (1999) research, as well as Tangpong et al.'s (2016) study, has validated that taking a bribe has enduring psychological effects that influence subsequent business activities. Thus, the norm of reciprocity, when applied to bribery, can justify the initiation of such corrupt acts by allowing participants to frame them as routine obligations, not isolated illegal transactions.

Second, the returned favors may be unspecified in terms of timing, form, and value. The elements of uncertainty in these exchanges depend largely on the presence of various opportunities, often subject to the authority and discretion of public officials, during which the obligated party may grant favors to the briber. Real-life instances of bribery seldom provide specific quantitative measures to define what constitutes equivalent compensation to original payments. This built-in uncertainty confirms that the promise of repayment after a bribe need not follow any established value comparison system. Numerous studies indicate that ambiguity regarding the timing and extent of reciprocation fosters an atmosphere conducive to the emergence of corrupt practices (Rose-Ackerman, 1999; Williams & Martinez, 2014).

This is a valuable avenue for future research. Existing research on corruption is tackling how the exploitation of normative norms facilitates the establishment of corrupt networks in Vietnam. Comprehensive research that integrates these theoretical frameworks can elucidate the cognitive processes occurring between social indebtedness and ethical obligations (Mendonça, 2012; Rose-Ackerman, 1999). Specifically, this research will explore how moral disengagement interacts with

reciprocity to provide a comprehensive explanation for the initiation and perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships.

1.5. The integration of Moral disengagement theory and Norm of reciprocity in bribery-prone relationships

Scholars have also started to examine how the processes of the norm of reciprocity and moral disengagement can work together to shape behavior, especially in ethically questionable or illegal environments (Anand et al., 2004; Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Moore, 2008; Tangpong et al., 2016). This study presupposes that in the establishment and upkeep of relationships susceptible to bribery, there is a significant interplay between psychological processes of moral disengagement and social processes of obligation, frequently founded on reciprocity.

The reciprocity norm is an elementary principle of social interaction, which states that society expects people to return the favors or goods they have received (Gouldner, 1960). This norm generates a feeling of obligation as individuals are inclined to reciprocate the same for the sake of social relations and future cooperation (Blau, 1964; Steidlmeier, 1999). Reciprocity has most commonly been studied in positive or zero-sum exchanges, yet researchers have discussed its potential usefulness in accounting for processes in more hostile contacts, such as those engaged in illicit activities (Abbink et al., 2000; Tangpong et al., 2016). In relational societies where social relationships and fulfilling of mutual obligations are highly valued, the pressure to reciprocate may pervade even beyond formal close networks and affect even relationships between individuals whose primary relationship is professional or commercial (Bello, 2014; Luo, 2008).

However, when the return that is expected or hoped for entails breaking formal regulations, professional codes of conduct, or laws, like granting someone an undeserved advantage in exchange for a favor would put people in a very tough moral dilemma (Moore, 2008). This act contravenes internalized moral principles and cultural norms of honesty, sometimes generating psychological distress or cognitive dissonance (Adams, 1963; Bandura, 1999).

It is in this moral dilemma that the theory of moral disengagement becomes particularly applicable. Moral disengagement theory describes the psychological

processes whereby people can selectively disengage their moral self-sanctions, permitting themselves to behave inconsistently with their moral standards without experiencing shame or self-blame (Bandura, 1999; Bandura et al., 1996). These mechanisms function by cognitively reframing harmful behavior (e.g., moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison), obscuring agency (e.g., displacement or diffusion of responsibility), neglecting or trivializing the detrimental outcomes, or blaming and dehumanizing the victims (Bandura, 1999).

In bribery, the force or sense of obligation brought about by the reciprocity norm can be considered as an important situational factor that enables the application of moral disengagement mechanisms. Having to feel that one owes somebody something because of something he did before or because one would like to get something back could potentially worsen the internal conflict when receiving an unethical request (Moore, 2008). Moral disengagement mechanisms can then be employed to alleviate this agony and rationalize the task being accomplished through illegal methods. As a case in point, euphemistic reframing the bribe as simply a “gift” or “facilitation” or moral reasoning that it has to be done to preserve key relations or get important organizational objectives can enable one to justify the act against his/her own personal morals (Anand et al., 2004). The perception that “everyone does it” in a system can facilitate diffusion of responsibility, diminishing the feeling of personal responsibility for being involved in a mutual immoral behavior (Ashforth & Anand, 2003).

Such a meeting is germane to everyone who is involved in bribery; however, the particular means and their significance can differ with respect to the role played, power disparity, and the organizational context. Public officials, bound by ethical standards of public service and formal regulation, might witness stark role conflict where interdependent social obligation clashes with professional duty (Moore, 2008). Their use of moral disengagement might be particularly focused on justifying the violation of public trust or the distortion of official processes. Businesspeople, on the other hand, may rationalize offering bribes as a pragmatic necessity for survival or success in challenging environments, framing it perhaps as a “cost of doing business” or a response to systemic inefficiencies (Anand et al., 2004). The study indicates that situational circumstances and environmental conditions can significantly affect the probability and

expression of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999; Moore, 2008). Cultural norms, specifically the intensity and meaning of the reciprocation expectations, can also influence the utilization and validity of such psychological processes within a specific environment (Luo, 2008; Tangpong et al., 2016).

To explain relations susceptible to bribery, therefore, one would preferably take a holistic perspective that examines the intersection between the social norm of reciprocity and the psychological ability of moral disengagement that allows actors to commit to, and continue at, corrupt exchange processes despite potential internal moral unease. The exact individual positions of the actors participating and the overall social, cultural, and institutional context likely shape this intersection.

1.6. Existing empirical studies of bribery in Vietnam

Bribery remains a critical issue in Vietnam because of the country's social and economic situation. Combating such an issue requires profound understanding and multi-dimensional approach. Bribery has ever been examined via macro-economic lenses; however, bribery is being micro-economically researched more now, with thorough studies addressing its determinants, signals, and effects on individuals and firms in the Vietnamese environment. Current research has cumulatively established a solid base for knowing bribing relationship motivation and potential intervention channels.

At an individual level, psychological determinants and behavioral intention are extremely critical. In Vietnam, there was growing work on how individual variables might influence corrupt activity. For example, Nguyen and Thanh (2024) have applied the theory of planned behavior in understanding corrupt intentions of individuals. The research has proved that attitude towards corruption (whether it's acceptable or necessary), subjective social norms (whether others approve of corruption), and perceived behavior control (perceiving whether the corrupt act has high risks of punishment) have shaped an individual's corrupt intention. This cognitive angle has highlighted how each individual factor, together with perceived social environment, can promote or prevent the act of engaging in bribery behavior.

Social norm is another emerging topic in Vietnam's literature. Vuong et al. (2020) has provided compelling evidence that social norms in both the host country (Vietnam)

and the home country (for foreign actors) contribute to shape bribery behavior. This research has raised a rather intriguing point that the ethical climate brought about by leaders can have an impact on corruption as well. This once more indicates organizational culture and administrative style can either build up or disperse pressure for corruption from an underlying societal norm. This leads towards the multifaceted interaction of cultural norms, organizational environment, and human decision, indicating that anti-bribery must look at normative standards on various levels.

Scholars have investigated thoroughly to determine the economic effects that bribery has for individual companies. De Jong et al. (2010) conducted a study to demonstrate how bribe relationships affect firm performance in a non-linear pattern. IN this study, small payments can sometimes be “grease money,” but large-scale bribery can be extremely expensive and act as “sand in the wheels” that brings long-term development to a standstill. Rand and Tarp (2012) found that corruption at the firm level has a significant negative effect on the economy because it leads to misuse of resources, higher operating risks, and unfair competition. Research findings demonstrate that economic consequences of bribery depend on both the specific circumstances and the magnitude as well as the intensity of bribery activities.

Consequences of corruption that extend beyond economic matters into individual’s well-being. Sharma et al. (2021) broke away from traditional literature in studying the negative correlation between perceived corruption level and mental health in Vietnam. The research affirms that exposure or perception of pervasive corruption causes psychological distress. Such harm to mental health or in another words, “human cost”, is often overlooked in corruption literature. It is argued that the normalized presence of corrupt behavior creates social environments marked by injustice and helplessness alongside anxiety because it destroys mutual trust and negatively impacts individual’s mental health.

Some aspects of behavior have also come under examination. Nguyen and Le (2021) solely dealt with bribery behavior, establishing the premise that socioeconomic status and social norms are fundamental predictors of an individual’s likelihood to bribe. This fits with the reality that both individual circumstances (e.g., having available money, perceiving the necessity to speed up services) and social pressure (e.g., conforming to institutionalized practice) significantly contribute to the decision to bribe or not.

Moreover, research consistently finds that firm-level factors influence their engagement with bribery. Firm age is a significant factor in bribery practices, as new

enterprises often engage in bribery to establish networking arrangements in adverse institutional contexts, according to De Jong et al. (2010). Meanwhile, Vuong et al. (2020) illustrated how foreign-invested business firms react to host country corruption norms, revealing the strong impact of the immediate business environment on shaping bribery behavior, even for firms from less corrupt environments.

While the reviewed body of research offers significant advances in understanding bribery within Vietnam, highlighting social norms, individual intentions, and firm behavior, it also reveals critical areas that need further investigation. First, as important as social norms and relationships are highlighted (e.g., Vuong et al., 2020; Nguyen & Le, 2021), the dynamics of mutual obligations in bribery exchanges outside of immediate, intimate relational circles in the Vietnamese context are still insufficiently analyzed. There is a need to find out how such obligations are formed and maintained in potentially less personal relations. Secondly, though psychological theories such as the theory of planned behavior have been utilized (Nguyen & Thanh, 2024), the research focused on in this review don't fully account for the cognitive and affective processes at play, including certain moral reasons or disengagement strategies, behind, responsible for the diverseness of reactions to bribery chances in Vietnam. Lastly, most studies on Vietnam, in analyzing relational and individual traits separately, do not provide an integrated model explaining the interactions between these dimensions. A fundamental gap continues to be an understanding of how individual mental process changes and social commitment changes can interact with each other to sustain bribery in the long run. These issues need to be resolved in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of bribery dynamics in Vietnam.

1.7. Research gap

Bribery continues to cause huge economic losses and damage to society, even though many anti-corruption measures have been put in place (Nguyen, 2020; Bandura, 1999). Both enterprises and the Vietnamese government consider this issue to be a priority in both theory and practice. In the academic field, bribery is widely researched as a deeply entrenched phenomenon in cultural and institutional settings. Two primary approaches dominate the literature: one examines bribery via cost-benefit analysis informed by rational choice theory (Becker, 1968; Rose-Ackerman, 1978; Fisman & Miguel, 2007). The second monitors human relations and socio-cultural environments as the drivers for bribe deals (Luo, 2008; Puffer et al., 2010; Karhunen et al., 2018). Although most literature has generated insightful findings, they also have significant

limitations as social norms and psychological processes are not considered throughout the development of bribery-prone relationships.

Firstly, a number of studies use laboratory experiments to build on the games of reciprocity to examine the conditions for bribery perpetuation (Abbink et al. 2002; Cameron et al. 2009; Lambsdorff and Frank 2010; Rivas 2013). In these studies, bribery partners initiate and return favors based on both positive (favor) and negative (punishment) reciprocity (Lambsdorff and Frank 2011). This departs from the conventional cost/ benefit calculation in a way that the punishment may be more hostile than the initial defect and would be carried out even if it costs the punisher. While these studies confirm the existence of reciprocal bribes, it has not been clear whether reciprocity involves a sense of moral values.

Second, a number of qualitative research on bribery, especially in Vietnam and in comparable cultures, concentrate on interpersonal connections and socio-cultural circumstances (De Jong et al., 2012; Gillespie et al., 2020). A prevalent theme in the literature is the function of reciprocity in corrupt transactions. This regulating role of reciprocity has been extensively established in relational societies where kinship and personal networks significantly influence professional and corporate interactions (Luo, 2008; Steidlmeier, 1999; Sun & Ai, 2020; Wu et al., 2006; Puffer et al., 2010; Karhunen et al., 2018). In Vietnam, dependence on personal relationships in dealing with institutional weakness is also well-documented (De Jong et al., 2012; Gillespie et al., 2020, Nguyen et al., 2020). These partnerships inhibit opportunism and minimize risks linked to unscrupulous agreements. Yet, these studies largely discuss bribery under the premise of close relationship networks with the suggestion that reciprocal bribery is only observed to occur within intimate and trusted circles (Karhunen et al., 2018; Luo, 2008; Wang, 2016). A closer analysis of the dynamics of the norm of reciprocity reveals that the norm can possibly govern bribery exchanges beyond the confines of such close-knit relationships. It is argued that the norm of reciprocity can govern a number of bribery exchanges involving partners who may not belong to the same network. This assertion raises key questions that remain unanswered in current literature: What distinguishes such exchanges from those occurring within pre-existing relational networks? And what are the forms of obligations that arise from such alliances, and how are these obligations formed and sustained over time? While current research recognizes the cultural diversity in reciprocity-based bribery (Karhunen et al., 2018), obligation-based bribery in more common settings needs to be studied.

Thirdly, although cultural norms and relational considerations have been given ample consideration in the bribery literature, individual-level psychological processes remain under-studied (Smith-Crowe & Warren, 2014; Moore, 2008). Scott (2014, p. 94) emphasizes that “between the context and response is the interpreting actor,” signifying that any theoretical framework about corruption must consider the individual cognitive and emotional factors that affect decision-making. But questions like why and how do some decent officials slip into corrupt roads? and given the same external conditions, why do some officials engage in corrupt acts while others do not? are unanswered. Rational cost-benefit models alone cannot fully encompass the diverse human processes that influence decisions to accept or reject bribes, especially in morally difficult contexts (Becker, 1968; Bandura, 1999).

Here, moral disengagement helps shed light into understanding how these psychological processes might be better understood. Based on Bandura’s work, moral disengagement is described as the process individuals go through to rationalize unethical behavior to reduce potential emotional discomfort. Public officials often experience emotional unease in the formation of bribery-prone relationships since they are unsure of the offeror’s benevolence and also under the pressure of conforming to social norms. This leads them to resort to rationalization strategies to justify their participation. Such justifications involve reframing that their actions fit within the local cultural norms and institutional rules to make them morally acceptable and thereby decrease internal conflict. Further, these rationalizations can evolve over time, as individuals go through phases of bribery-prone relationships, specifically the initiation and perpetuation phases. For example, officials may start with rather innocent explanations for their actions by describing them as essential requirements or normal cultural behaviors, yet they later become more involved with the bribery relationship through more convincing ethical justifications and established patterns. Even while this focus on moral disengagement could change how to study corruption, it is still mostly separate from other relational theories, such as the norm of reciprocity (Moore, 2008; Bandura, 1999).

As mentioned earlier, there is essentially no literature with an integrative framework covering psychological elements of an individual and relational theories, explaining the dynamics of bribery in a holistic manner. Current literature focusing on obligation-based reciprocity neglects the interplay of moral disengagement and how these elements combine together in the context of bribery and how this would evolve with time. For instance, the shift from pragmatic obligation, a form of cost-benefit reasoning, to moral obligation grounded in social norms and trust, and the processes of

moral disengagement that offer explanations to these changing obligations. These are pivotal but underexposed turning points in the literature (Smith-Crowe & Warren, 2014; Nguyen, 2019).

In summary, this research seeks to address the following gaps:

1. The limited understanding of obligation-based/reciprocity-driven bribery in relationships outside of pre-existing, close-knit networks, particularly in the moral realm.
2. The insufficient exploration of individual-level psychological mechanisms, including emotional discomfort, rationalization strategies, and the moral disengagement process across different stages of bribery-prone relationships.
3. The absence of an integrated framework combining relational norms (norms of reciprocity) and cognitive psychological processes (moral disengagement theory), which would explain how obligations are created, sustained, and rationalized in perpetuating bribery-prone relationships.

This research bridges these gaps by integrating the norm of reciprocity and moral disengagement theories. It proposes an integrated framework that explains how obligation-based bribery starts, evolves, and is sustained over time. Such framework combines relational norms, psychological processes, and socio-cultural specificity to offer a holistic understanding of bribery-prone relationships. By doing so, this research provides actionable insights for business practitioners and policymakers aiming to design anti-corruption interventions that address both systemic and individual-level factors.

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodological framework adopted to achieve the objectives of this research. It details the chosen research design, sample selection strategy, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, and strategies employed to ensure validity and reliability.

2.1. Research context

2.1.1. *Overview of corruption in Vietnam*

Vietnam provides an excellent case study on how businesspersons and public officials could collude for malignant purposes. The country has simultaneously suffered from an assortment of governance problems, including lack of proper regulation, rampant corruption, and the problematic use of patronage systems, alongside its economic progress from the Doi Moi reforms and its now status as a hub for foreign direct investments. Through the lens of informal institutional practices and media commentary, and combining qualitative insights from case study interviews with quantitative indicators like inflow of foreign capital, Vietnam's low CPI ratings, and the country's reported informal payment systems, one could evaluate the country's informal governance structure.

The economic miracle of Vietnam stemmed from the Doi Moi Reform Movement which began in 1986. Under its economic reforms, which brought market principles to replace central planning, Vietnam achieved significant economic growth throughout the recent decades. The World Bank (2022) confirms Vietnam achieved sustained Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth at a yearly rate of 6.5% during the 1990 to 2019 period. Throughout the country's rapid economic transformation, the nation also greatly increased its foreign direct investment (FDI). Records from 2021 indicate the country received USD 30 billion in FDI which positions it among the leading FDI recipient nations of developing countries (UNCTAD, 2022).

The process of economic liberalization brings forward multiple hurdles that affect its implementation. The quick acceleration of industrialization and globalization activities exceeded the regulatory capabilities of local institutions that manage economic activities. The difference between the rate of economic growth and institutional

development is significantly greater, which has caused governance frameworks to be weaker. As government legislation framework moves at a snail pace in certain sectors, businesses that want to secure leases and other associated business favors from government officials' outcomes are often forced to circumvent the law. The Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) 2020 report showed that more than 40% of Vietnamese and international companies reported that they paid later and got paid more due to unofficial payments. The paper indicates that bribery distorts market conditions in the competitive process and adds the cost of doing business, thereby diminishing productivity and rendering companies less competitive in the global market.

Foreign Direct Investment is a primary catalyst for Vietnamese economic modernization. However, the fast pace of capital inflow into Vietnam's economy has caused advanced regulatory problems. The 2021 Index of Economic Freedom from The Heritage Foundation shows that Vietnam strengthened its regulatory efficiency but still faces substantial barriers especially in terms of rule of law and control of corruption (The Heritage Foundation, 2021). The interaction between foreign investors and domestic bureaucracies has sometimes led to the adoption of bribery practices. In particular, problematic administrative procedures cause firms to make informal payments. The rapid economic growth and changing institutional environment of Vietnam as a country prove the importance of bribery relationship research.

Furthermore, in many transitional economies, informal relationships often become an integral part of doing business. Vietnam is no exception. Business actors and government officials may ground their interactions in long-standing social norms that blur the lines between gift-giving and bribery. For example, the Confucian legacy, which emphasizes personal relationships (*guanxi*) and reciprocity, complicates the assessment of what constitutes acceptable behavior versus corruption (Cheung, 2004). This cultural element provides the premise for study on how bribery relations work both in formal institutional settings and in informal networks, thereby affecting economic outcomes.

Bribery damages the public's trust in governmental institutions; therefore, this remains only part of the problem. Citizens' perceptions of governmental dishonest practices may result in decreased civic participation, diminished trust in the governance, and in some drastic cases, may fuel civil disorder. Vietnam's CPI score of 37 out of 100

(Transparency International, 2022) illustrates the capture of systemic corruption and the corruption's societal and public trust consequences.

Bribery is considered at a global level as one of the principal obstacles to accomplishing the sustainable development goals (SDG). The United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) ratified by Vietnam in 2009 aims to curb such activities through multi-dimensional processes of prevention, enforcement, and international cooperation (UNCAC, 2009). While adopting such frameworks may pose challenges to Vietnam, its participation in these frameworks highlights the competing realities of globalization and domestic governance. The case study of bribery in Vietnam may, therefore, address the issues of how far domestic policies can deviate from international benchmarks on anti-corruption without causing practical sustainable realities.

Moreover, Vietnam's expanding involvement in global supply chains and growing role as a factory and technology base increases the significance of its governance practices to not only national constituents but also to multinational companies and investors. Understanding bribery in this context is critical for evaluating risks, designing better. The understanding of bribery in this specific situation plays an essential role in risk evaluation and compliance program design and sustainable business practice development, which aligns with global economic interests.

2.1.2. Overview of corruption policy and institutional framework in Vietnam in Vietnam

Corruption has been comprehended by Vietnam for a long time as a root systemic problem that undermines public confidence, hinders economic growth, and misallocates resources. To address it, the government has put in place a variety of policies and legal frameworks. One of the notable changes in the Vietnam government's attempt to fight corruption is the enactment of Anti-Corruption Law 2018. It was approved by the National Assembly in 2018 and came into force a few months later. Its purpose was to revise existing measures and develop more sophisticated ones to combat corruption more effectively. It covers a broad range of corrupt practices like bribery, embezzlement, misuse of power, and illegal enrichment. The law also provides detailed procedures for

investigation, prosecution, and the recovery of assets (Vietnam Ministry of Public Security, 2019).

The effectiveness of these legal frameworks is largely dependent on the specialized institutional bodies tasked with their enforcement. In Vietnam, the anti-corruption landscape is led by the Central Steering Committee on Anti-Corruption (CSCA), chaired by the General Secretary of the Communist Party. The CSCA serves as the primary coordinating body, ensuring that anti-corruption efforts are aligned across all levels of the political and administrative system. Working alongside the CSCA is the Government Inspectorate (GI), which is responsible for state inspections, citizen reception, and the prevention and combat of corruption within the administrative apparatus. These bodies, along with the Ministry of Public Security and the Supreme People's Procuracy, form a multi-layered institutional structure designed to monitor, detect, and sanction corrupt activities.

The government of Vietnam has issued a large volume of legal documents since its formalization to operationalize its provisions. As reported by the Office of Government Vietnam, between 2018 and 2022, more than 30 decrees, resolutions, and circulars specifically targeting the enhancement of anti-corruption policies were created, demonstrating the legal frameworks' rapid development. For example, Decree No. 145/2020/ND-CP provided detailed regulation of the handling of corruption cases in the field of public procurement and contractual negotiations; Resolution No. 47/2020/NQ-CP set targets for improving transparency and accountability in public financial management. Another notable legal instrument is Decree No. 08/2019/ND-CP. Though not founded on the prevention of corruption, the decree does include measures intended to encourage better behavior in state administrative bodies through increased rule transparency and accountability. It mandates the application of transparent procedures for administration decision-making and increased internal supervision. This, in turn, indirectly assists in reducing corrupt practices in day-to-day governmental operations.

Latest to date, in 2021, the government approved Decision No. 260/QĐ-TTg, which formally adopted a national anti-corruption strategy for the 2021–2025 period. This choice, as decided by the council, sets out strategic objectives, performance indicators, and specific measures to reinforce preventive and punitive aspects of anti-

corruption policy. The decision also puts capacity development first, reinforcing digital governance mechanisms, and harmonizing national policies with international best practices, thereby setting an institutional reform roadmap and long-term cultural transformation (Vietnam Government, 2021).

Vietnam's Criminal Code, particularly its 2015 and 2017 revised editions, criminalizes corruption as an offense by sanctioning punishment for acts of corruption by government officials and civilians. Provisions of the Criminal Code have long served as the legal basis for first-century corruption prosecutions. More specialized laws, like the Anti-Corruption Law 2018, have laid out more specific requirements for how these laws are enforced.

These policy instruments have contributed significantly to keeping the law living and addressing new corruption threats. By rationalizing responsibilities, standardizing procedure, and penalizing transgressions, the decrees seek to limit bureaucratic discretion, the very factor that can lead to bribery (The Heritage Foundation, 2021).

The multi-layered legal system of Vietnam against corruption, with pillar laws like the Anti-Corruption Law 2018, Criminal Code amendments, and complementary support laws like the Law on Administration of Public Services 2015, is a reflection of Vietnam's endeavors towards curbing corrupt activities. The implementation of these laws, decrees, and administrative regulations has come a long way in giving a structured legal framework against corruption. According to the Vietnam Ministry of Public Security (2019), since the Anti-Corruption Law 2018 came into effect, the prosecution of corruption cases has risen because some provincial regions have witnessed increased transparency of public procurement and project management.

However, challenges exist. In its annual report, Transparency International (2022) shows that Vietnam's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) ranks lower than that of other developing countries. The effectiveness of Vietnam's ongoing legal instruments is sometimes hindered because decentralization issues and long-established informal networks continue to exist. Official institutions face growing challenges from low-level corruption in everyday administrative routines, which persists and damages public trust even after upper-level corruption cases are addressed.

Despite a robust institutional and legal architecture, the persistence of bribery-prone relationships as explored in this research suggests that formal anti-corruption bodies often struggle to address the micro-level, informal dynamics of reciprocity and moral disengagement that is often overlooked by traditional monitoring systems.

2.1.3. Vietnam as a research context

Vietnam, like other Southeast Asian countries, grapples with issues of bribery. The Southeast Asian countries, which include Vietnam, face corruption issues at different levels. While Singapore is known to deal with corruption through well-established institutions, regions like Indonesia and Myanmar face challenges with informal governance and bribery (OECD, 2018).

Vietnam's transitional phase is an important case for analyzing the manner in which bribery perpetuates itself in the emerging economies. The country's relatively open economic policy combined with its socialist political system offers the hybrid environment within which new market trends interface with the persistence of old governance institutions. With elements of both socialism and capitalism, Vietnam is a country of interest for regional corruption studies, which deepens the understanding of ASEAN geopolitics and global bribery issues.

Theoretically, studies of Vietnam's bribe networks contribute to broader theoretical debates in political economy and governance. Principal-agent theory, for instance, dictates information asymmetry and power disparities that are sources of corruption (Eisenhardt, 1989). Vietnam's unique combination of a one-party political regime and rapidly marketizing economy provides empirical evidence on which to subject these theories to naturalistic tests. The Vietnamese experience therefore provides a "natural experiment" for analyzing the interaction between informal networks and institutional vulnerabilities in the production of bribery.

In addition, application of ideas in cultural sociology sheds light on the ambiguities that shape accepted practices, such as gift-giving, from its opposite, corruption. This perspective has the potential to deepen the understanding of the cultural legacy modern market pressures in transitional economies compete with, and, at times, conflict with. This also helps understand how business ethics and social responsibility can be integrated into corporate culture to promote sustainable and inclusive growth.

While corporate social responsibility must confront the fundamental societal and ecological issues in Vietnam, ethical leadership seeks to foster vertical integrity within the organization.

The Vietnam story, however, captures a wider story in many emerging market economies characterized by a deeply dynamic economy and weak institutions existing together in an intricate relationship. Vietnam stands out in acquiring the understanding of the role of a well-managed corporation and effective business administration on the economic development and social progress in emerging markets. Thus, studying the relationship of bribery in Vietnam is not only crucial for the development of the country, but extends other countries in the same predicament as Vietnam to learn from these challenges.

2.2. Research design

This research employs a qualitative design that allows for in-depth investigation of an intricate and sensitive phenomenon: bribery and its perpetuation in the context of Vietnam. This paradigm posits that social reality is complex, multi-layered, and constructed through the subjective meanings that individuals attach to their experiences (Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The choice of a qualitative methodology was not merely a preference but a deliberate and necessary decision driven by the nature of the research phenomenon, the exploratory framing of the research questions, and the overall objective of building theory rather than testing a pre-existing hypothesis. This chapter starts with the detailed rationale for this overall approach and then outlines the case study method and grounded theory position taken to implement it.

2.2.1. Rationale for a qualitative approach

The general rationale for a qualitative methodology is rooted in the specific demands of the research topic and questions.

The norm of reciprocity, a cornerstone of this research, is a culturally-specific phenomenon deeply ingrained in Vietnamese culture. Its meaning and application in the context of bribery are subtle and are not amenable to decontextualized questioning. The qualitative method, and in particular in-depth interviewing, facilitates the "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) required to explore this cultural attitude, revealing the way in which respondents interpret and apply society's norms to the specific context of their bribery-prone relationships.

Besides, qualitative methodology is employed owing to the cultural and contextual specificity of the phenomenon under study. In Vietnam, where societal norms and informal relationships play a significant role in exchanges, understanding bribery requires capturing ground-level narratives rather than relying on preconceived or broadly generalized models (TV Nguyen, 2020). A qualitative approach also allows for sensitivity in exploring a topic as delicate as corruption, wherein trust and rapport with participants are crucial for eliciting valuable insights (Torsello & Venard, 2016). In this context, trust between researchers and informants plays a crucial role in gathering and securing relatively sensitive information that is normally not in the public domain. The qualitative approach allows us to mobilize personal relationships and foster some sense of trust with informants. The study also tries to approach bribery from the respondents' point of view. The respondents not only gave information but also clarified meanings of various events and incidents related to bribery/ corruption (Torsello and Venard 2016). Qualitative approach is effective in probing into their meaning construction (Gillespie et al. 2020) and values (Vu 2019) relating to bribery. It also allows to probe into sensitive issues in a more unthreatening way.

The central aim of this dissertation is to develop an integrative theoretical model of bribery persistence through the interplay between psychological processes and social norms. A qualitative approach is at the core of this theory-building aim. It provides the rich, qualitative data necessary to forge new conceptual links between social norms (reciprocity) and psychological processes (moral disengagement), making an innovative and theory-driven contribution to the literature (Vu, 2019). The research questions are formulated not to test an a priori hypothesis but to find out how relationships are formed, sustained, and legitimized from the point of view of the respondents, going beyond description towards an explanatory integration.

Quantitative techniques would not be appropriate for this study for a variety of crucial reasons. First is that the sensitivity of the topic would risk high social desirability bias in survey scores, rendering the data unreliable. Few individuals would be likely to provide honest, quantitative scores of illegal or immoral behavior. Second, a quantitative design would require variables to be pre-defined (e.g., specific rationalization strategies), too early and rule out the discovery of unforeseen but significant themes. Such methods would strip the acts of bribery from their social context, reducing complex human interactions to a set of numbers that lack explanatory power regarding process and meaning.

2.2.2 Specific methodological and analytical approach

To make this qualitative study operational, the study makes use of case study methodology with Vietnam serving as a bounded system. Case study methodologies are generally viewed as being highly appropriate for the recording of contextual subtleties and investigation of the interaction of cultural norms and psychological processes within a specific context (Yin, 2018). Using this study with Vietnam as a case allows for the production of context-specific findings and making wider theoretical contributions to bribery and reciprocity discourses.

Lastly, this dissertation seeks to build an integrated theoretical framework for the perpetuation of bribery from the interaction between social norms and psychological processes. Qualitative is underlying methodology in achieving this theory generation objective. It provides rich, descriptive data to generate new conceptual linkages between social norms (reciprocity) and psychological processes (moral disengagement), providing a new and theory-informed addition to anti-corruption scholarship. It is more than simply describing a phenomenon; it explains it in a detailed and very contextualized way.

A grounded theory methodology is used in the qualitative data analysis. Grounded theory gives the researcher the freedom to examine new themes and patterns emerging from the data, without the pressure of compelling responses into preset concepts. It proves especially helpful when investigating territories previously under-explored, in this instance the particular role of norm of reciprocity in obligation-based bribery and the mechanisms of moral disengagement rationalization (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

2.3. Sampling

The research adhered to the general case selection guidelines proposed by Morse (1994, 2007). Consequently, suitable informants were required to satisfy both general and specific criteria: (1) they must have prior experiential knowledge of potential bribery-prone relationships between officials and business people; (2) they should possess the competence to address the questions posed especially those demanding a thorough understanding of how bribery-prone relationships started and evolved over time; (3) they need to be afforded sufficient time and space to openly share their insights on the research topic.

Understanding the formation and maintenance of bribery-prone relationships necessitates examining the perspectives of all parties involved. Therefore, the

sampling focused on interviewing participants from both government official and businessperson groups. This dual-perspective approach was essential for illuminating the inherently relational dynamic of these exchanges, allowing the research to explore how reciprocity and obligation are perceived and negotiated, and how moral disengagement operates from the viewpoints of both those who are frequently solicited for favors and those who initiate or participate in the offering of them. The first sub-sample (government officials) provided primary data for subsequent analysis, while the second sub-sample (businessmen and business women) provided both primary data and contributed to the triangulation process for confirmation of emerged themes from the first sub-sample.

2.3.1. Sub-sample 1: Government officials

The data for this sub-sample consists of a secondary analysis of qualitative interviews originally collected as part of a large-scale study on corruption dynamics in Vietnam. This primary research was conducted collaboratively by the World Bank and the Government Inspectorate Research Institute (GIRI) between 2018 and 2019 (the author was a member of the research team and was granted full access to the research data). It was ideal for the present study to utilize this second-order dataset, as the core research was directly designed to capture the experience of officials in the process of favor exchange and provided a fertile ground to examine the relational and psychological processes of bribery.

The primary study, which was aimed at establishing common patterns of corruption, used a purposive sampling design. For qualitative purposes, sampling for this population adopts a purposive design where the participants were selected based on their relevance and contribution to the study objectives. With support from the Government Inspectorate Research Institute (GIRI), the team directly contacted one hundred and sixty-five officials at five ministries and ten provinces, briefed them on the nature of the research, and invited them to interview in Hanoi (for central level officials) or at their provinces (for local officials). A total of twenty-three in-depth interviews were conducted during the period of April to December 2018. These officials worked at central, provincial, and district administrative levels, covering diverse fields such as planning, internal affairs, public security, healthcare, natural resources, construction, and education. The selection targeted public officers who were directly or indirectly involved in favor exchanges through observation or participation in such practices. Efforts were made to diversify the sample in terms of administrative level, sector of

expertise, and geographic distribution to capture the regional and hierarchical variation in bribery practices. Localities spanned ten provinces and central-level ministries. Table 2.1 provides a breakdown of participants' localities and working sectors.

While the original study had its own objectives, a subsequent review of the anonymized interview transcripts for this dissertation revealed emergent themes of profound relevance to the current research questions. Specifically, the dataset contained rich, detailed narratives about favor exchange, the norm of reciprocity, and the psychological justifications used by officials, making it an exceptionally well-suited source of data for this thesis. The use of this fully anonymized, pre-existing dataset was deemed methodologically appropriate and ethically sound, as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of themes that were present but not the central focus of the initial inquiry.

Table 2.1: Government officials' sectors and localities

Locality	Sector							Total
	Nat. Resources	Finance	Trading	Construction	Transp.	Inspect	District	
Can Tho				1				1
Da Nang		1		1			1	3
Dong Thap						1		1
Ha Noi	1		1	1	1		1	5
HCMC			1		1		1	3
Hue						1	1	2
Nghe An	1	1					1	3
Son La	1			1		1		3
Thai Binh	1				1			2
<i>Sub-total</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>23</i>

Source: Author's field data

To protect confidentiality and keep citation concise, each interviewed public official is assigned a code GO-N. "GO" stands for "Government-Official" and "N" is a unique identifier from 1 to 23. The author will provide a detailed description and pseudonym for the 23 government officials who participated in in-depth interviews. Details can be observed in the table below.

Table 2.2: Pseudonyms and details of government officials for interviews

Pseudonym	Level	Position/Rank	Department/ Agency	Years in service
GO-1	Central	Director	Ministry of Environment & Natural resources	3
GO-2	Central	Senior auditor	Ministry of Finance	2
GO-3	Central	Program manager	Ministry of Construction	4
GO-4	Central	Division chief	Ministry of Industry & Trade	4
GO-5	Central	Inspector	Government Inspectorate	5
GO-6	Provincial	Deputy director	Dept. of Planning & Investment	8
GO-7	Provincial	Head of finance	Dept. of Finance	3
GO-8	Provincial	Deputy head	Anti-corruption office	7
GO-9	Provincial	Division leader	Dept. of Construction	6
GO-10	Provincial	Section chief	Dept. of Transportation	3
GO-11	Provincial	Planning officer	People's Committee	7
GO-12	Provincial	Policy advisor	Dept. of Construction	9
GO-13	District	Policy advisor	People's Committee	11
GO-14	District	Policy advisor	People's Committee,	5
GO-15	District	Director	People's Committee	5
GO-16	District	Head of economic division	Government Inspectorate	4
GO-17	District	Deputy head	Dept. of Environment & Natural resources	7
GO-18	District	Policy coordinator	Dept. of Finance - Planning	8
GO-19	District	Finance officer	Dept. of Finance - Planning	13
GO-20	District	Auditor	District Inspectorate	12
GO-21	District	Section chief	People's committee	7
GO-22	District	Planning specialist	Dept. of Planning	4
GO-23	District	Administrative officer	District Inspectorate	6

Source: Author's field data

2.3.2. Sub-sample 2: Businesspeople

The second sub-sample comprises 20 individuals from the business sector and was designed to fulfill a dual purpose. First and foremost, this cohort serves as a primary source of data for understanding the dynamics of corruption from the private sector perspective. The interviews were intended to capture their unique experiences, pressures, and rationales when engaging in favor exchanges with state actors.

Secondly, the data from this group provides a critical counter perspective for triangulating the findings from the government officials. Through comparison and contrast of both sides of the state-business relationship, the study aims to authenticate testimony, raise inconsistencies, and create a more well-rounded picture of the bribery schemes in question.

To achieve these dual purposes, recruitment was conducted in accordance with purposive sampling design with established inclusion criteria. To ensure that participants could contribute insightful, relevant feedback, participants must have: 1) a minimum of two years of experience working within their field, and 2) regular professional contact with government officials. To further enhance the quality of both the initial data and subsequent triangulation, the sample was consciously mixed across sectors (natural resources, finance, trading, building, and transport) in order to represent the sectors included in the government official sub-sample. Table 2.3 provides a complete breakdown of this group's membership.

Table 2.3: Business sectors and localities

Sector					Total
Nat. Resources	Finance	Trading	Construction	Transp.	
2	4	5	5	4	20

Source: Author's field data

To protect confidentiality each interviewed businessperson is assigned a code BP-N (“BP” = Businessperson; N = 1–20). Table 2.4 provides details of this sub-sample.

Table 2.4. Pseudonyms and Key Details of Businessperson Informants

Pseudonym	Business/Sector	Business size	Location	Years in business
BP-1	Forestry & Timber Export	Medium	Ha Noi	4
BP-2	Renewable Energy	Medium	Da Nang	5

Pseudonym	Business/Sector	Business size	Location	Years in business
BP-3	Commercial Banking	Large	Ha Noi	13
BP-4	Microfinance	Small	Ha Noi	20
BP-5	Insurance	Medium	HCMC	12
BP-6	Investment Fund	Micro	Nghe An	6
BP-7	Import-Export	Micro	Nghe An	6
BP-8	Wholesale Electronics	Small	Son La	8
BP-9	Retail Consumer Goods	Micro	Thai Binh	13
BP-10	Seafood Export	Small	HCMC	4
BP-11	Agricultural Produce	Large	Da Nang	12
BP-12	Construction & Real Estate Development	Small	Hanoi	5
BP-13	Civil Contractor	Micro	Ha Noi	13
BP-14	Construction Materials Manufacturing	Small	HCMC	11
BP-15	Infrastructure Projects	Medium	Thai Binh	15
BP-16	Residential Construction	Micro	Thai Binh	8
BP-17	Freight	Medium	Nghe An	10
BP-18	Transportation & Logistics	Small	Ha Noi	11
BP-19	Domestic Passenger Bus	Small	Ha Noi	4
BP-20	Domestic Passenger Bus	Small	Ha Noi	4

Source: Author's field data

The sample size for this cohort was not predetermined but was instead guided by the principle of thematic saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Saturation is the point at which collecting additional data yields diminishing returns, and no substantively new themes related to the research questions are emerging from the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The specific purpose of these interviews (to serve as a source for data triangulation) was central to this determination. Unlike the initial exploratory interviews with government officials, the goal with the businesspeople was to systematically confirm, contest, or elaborate upon the themes that had already been generated. This focused analytical purpose allowed for a more targeted assessment of saturation.

The process of data collection and analysis was conducted concurrently. After approximately 15 interviews, it became evident that the core patterns of response were becoming recurrent. The interviews began to consistently confirm the thematic framework derived from the officials' data, including the mechanisms of initiation, the use of euphemistic language, and the internal justifications for engaging in favor exchanges. The final five interviews (participants 16 through 20) were conducted to rigorously test this observation and served to confirm that a point of informational redundancy had been reached. The subsequent interviews brought no significant new conceptual categories but to confirm the continuity of the themes already encountered.

This 20 sample size also adheres to the established norms and standards for qualitative research aimed at representing a shared experience among a specified group (Morse, 2000). It was sufficient to provide the necessary depth for sound triangulation without being too comprehensive for in-depth exploration, thus ensuring credibility and trustworthiness of the study findings.

2.4. Data collection

Data collection methods were designed to attain an in-depth insight of participants' experiences and perspectives being respectful of ethics and culture. Two principal methods employed were in-depth interviews and semi-structured interviews.

In the instance of the government officials, a concrete interview approach was selected to provide access to the rich, detailed, and private accounts of their experience within the machinery of the state. The goal was to learn about their personal reasons, institutional limitations, and covert norms they work within. The less structured environment allowed wide scope exploration of themes as they emerged and encouraged participants to guide the process, creating rich, narrative-rich data.

Conversely, for the businessmen, a semi-structured approach was more appropriate in an effort to accomplish the two goals of gaining their preliminary opinions and comprehensively collecting information for triangulation. This approach utilized an absolute guide of key questions to facilitate specific issues like permit processes, bribe

offering, and key areas of interaction with officials to be exhaustively covered. These areas were covered uniformly across all 20 interviewees. This consistency was essential for comparing their accounts and validating the information received from the government cohort.

This combination of interviewing techniques yielded a robust conceptual grasp of the phenomenon with conclusions based on both government and business settings. Figure 2.1 illustrates stages in the process of data collection. And in keeping with the sensitive content of the subject matter, strict ethical processes were adhered to in order to ensure participant confidentiality and voluntary agreement. The assistance of the Government Inspectorate and promises of anonymity greatly facilitated the recruitment process by creating a trust-friendly context. No interviews was taped, and identifying details were anonymized, ensuring that participants felt secure in expressing their views on bribery and favor exchanges.

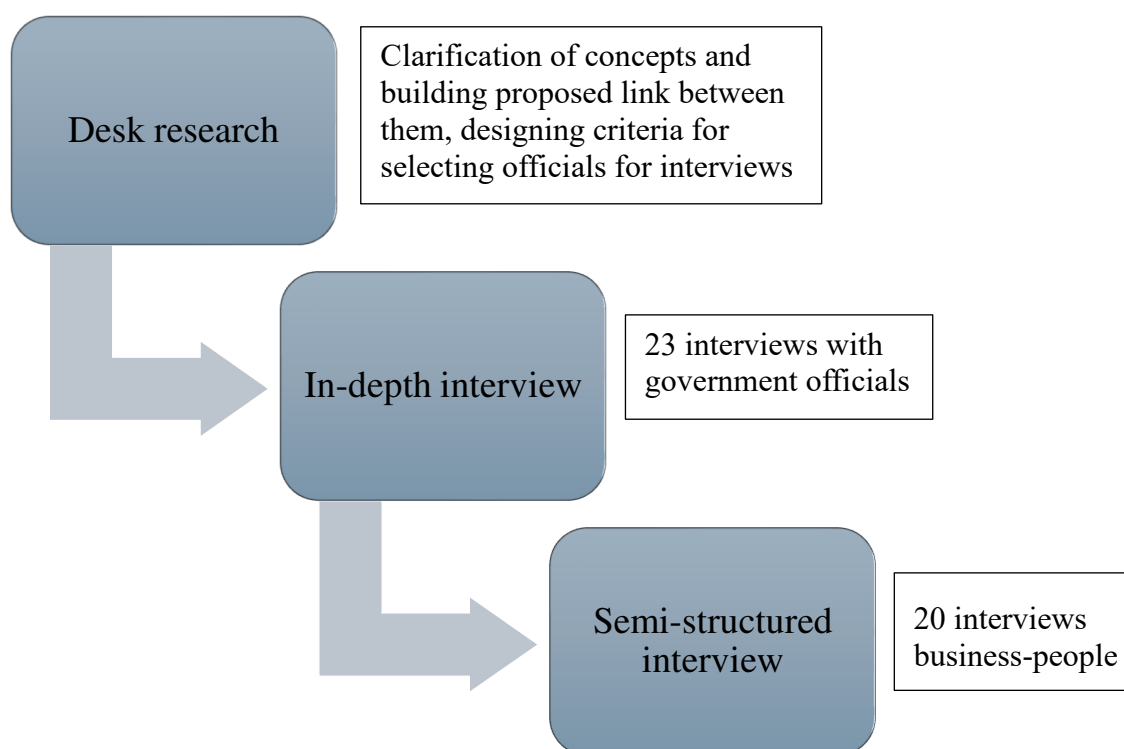


Figure 2.1: Data collection process

Source: Developed by the author

2.4.1. In-depth Interview procedure

Twenty-three in-depth interviews were conducted with government officials. Individual interviews allowed researchers to have one-on-one engagements with

participants, offering a less intimidating and more private setting to discuss sensitive material. his format was particularly useful for allowing a deeper narrative driven exploration of participants' psychological and moral states regarding favor exchanges.

Rather than a rigid questionnaire, the interviews were guided by a flexible 'aide-mémoire' (see Appendix) that outlined three broad thematic areas to ensure the discussions remained within the scope of the research. The first area covered experiences with favor exchanges and their influence on decision-making processes. The second area investigated forms and timing of exchanges, with participants encouraged to provide specific examples from their working environments. And the third one focused on the processes of moral rationalization or emotional discomfort involved in participation or resistance to bribery-prone exchanges.

The researcher opened the discussions by explaining the objectives and ensuring a complete confidentiality of the discussions. Endorsement from reputable third parties and an assurance of confidentiality fostered trust and encouraged informants to participate in this sensitive topic. The questions contained in the research tool were largely open-ended and emergent. Typically, an interview would begin with a broad 'grand tour' question, such as "Could you describe a recent situation you know clearly involving a favor exchange?" The subsequent questions were not pre-scripted but arose organically from the participant's narrative, allowing for probing into their unique experiences. Participants were probed about situations in which government officials involved in favor exchanges which may interfere with their decisions at work. Participants were encouraged to talk about exchanges in continued relationships. The second section focused on various forms and timing of the "favors". Participants were encouraged to give examples of different situations in order to better 'flesh out' the answers given on the nature of the exchanges. The third section of the tool focused on participants' explanations and/or perceptions of psychological process generated by favor exchanges in their working environment. Participants were asked to describe how an official would feel when she/he encounters requests for favor exchanges and how their feelings may intervene in their decision-making. During the interviews, questions were carefully worded to avoid sensitivity and encourage participants to share their experiences. For example, words like "bribery" were avoided and more descriptive words, such as "personal favor" or "offers", were used. Similarly, we used phrases such as "do people in similar work settings of yours" rather than "do you", or "describe a recent favor-exchange situation you know clearly" rather than "describe a recent favor-

exchange situation you were involved in”, to avoid implicating the respondents in any wrongdoing. It is also confirmed that the interviews were not tape-recorded and that the interviewees’ confidentiality was guaranteed.

2.4.2. Semi-structured interview procedure

Information from semi-structured interviews with businessmen and women was gathered to serve two purposes: (1) to triangulate data from previous interviews of officials; and (2) to provide insights on how modest, pragmatic favors evolve into deeply felt moral debts, and the specific cognitive mechanism that participants use to justify corrupt exchanges.

To achieve these dual goals, a modified semi-structured approach was employed. While traditional semi-structured interviews are often conducted in a formal setting, we adapted the method to a more naturalistic environment to encourage candor on this sensitive topic. The author attended a series of courses and networking events hosted by the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry from January 7th to January 10th, 2025. During and after these sessions, the author spent one-on-one time with participants, having multiple opportunities to discuss significant research questions with business executives from a wide range of industries. This setting provided chances to conduct the interviews in a context where participants felt more at ease.

All the informants were also informed beforehand that the author was conducting a study on bribery and that confidentiality would be absolute. Oral consent was obtained at the beginning of each interview, and participants were informed that they might decline the invitation to discuss or withdraw at any time. In keeping with ethical protocol, any individual-identifying information was removed or anonymized before notes entered the formal data collection.

Crucially, while the interactions were conversational in tone, each one was systematically guided by a core set of open-ended questions (see Appendix). This interview guide ensured that the same key topics were consistently covered with each businessperson, which was essential for the triangulation purpose. Examples of these guiding questions include: “Have you ever felt obligated to return a favor to an official and vice versa?”... and “How did you or people you know initiate a more personal relationship with an official?”. By using this guide within a flexible, conversational format, participants could be able to elaborate more freely on sensitive topics,

revealing insights on reciprocity and moral rationalization that might have remained unspoken in formal interviews.

None of these semi-structured interviews were recorded by electronic devices. Instead, the author employed a rigorous note-taking protocol by taking synchronous, handwritten field notes that captured not only participants' words but also nonverbal cues, the physical setting, and any observable emotions. In writing up promptly after each encounter, the author developed such notes into detailed reflective memos, making decisions on emerging patterns, potential contradictions, and fresh lines of investigation. The two-step documentation process thus guaranteed that the depth of each exchange was recorded even without audio recordings.

Ultimately, these memos and field notes were integrated into our coding framework in NVivo systematically along with transcripts of the in-depth interviews. By cross-referencing themes that emerged from the business interviews with those identified in our data from officials, we strengthened our triangulation strategy. We could validate major constructs such as “pragmatic obligation,” “moral obligation,” and “emotional discomfort” against multiple vantage points. A full list of questions used in these semi-structured interviews is provided in the appendix.

2.4.3. Research instruments

This study employs a dual-source research design, combining the secondary analysis of existing in-depth interviews with government officials and the primary collection of new semi-structured interviews with businesspeople. The distinction between the data sources and the instruments associated with each is fundamental to the study's exploratory and confirmatory objectives.

2.4.3.1 Secondary Data Source: In-depth Interviews with Government Officials

The foundation of the exploratory phase of this research is a secondary dataset of twenty-three in-depth interviews previously conducted with government officials. While the original purpose of that data collection was different, a preliminary review established its profound relevance to the current study's research questions. The secondary dataset containing interviews with government officials was collected using a comprehensive interview guide (see Appendix). Interviewers made use of the guide neither as a script to read from, but as a template to ensure all relevant thematic lands were being addressed.

The open-ended, exploratory interview style within this accessible dataset was conducted in a fashion typical of in-depth work. The model was constructed so that participants were given the opportunity to take the lead and address sensitive matters spontaneously. This provided a dataset rich with individual histories of moral legitimation, emotional discomfort, and the nuanced politics of reciprocity. For the purposes of this dissertation, this secondary dataset is the basis for drawing initial themes and building a rich, phenomenological understanding of the officials' world. The relevant scope and thematic focus of this secondary data are outlined in Appendix.

2.4.3.2 Primary data source: Semi-structured interviews with businesspeople

To build upon, validate, and triangulate the themes emerging from the secondary data, a new primary dataset was collected through semi-structured interviews with businesspeople. A specific interview protocol was developed exclusively for this phase of the research (see Appendix). This protocol was the key instrument for primary data collection.

The protocol contained a list of specific, consistently worded open-ended questions that were asked of each business participant. Its design was directly informed by the initial analysis of the officials' interviews. Its general aim was to deliver reliability and comparability across the sample so that systematic comparison against the worldviews of the officials was possible. The protocol included such questions as: "Have you ever felt obligated to return a favor to an official and vice versa?" and "How did you or people you know initiate a more personal relationship with an official?" While the interactive setting allowed with it some leeway, the researcher's main duty was to ensure that each question in the protocol was addressed. This systematic process ensured that a similar dataset was gathered from all businesspeople so that rigorous cross-case analysis could be done and the overall validity of the research could be increased.

Overall, the research design deliberately employs two different sources of data. The secondary dataset of in-depth interviews serves as a tool for exploratory theme generation, providing depth and narrative richness. The primary data, collected via the structured interview protocol, serves as a tool for triangulation and confirmation, prioritizing consistency and comparative analysis.

2.5. Data analysis

This study employed a systematic Thematic Analysis approach to interpret the qualitative information obtained through interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is

due to the fact that this approach provides a systematic process for making the patterns in meaning of the data explicit, and for the main findings to come out of what the participants actually stated.

The analytical process began with data preparation and familiarization. Morse et al. (2002, p.18) recommended that qualitative researchers should "collect and analyze data concurrently" to prepare for data analysis. In this study, audio-recorded data that were transcribed were analyzed soon after they were gathered, and thus it was easier for the coder to retain as much information as possible about the context of the interview. Audio files from in-depth interviews were manually transcribed within 24 hours of collection. This concurrent approach to data collection and analysis enhanced the reliability and validity of the qualitative research (Morse et al., 2002). Transcription was done without technological assistance. This careful process involved recording hesitation, filler words (e.g., "ah," "uh"), tone changes, and other details to prevent missing data. Although time-consuming, manual transcription helped maintain data accuracy and facilitated deep immersion in the data from the initial stages.

Following familiarization with the data, analysis progressed through several iterative coding stages. The analysis of the data began by employing open coding when researchers are scanning transcripts for occurring keywords, stories, and patterns in bribery transactions. Using qualitative analysis software (e.g., NVivo) for organizing and coding the data, this initial phase focused on generating a comprehensive list of ideas and concepts from the text. As time evolved, categories such as "pragmatic obligations," "moral obligations," and "emotional discomfort" began emerging that described how the norm of reciprocity and disengagement morality intersect.

The subsequent stage of analysis was the construction of these initial codes into broader, more significant themes. Rather than Grounded Theory's conclusive axial and selective coding (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990), this research focused on mapping relationships and connections between the developing categories to construct overarching themes. For instance, transcripts illustrated how pragmatic obligations (on a basis of reciprocity) naturally morphed into moral obligations with time, situating bribery-prone relationships. Emotional states of guilt, shame, and rationalizations for euphemistic speech were also found to be core themes. The use of NVivo ensured consistency and ease in revisiting categories during this iterative analysis process.

Finally, these findings were organized into the core thematic dimensions that form the basis of the discussion chapter. These include: (1) Types of obligations driving bribery (pragmatic and moral); (2) Rationalization strategies (e.g., denial of responsibility, euphemistic labeling); and (3) Evolving stages of bribery-prone relationships (initiation and perpetuation).

To be more specific, data analysis for the in-depth interviews and semi-structured interviews are detailed as follows:

2.5.1. In-depth interviews

Following the principles of Thematic analysis, the next stage involved developing a comprehensive coding scheme to systematically analyze the transcribed data. This was an iterative process that was both deductive, informed by existing literature, and inductive, allowing new concepts to emerge directly from the participants' narratives.

The initial phase focused on generating codes close to the data. The data was transcribed close to verbatim within 24 hours of the interviews. For forms of favors and psychological processes, the emerging codes were regularly discussed and compared with existing constructs in the norm of reciprocity, moral disengagement, and bribery literature. To ensure reliability, the coding schemes were agreed upon and then coded independently. This process of constant comparison between the data and existing theory was central to the analysis.

The outcome of this iterative process was a detailed coding scheme, summarized in Tables 2.5 and 2.6. This scheme is organized around several key thematic domains that directly address the research questions.

The first domain distinguished between different types of corrupt exchanges. The data was coded to differentiate bribe types. While transaction-based bribes have been well documented in the literature, the analysis focused on the more nuanced obligation-based bribes. Within this category, two types of obligation emerged, including pragmatic obligation and moral obligation. The data were categorized to further examine the nature of these obligation types.

A second thematic domain captured the specific practices of favor-offering. Then, the forms and motivation of initial offers to government officials were categorized. Two forms, i.e. monetary/material and non-material, and three motivations, i.e., bribery transaction, investment on relationships, and social exchange, emerged from the data.

Table 2.5: Coding schemes for types of bribes and obligations

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

The third domain explored the officials' internal experiences. Next, the emotional discomfort an official may experience when someone offers him/her a favor (e.g., “gift”) at work was explored. The data suggested that emotional discomfort comes from conflicting feelings. On the one hand, some certain feeling encourages the official to accept the offer, including “desire for personal gain”, “needs to fit in”, and “obligation to payback”. On the other hand, some feeling may at the same time prevent the official from engaging in the exchange. These include “guilt”, “shame”, “conscience-stricken”, and the “fear of being betrayed”.

The fourth domain identified the cognitive strategies used to manage this discomfort. This part of the analysis involved the coding of how the officials overcome or rationalize when experiencing emotional discomfort. Some existing rationalization strategies in the literature matched well with the data. These strategies are “using euphemistic languages” (e.g., gifts), “denying harm”, and “denying responsibility”. In addition, some new rationalization strategies emerged from the data. These include “beneficiary specificity” and “evaluation subjectivity.”

Finally, the coding scheme was designed to allow for comparative analysis across the relationship timeline. Data was categorized by the stage of a relationship, i.e. initiation and perpetuation. As the data on the collusion stage was sparse, it was merged with perpetuation. This structure allowed for a comparison of how emotional discomfort and rationalization strategies evolved at different stages of bribery-prone relationships.

Table 2.6: Coding schemes for stages of relationship

Concepts	Definition	Examples
STAGE OF BRIBERY-PRONE RELATIONSHIP		
Initiation	The offered favors are from a new partner	- New business managers - New subordinates
Perpetuation	The exchanges of favors are from a known partner who had offered favors to the official before	- Business in the area who have been working with the official for some time
CALCULATIVE JUDGMENT		
Benefits/ opportunities	Potential [bribery] benefits a relationship would bring in to the official	- Monetary or material benefits - Intangible benefits: Fit in with a network of other officials/ businesses; sextortion

Concepts	Definition	Examples
Legal risk	The risk of being detected and prosecuted	- A bribe is detected and prosecuted
Relational risks	The risk of being betrayed by the partner	- Partner's resentment due to dissatisfaction in the relationship
EMOTIONAL DISCOMFORT		
Desire for personal gains	The desire to accept the offers for personal gains	- Offers could be money, material gifts, or other forms
Need to fit in	The need to fit in with other groups for personal gains	- Fit in with business group for more opportunities - Fit in with a network of colleagues in the government sector for career advancement
Sense of guilt	Feeling guilty (to him/herself) when breaching personal/professional moral standards	
Sense of shame	Feeling shame (to others) when breaching personal/professional moral standards	
Uncertainty of offeror's benevolence	Unsure if the offeror would betray or do harm to the official	The offeror may report or leak information of the illegal exchanges between the two
Obligation	The sense of being in debt to the offeror	
Sense of losing control	The fear that the official may lose control of his/her career due to the bribery-prone relationships	The official's secret bribery exchanges may be known to people in the networks
RATIONALIZATION STRATEGIES		
Euphemistic languages	The actors use language to verbally sanitize the immoral conduct, making it seem respectable	Gifts, favors, helps are used for "bribes"
Denying the harm	The actors ignore the harm they have caused, point out to others that the harm is less serious than it actually is, or argue that they have not caused harm	The actors explain the "gifts" are small or the gifts are given after the favor is returned, so no harm is done

Concepts	Definition	Examples
Denying responsibility	The actors explain that they are not responsible for immoral conduct	The official believes that the partner persistently and voluntarily gives the “gifts”, so he/she is not responsible for the gift-giving.
Beneficiary specificity	The actors justify that helping specific groups of people is better than contributing to general society	
Evaluation subjectivity	The actors explain that all evaluation is subjective and dependent on the evaluator’s viewpoints	

Source: Author

2.5.2. Semi-structured interviews

The data analysis for the semi-structured interviews with 20 businesspeople served a dual purpose. First, a stand-alone thematic analysis was carried out to discern the salient concepts and coding schemes arising from the perspective of the business world. Second, the themes generated from this process were systematically compared against the findings from the in-depth interviews with government officials to perform data triangulation, thereby enhancing the study's overall trustworthiness.

2.5.2.1. Thematic analysis

Prior to the integrated analysis, an initial, separate thematic coding process was applied to the dataset derived from the semi structured interviews with businesspeople. This initial stage was designed to immerse and explore salient themes, trends, and ideas emerging solely from entrepreneurs' perceptions of exchange with potential or real bribery. Informed by the etiquette of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), this coding was an experience that immersed the author within the narratives of the entrepreneurs to identify common concepts and experiences toward the research issues (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

During this initial coding pass, the writer specifically sought out instances where business leaders accounted for interactions that were governed by the principle of reciprocity, like offering favors or expecting reciprocation, even when such interactions were done in the absence of formal processes. Codes were created to capture key concepts. For example, businesspeople often spoke of needing to "give something first, especially around Tet, just to get their attention," led to the code "preemptive gift-giving". Similarly, their conceptualizations of obligation (e.g., "It's not really a bribe,

more like building a necessary connection") and emotional responses like pressure ("You feel a lot of pressure to comply") and frustration were systematically coded.

Furthermore, the coding focused on uncovering the emotional responses described by businesspeople in relation to these exchanges. Participants frequently expressed feelings of pressure ("You feel a lot of pressure to comply, otherwise your business will suffer") and anxiety ("Waiting for the permit is so stressful, you don't know what they expect"). They also voiced frustration ("It's frustrating that this is just how things work here") or resignation ("You just accept that this is a cost of doing business").

Finally, the author was eager to document the reasons and justifications entrepreneurs employed when describing taking part in the practices, seeking to track the thinking that might insulate potential moral dissonance. Common rationalization strategies observed included normalization, expressed in phrases like "Everyone does it, you can't compete if you don't," and appealing to business need or survival measures, e.g., "You have to do it to keep your business going, it's survival." The relational framing of these acts ("We are just building goodwill, like you would with any partner") and minimizing the perceived wrongdoing ("It's just a small gift, not a big deal") were also coded.

This initial coding of the businesspeople data generated a preliminary set of categories and themes specific to their experiences. Table 2.7 presents some more illustrative examples of emergent concepts, codes, and examples from the businesspeople's data that emerged during this phase. These emergent themes and codes then served as a foundation for the next integrated analysis with the government officials' data to give comparative analysis of the dynamics on both sides of the relationship.

Table 2.7: Coding schemes

Concept/Theme	Initial codes	Examples
STAGE 1: INITIATION		
Reciprocity/ Obligation	Preemptive Gift Giving	Descriptions of giving small gifts or favors early on without an immediate request
	Expectation of Return	Framing initial offers as building goodwill
	Necessary Investment	Viewing early favors as necessary to open doors for future business interactions
Emotional responses	Anxiety (of refusal/failure)	Nervousness before approaching officials

Concept/Theme	Initial codes	Examples
	Feeling Pressured (to start)	Feeling pressured by market norms to initiate such relationships
	Uncertainty (of outcome)	Uncertainty about whether an official would be receptive
Rationalization Strategies	Euphemistic labeling	Using softened language like "showing respect" or "cultural exchange" for initial offers
	Advantageous comparison	Competitors are doing the same or more; small gifts as minor compared to large-scale corruption
	Evaluation subjectivity	Giving favors is the only way to compete or survive in the current market, officials need the extra money
STAGE 2: PERPETUATION		
Reciprocity /Obligation	Expectation of Return	Discussing the expectation of faster or favorable treatment after past favors
	Creating Future Access	Explaining how sustained favors ensure continued access to decision-makers
	Sense of Indebtedness	Feeling implicitly obligated to continue to help or give favor to officials
	Responding to Requests	Describing fulfilling specific, sometimes unsolicited, requests from officials
	Long-term Relationship Building	Framing the relationship as a continuous investment.
Emotional responses	Resignation (to the system)	Statements indicating giving up on the idea of a level playing field
	Acceptance (of the norm)	Describing the acceptance that this is how business is done
	Frustration (with constant demands)	Expressing annoyance at the ongoing need to provide favors
	Necessity (as a feeling)	Describing the feeling that maintaining these relationships is a necessary burden
Rationalization	Normalization	Giving favors is a standard practice
	Displacement of responsibility	Just responding to officials' demands due to bureaucracy

Concept/Theme	Initial codes	Examples
	Diffusion of Responsibility	Seeing it as a shared responsibility within the business community
	Disregard/Distortion of consequences	Downplaying the harm; focusing only on the business benefit

Source: Author

2.5.2.2. Triangulation with government official data

Following the independent analysis of the business-sector data, the second phase focused on triangulation. The emergent themes and codes of the businesspeople served as a starting point for comparative analysis with the government officials' data. The process was conducted in three stages, as presented in Table 2.8, to allow systematic integration.

Comparative Code Refinement (Open Coding): We first combined the two datasets in NVivo. Two researchers tagged meaning-units independently in the business transcripts. New business-specific codes (e.g., “festival gift norm,” “technical partnership,” “family networking”) were added to the existing codebook from the official data. Frequent debriefing meetings allowed us to reconcile code definitions and ensure consistency.

Cross-Thematic Mapping (Axial Coding): We then consolidated codes into broad categories that mapped onto the three thematic axes that existed among officials: forms of obligations, rationalization strategies, and trajectory of relationships. So, for example, "seasonal gift giving" (business data) was mapped to "pragmatic obligation," while "uneasy after favor" was mapped to "emotional discomfort." This mapping highlighted areas of convergence (both groups mention euphemistic labeling) and divergence (businesspeople mention increased emphasis on cultural festivals as initiation rituals).

Integrated Model Refinement (Selective Coding): In the final phase, we integrated these contrasted categories to create our process model of bribery-prone relationships. Business insights validated the two-stage development (initiation and perpetuation) and corroborated the focal role of moral disengagement mechanisms (denial of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, and favorable comparison) since these occurred in real business settings.

This combined analysis was validated using several triangulation methods. Investigator triangulation was achieved using two analysts in coding difference

reviewing work, and theory triangulation was achieved through cross-tabulation against social exchange and moral disengagement theory. The core method, data triangulation, using official and business accounts comparison, added further credibility to our findings. Last but not least, the semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs complemented and certified the trends that had been achieved using the analysis of government officials, offering insight into how obligation-based bribery arises.

Below is a summary table describing how the semi structured interviews with 20 entrepreneurs were coded and triangulated with the focus-group and in depth interviews with officials.

Table 2.8: Triangulation

Analysis Stage	Main activities	Business-sector contribution	Triangulate method	Outcome/ Insight
Open coding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Import de-identified transcripts and field notes into NVivo – Two researchers tag meaning-units independently – Add business specific codes to existing codebook 	Codes such as “festival-gift norm,” “technical partnership,” “family-networking”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data triangulation Investigator triangulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – New codes capture business rituals – Ensures consistent code definitions across researchers
Axial coding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Cluster open codes into higher-order categories matching official themes – Map business codes onto: Types of obligation, rationalization strategies, relationship evolvment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Seasonal gift giving” → Pragmatic obligation • “Uneasy after favor” → Emotional discomfort 	Data triangulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Convergence: both groups describe euphemistic labeling – Divergence: only business people emphasize festival-based initiation
Selective coding	– Integrate categories into a refined process model of	Validation of two-stage evolvment (initiation	Theory triangulation	Business data confirm and deepen

Analysis Stage	Main activities	Business-sector contribution	Triangulate method	Outcome/ Insight
	bribery-prone relationships – Highlight moral disengagement mechanisms observed in business interviews	& perpetuation) Reinforcement of: • Denial of responsibility • Diffusion of responsibility • Advantageous comparison		understanding of moral disengagement in real-world exchanges
Trust-worthiness	– Two analysts resolve coding discrepancies via weekly debriefs – Cross-referencing against social-exchange and moral-disengagement theories	N/A	Investigator & Theory triangulation	Increases credibility and reliability of findings across data sources

Source: Author

This table demonstrates how each stage of analysis drew on business interviews to enrich existing themes, validate or refine the process model, and employ multiple triangulation strategies to enhance the study's overall validity.

2.6. Integrated Analysis

Following the initial, within-group thematic analyses of the government official and businessperson interview datasets, the subsequent phase involved a crucial integrated analysis. The primary objective of this phase was to move beyond separate findings to understand the relational dynamics of bribery-prone relationships from a holistic perspective, examining how the experiences, perceptions, and behaviors of government officials and businesspeople interact and influence one another throughout the relationship lifecycle.

This combined analysis entailed systematic comparison and synthesis of the patterns, concepts, and themes inductively identified independently within each data set for the groups. To this end, the thematic overviews and coded interview transcripts of

the government officials were placed into conversation with those of the businesspeople. This cross-referencing enabled the location of points of convergence, divergence, and above all, the interaction of the viewpoints and actions of the two sets of actors engaged in these encounters.

One of the pleasures of this phase was not just comparing whether or not specific themes (e.g., reciprocity, moral disengagement) appeared in every dataset, but exploring how they appeared differently or similarly in each set and, crucially, how they interacted in the relational context. This involved looking actively for patterns of interaction reported by both parties. For instance, the analysis specifically sought to understand how businesspeople's descriptions of why they granted favors and how they went about granting favors compared or differed with officials' descriptions of receiving and returning these favors.

Concrete examples of this cross-group pattern analysis included examining how businesspeople's reports of feeling pragmatic obligations or viewing initial gifts as necessary "investments" to secure access or opportunities aligned with officials' descriptions of accepting seemingly small, routine gifts or "personal favors" and the sense of diffuse obligation that might consequently develop. Furthermore, the analysis explicitly compared the justifications or rationales employed by officials when engaging in or considering favor exchange with the rationalization strategies (mapped onto Bandura's moral disengagement mechanisms) articulated by businesspeople when describing their participation in such acts. This comparison helped to highlight the often complementary nature of the mental processes enabling both sides to navigate the moral landscape of bribery.

By merging these two categories of perspectives, the analysis aimed to build a better image of relational dynamics in workplace settings, demonstrating how the motivations, behaviors, and thought processes (including moral disengagement) of the two actors result in initiation and maintenance stages of bribery-prone relationships. This dual approach was particularly crucial in the case of Research Question 3, which seeks to bring together obligation-based reciprocity and moral disengagement to explain these phases of relationships among *both* government officials and entrepreneurs. This phase therefore moved towards a better understanding of the reciprocal nature of these relationships and the inherent psychological and social processes that sustain them, setting the stage for the development of integrated findings.



Figure 2.2 An Integrated Grounded Model of Bribery-Prone Relationship Dynamics.

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 2.1 is designed to map the interpersonal journey of bribery, shifting the focus from isolated transactions to evolving relationships. Unlike quantitative models that seek to measure the impact of static variables, this qualitative map tracks the shifting psychological and social states of the actors involved. While the specific dynamics of bribery-prone relationships are emergent and grounded in the data presented in Chapter 3, the following conceptual map

(Figure 2.1) is provided here to synthesize the theoretical logic guiding this inquiry. It serves as a provisional roadmap rather than a final conclusion.

Norm of reciprocity: Reciprocity-driven social debt. The process is anchored in the “Social Debt” phase. In the Vietnamese business context, initial exchanges are rarely explicit. By labeling this box Reciprocity-Driven Social Debt, the research highlights how culturally mandated gestures (such as “cam on” or festival gifts) function as a social engine. These acts create an imbalance in the relationship. This is not a “variable” to be measured, but a felt obligation, a social push that necessitates a return gesture. The framework captures how this debt serves as the entry point for parties who may not have prior kinship ties, effectively “engineering” a connection through the norm of reciprocity.

Moral disengagement: Moral neutralization process. The transition to Moral Neutralization explains the internal dialogue of the participants. Because the actors (both public and private) often view themselves as “good people”, the illicit act creates cognitive dissonance. This phase is not a mere “step,” but a mediating shield. The labels within this box such as *Euphemistic Labeling* and *Advantageous Comparison*, represent the specific vocabularies of motive found in the interview data. This section of the framework explains *how* the actor stays psychologically comfortable while violating formal rules, reframing the bribe as a necessary component of social harmony or business survival.

The Conceptual outcome: Normalized bribery-prone relationship. Finally, the framework illustrates the Bribery-Prone Relationship not as a final destination, but as a state of Relational maturation. The most critical element of this qualitative model is the Feedback Loop. It signifies the automation of corruption: as the relationship deepens, the “Social Debt” and “Moral Neutralization” phases require less conscious effort. The parties reach a stage of psychological justification where the illicit exchange is no longer a crisis of conscience but a normalized social activity. This loop explains the resilience of bribery in Vietnam; once the relationship matures, the internal and external barriers to corruption are effectively dissolved.

By presenting this outcome and loop now, the dissertation establishes a clear relational process model. This allows the reader to follow how the raw data in Chapter 3 actually moves through these theoretical phases from the first ‘gift’ to a fully synchronized, long-term corrupt relationship.

2.7. Validity and reliability of qualitative research

Qualitative inquiry maintains its validity by understanding that researchers, participants, and readers may interpret the same phenomenon in differing ways (Creswell, 2013; Morse et al., 2002). To ensure that our findings on bribery-prone relationships in Vietnam are both rigorous and credible, the author adopted Creswell and Poth's (2018) guidance to employ multiple validation strategies. In the following sections, it is described how method triangulation, member-checking, thick description, and peer debriefing/investigator triangulation were systematically integrated into our research design to enhance credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data and methodological triangulation is pursued by deliberately seeking convergent evidence across different sources and modes of data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.340). First, data triangulation was achieved through three distinct streams: eleven focus-group discussions with 90 public officials representing central, provincial, and district levels and six administrative sectors (Table 2.1); twenty-three in-depth interviews probing emotional discomfort and rationalization strategies; and twenty semi-structured interviews and informal talks with businesspeople recruited from diverse industries (Table 2.2). Each of these data streams addressed the same core themes of pragmatic obligation, moral obligation, emotional discomfort, transaction-based versus obligation-based bribes, allowing us to cross-validate participants' accounts and reduce the influence of any single perspective. Second, methodological triangulation was realized by combining one-to-one interviews and informal conversations (Figure 2.1), each offering complementary insights into how norms of reciprocity and moral disengagement operate in practice.

To verify that our analytical interpretations aligned with participants' intentions, member-checking is conducted after the initial coding phase. Using NVivo software, the author applied open, axial, and selective coding to identify preliminary themes and categories. We then shared concise summaries of these emerging constructs with a purposive subset of informants (eight public officials and four business representatives) and invited their feedback in follow-up meetings, either in person or via secure messaging. Participants confirmed, clarified, and in some cases challenged these definitions. For example, the parameters distinguishing "pragmatic" from "moral" obligations. Thereby ensuring that this conceptual framework (summarized in Table 2.3) remained truthful to their lived experiences.

To achieve transferability, the author provided rich, detailed accounts of participants' narratives, settings, and interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.343). The

author included extensive verbatim quotations by preserving pauses, hesitations, and tonal inflections to convey the emotional texture of participants' reflections on guilt, shame, and justification strategies. Narratives illustrate key stages in the evolution of bribery-prone relationships (initiation and perpetuation) as reconstructed in Chapters 3.4–3.5. Moreover, by presenting our coding scheme in Table 2.3 and mapping our data-collection workflow in Figure 2.1, the author offers readers a transparent approach from raw data to thematic integration.

To avoid individual bias and enhance dependability, two external qualitative scholars independently coded a randomly selected 20 percent of the transcripts. Through critical dialogue, we resolved discrepancies in code application. For instance, whether an excerpt belonged under “moral obligation” or “emotional discomfort”, and refined our coding definitions accordingly. An additional expert in organizational ethics reviewed our preliminary process model (section 3.4), probing assumptions about the role of affective processes in sustaining reciprocal obligations. These layers of independent scrutiny and discussion not only strengthened our analytical rigor but also ensured that our findings reflect a multiplicity of scholarly perspectives.

By putting together these four validation strategies of triangulation, member-checking, thick description, and peer debriefing/investigator triangulation, the author has addressed key validity, and reliability concerns inherent in qualitative research. This chapter provides a cohesive structure for understanding bribery through the interaction of socio-cultural norms and moral disengagement processes. The use of multiple qualitative tools not only ensures the reliability and validity of findings. At the same time, it offers a rich understanding of bribery-prone relationships in a culturally specific context.

2.8. Statement on data integrity and ethical responsibility

Given the highly sensitive nature of the data collected for this study—specifically accounts of illicit exchanges and internal psychological processes from both public and private sector actors, the researcher has adhered to the highest standards of academic integrity and objectivity. I hereby confirm that all interview data was collected through voluntary participation and processed with strict adherence to confidentiality protocols.

To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the arguments presented in this dissertation, several validation measures were employed. First, the transcription process involved a rigorous verification phase to ensure that the participants' narratives were captured without bias or distortion. Second, the use of two independent streams of data

(public officials and business practitioners) allowed for cross-verification, or "triangulation," of sensitive claims. This process ensured that the findings are not based on isolated anecdotes but on recurring patterns observed across multiple data sources.

As the primary researcher, I assume full responsibility for the accuracy of the data and the interpretations derived therefrom. Every effort has been made to maintain a neutral, objective stance during the analysis, ensuring that the personal perspectives of the participants are reported faithfully while being framed within the established theoretical boundaries of moral disengagement and social exchange theory. The sensitivity of the subject matter has been met with a commitment to ethical reporting and professional accountability.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Before going into the analysis of the findings, it is essential to provide a clear description of the data that forms the empirical backbone of this dissertation. The results presented in this chapter are derived from a multi-stream qualitative dataset designed to capture the "dual-perspective" of bribery-prone relationships in Vietnam. This dataset consists of primary evidence gathered from two distinct groups of actors: public officials and business practitioners.

The first stream of data involves 23 in-depth interviews with Vietnamese public officials representing various administrative levels (central, provincial, and district) and six key sectors, including transportation, natural resources, and inspection. These interviews focused on probing the sensitive internal processes of emotional discomfort and the cognitive rationalization strategies used when navigating illicit exchanges. This primary data was further enriched and triangulated by eleven focus-group discussions involving a total of 90 public officials.

The second stream of data comprises 20 semi-structured interviews and informal discussions with businesspeople and entrepreneurs from diverse industries. These sessions were strategically conducted in naturalistic settings, such as networking events hosted by the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI), to encourage candor regarding the sensitive nature of bribery. This "business-side" data was used both to identify sector-specific themes such as "festival gift norms" and to triangulate the reports provided by the public officials.

By integrating these two datasets, the analysis moves beyond a one-sided account of corruption. Instead, it offers a grounded view of the relational dynamics, showing how the motivations and moral disengagement mechanisms of both givers and takers interact to initiate and perpetuate bribery-prone relationships. The following sections present the thematic results emerging from this rigorous qualitative inquiry.

3.1. Obligation-based Bribes

This chapter argues that in the Vietnamese context, obligation-based bribery operates not as a series of discrete transactions, but as a symbiotic, self-reinforcing system built upon the strategic manipulation of the norm of reciprocity. Drawing on parallel interviews with government officials and businesspeople, the analysis reveals a critical divergence in perspective: while officials often frame their involvement as a passive response to accumulating social debts, businesspeople describe a proactive and calculated process of creating and leveraging these obligations. This chapter will

deconstruct this process, showing how seemingly innocuous social gestures are weaponized to create 'pragmatic obligations' that eventually evolve into entrenched, bribery-prone relationships, sustained by sophisticated strategies of moral disengagement from both parties.

In regard to the relationships under study, the term “obligation-based bribes” surfaced as a significant theme, often distinguished from purely transactional exchanges. These were, as outlined above, fundamentally reliant on the norm of reciprocity and were strongly linked to the phenomenon of “quan hệ” or the nurturing of personal relations. Among the participants of this study, the blurring of lines between legitimate social exchanges, gift-giving, as well as obligation creation or obligation leveraging was apparent. The difficulty in recognizing the true nature of such exchanges was a challenge described by officials, contributing to the ambiguity surrounding these interactions.

From the perspective of the government’s official, gifts, especially from potential clients seeking assistance, often triggered a sense of obligation or debt. This feeling was not always clearly stated but was subtly understood as part of the exchange. On the other hand, interviews with businesspeople showed that they used reciprocity on purpose to create these obligations. They gave gifts, offered favors or support with a clear goal: to build relationships and make officials feel indebted. Their accounts revealed two types of obligations: pragmatic obligations moral obligations. Pragmatic obligations were based on explicit goals, like getting access, speeding up work, getting decisions made on time, or making sure there was help in the future. Businesspeople saw these acts as smart investments to help draw the official’s attention and secure their help in the future. While less common, some businesspeople also felt a kind of ‘moral’ obligation. This came from personal relationships built over time, even if the initial reason for giving a gift was just strategic.

Collectively, these perspectives highlight how the norm of reciprocity serves as a powerful though informal mechanism for forming and maintaining obligations between businesspeople and government officials, even outside close-knit networks. For government officials, reciprocal acts induce a sense of duty or expectation, influencing their future decision-making processes. On the other hand, for business people, these acts are a calculated strategy to foster loyalty and help them navigate the rule of give-and-take for favorable treatment. With repeated exchanges, the obligations deepen, transforming initial interactions into sustained bribery-prone relationship. What starts off as a minor assistance turns into a continuous relationship, which can later involve corruption. Both parties keep this relationship alive by reinforcing mutual dependency

and the expectation of reciprocal action, laying the groundwork for the perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships.

3.1.1. Transaction-based bribes

Transaction-based bribes are a specific type of corrupt exchange. Bribes do not need to originate from a contract or formal arrangements. Rather, transaction-based bribes happen when someone intentionally offers money or something of value to a public official. The person who gives the bribe wants something clear in return, and they expect it to happen rather quickly.

A common example is when someone pays a police officer to avoid getting a ticket. If they are stopped for speeding, instead of taking the ticket, they offer the officer money. If the officer accepts the money, and the driver avoids the ticket, it is a classic transaction-based bribe. The driver gives money, and the officer provides him/her immediate freedom from legal trouble. Another example is making paperwork move faster. Businesses or individuals may need permits, licenses, or other documents. These can take a long time because of delays or slow systems. To avoid dealing with long lines, a government official dealing with a long queue of customers can be bribed directly. In return, the official processes the paperwork quickly. Without the bribe, the documents might stay on a desk for weeks or even months. The bribe makes sure the paperwork gets done right away.

Transaction-based bribes are often one-time event. The connection between the briber and the bribed official does not intend to persist beyond the completion of the transaction. Once the bribe has been exchanged, there is no need to maintain any further connection. Thus, these interactions do not require trust or personal loyalty. The exchange is purely based on the immediate needs of both parties. The person offering the bribe wants to solve a problem or get something done quickly while the official receiving the bribe wants to make some extra money or gain some other personal benefit. Understandably, there is no long-term commitment or promise. Neither side wants to build a lasting relationship but solving problems in the short term with an immediate favor-exchange situation.

In contrast to other types of bribery, which often require ongoing relationships or complex networks of favors, transaction-based bribes are of a much more straightforward nature. These bribes are simple, direct, and focused solely on achieving quick results.

3.1.2. *Obligation-based bribes*

Unlike transaction-based bribes, obligation-based bribes are given to a public official with a long-term goal in mind. The briber here expects to generate a sense of obligation to return some form of illegal favors at a later date. This kind of bribery is less about specific immediate gains and more about cultivating a future-oriented relationship built on mutual obligation. It requires a level of commitment from both parties, the businesspeople initiating the exchange and the public official receiving the favor, that should remain valid even in the far future. Interviews with both government officials and businesspeople provided invaluable insights into these dynamics, proving that only a minimal number of bribe instances could be classified as purely transaction-based. Instead, the overwhelming majority of bribes operate within an obligation-based framework. This distinction arises largely for two critical reasons.

Firstly, it is crucial to recognize that bribes are secretive in nature. For a successful bribery exchange to take place, both parties involved (the business people and the public official) must have a certain level of confidence in each other's benevolence and confidentiality. However, this trust cannot develop in the short run. It is rather a gradual process that can only be fostered over a number of interactions and shared experiences, creating a relationship. *"Trust can't be built overnight,"* stated a senior government official in Ho Chi Minh City. He added: *"It's a process, even at times time-consuming. We must foster this over time; otherwise, the whole thing falls apart."* From the businesspeople's view, giving favors at the start is a smart way to build trust. They see it as something they must do to reach their goals. It reduces the risk associated with illicit exchanges and ensures that future requests are more likely to be met favorably. As one businessperson put it, *"Sending a gift or helping with a small problem first is like planting a seed. You show you are reliable, not a problem, and that builds the foundation before you ever ask for something big."* The growing confidence between the involved parties is vital not just for the initiation of bribery but also for its evolution over time. It involves an understanding that encourages each party to act in accordance with their long-term interests, making this type of behavior different from the one-off nature of transaction-based bribes. Moreover, the deeply ingrained norm of reciprocity serves as an effective means of facilitating this kind of exchanges. Both parties have implicit understanding of their mutual obligations and expectation.

Secondly, it is essential to note that not all potential opportunities for further bribery are known to both parties at the beginning of their interactions, thus making

the bribery landscape even more complex. There may be instances in which a bribe is paid to an official with the expectation that this official will keep his or her “eyes and ears open” to notice and subsequently suggest potential opportunities that could arise, which would be beneficial to the briber. This focus on future benefits shows that bribery is part of an ongoing relationship, not just a one-time corrupt act. “*You need to see the bigger picture,*” cited a business consultant. “*Bribery isn’t just about the cash; it’s about relationships and what they yield over time.*” Businesspeople understand this implicitly; their initial offerings are often strategically vague in their expected return, precisely to lay the groundwork for exploiting unforeseen future opportunities enabled by the official’s position. This approach also generates different types of obligations. Businesspeople described creating pragmatic obligations, where the official feels indebted to provide practical assistance when an opportunity arises, and sometimes even a sense of moral obligation based on the personal relationship cultivated.

“*Yes, it is a business, but you can’t just show up and say: ‘I offer this gift, could you please help me with that contract’. You need to build some sort of relationship before this kind of exchange could happen,*” one official in Ho Chi Minh City said this, showing that it is important to build a relationship before dealing with such sensitive matters. This idea explains obligation-based bribery. It is not just about making a deal, but about building trust and a personal connection.

3.1.3. Differences between transaction-based bribes and obligation-based bribes

Obligation-based bribes follow the rule of reciprocity. Because of this, they are very different from simple transaction-based bribes. Both government officials and businesspeople in this study pointed out these key differences.

First, as discussed earlier, a party may not necessarily initiate a bribe with the expectation of certain and immediate returns in mind. Furthermore, the recipient is not simply offered something as a means to tip the scales and achieve rapid results. Rather, the initial bribe may be offered to establish a deeper sense of obligation on the recipient. From the business people’s point of view, these first favors are seen as investments. They hope to gain access and influence later on. A senior official from the Ministry of Agriculture explained this by saying, “*They might give a little now to receive returns later.*” Correspondingly, businesspeople articulated this as a deliberate tactic. As articulated by a respondent from Da Nang, “*They create slots for themselves, a chance to leverage future opportunities as they come along.*” This cultivated sense of

obligation motivates the officials to return favors when they have the opportunity to do so. In this context, obligation-based bribery effectively blurs the link between the initial bribe and the returned favors, making it exceedingly difficult to detect the parties involved in these exchanges.

Additionally, beyond just the initial bribe, opportunities for lucrative returned favors may not even be present or clearly defined at the time of bribe initiation. Obligation-based bribery is fundamentally structured in a way that allows it to leave it to the discretion of the public officials to decide what and when the returned favors will materialize. From this perspective, the initiated bribes are largely about reserving the right to access desirable and lucrative opportunities as they emerge, rather than focusing solely on exchanging for specific, pre-identified deals at the moment. By offering a bribe, a briber may be attempting to “save a slot for future lucrative opportunities,” thereby ensuring that they maintain first access to possible favorable dealings when they eventually occur. As one businessperson explained, *“You make sure they remember you. You help them out, you give a gift, and then when something comes up later, you’re already on their radar, and they feel that pull to help you out. A favor is extended to a public official not necessarily to trade for a project or contract. In many cases, it is extended to ensure access to future opportunities.”* A central official explained this, stressing that obligation-based bribery is about the future. It helps establish a network of favors, where people might get something back later or in ways they did not expect.

Thirdly, obligation-based bribes are usually given and taken in the context of continuous relationships between the people involved, not just as one-time deals. Analysis of the interview result from both groups indicated that a certain degree of “personal attachment” (sự gắn bó) is needed for such secret exchanges to occur. The establishment of a relationship characterized by trust and reciprocity is crucial to facilitate these exchanges. A party often needs to engage in several preliminary interactions with a public official to be able to build this sense of attachment. This relationship-building effort may involve a series of small engagements and gestures over time, unless that individual is endorsed or recommended by a third party who is already known to and trusted by the official in question. As an official from Ho Chi Minh city noted, *“There are no shortcuts here. You’re not going to drop a gift on someone’s desk and expect them to rush to help you. It’s a process.”* Businesspeople echoed this, viewing the initial stages as crucial relationship-building rather than direct transactional

acts. *“It’s about building ‘quan hệ’. You start small, maybe a coffee, a meal, a small gift for their child. It’s not about asking for anything yet, just showing you are a good person, reliable, someone they can trust over time,”* shared a business owner.

During these early interactions, gifts or favors may be introduced as a means “to pay respect,” “to express a sentiment,” or “to show benevolence”. These first acts of compassion make the public official feel like they have to do something. This obligation encourages the official to repay the generous gestures when the opportunity arises. When the opportunity presents a returned favor that seems to be larger than the initial offer, an outstanding balance emerges. Now the business person is the one who feels obligated to pay such outstanding balance by giving another favor, creating an expectation for ongoing exchanges of offer and repayment. Over time, these cycles of initiated favors, repayment, and outstanding obligations contribute to promote a deepening sense of “personal attachment” between the involved parties. *“What starts as an occasional gift can turn into multiple other gifts, and that’s how people become friends,”* explained a local contractor involved in urban development.

Consequently, bribery exchanges are suggested and/or implemented not only to fulfill the obligation to pay or repay other parties in the relationship but also to consolidate interpersonal bonds and connections. Therefore, obligation-based bribery exchanges are intertwined with legal or moral actions in a series of personal interactions between the briber and the public official involved. This aspect underscores the point that obligation-based bribes and the associated corrupt acts do not exist independently from other types of exchanges that take place between the involved parties. As one construction consultant remarked, *“These are not just bribes; they’re investments in long-term relationships. Those who don’t understand this lose out.”*

3.2. Pragmatic and moral obligations in bribery

In the exploration of the dynamics of bribery, two distinct types of obligation that govern reciprocal bribery relationships were discovered: pragmatic obligations and moral obligations. Both of these types of obligation are essential for understanding the mechanisms at play in how such corrupt practices operate.

3.2.1. Pragmatic obligations

From the perspective of a public official, pragmatic obligation refers to the urge to return favors to a partner, primarily driven by the benefits such reciprocations can

give to the official. This cyclical pattern shapes the relational dynamics among involved parties in complex ways that needs a more careful analysis.

Within the context of a given bribery-prone relationship, the official will develop a rough sense of the accumulated values of favors received from the other party, which creates internal pressure for reciprocation. This pressure is perceived as necessary for the official to continue benefiting from the relationship or to avoid potential negative consequences from that relationship. In this sense, pragmatic obligation becomes a key motivator for continued engagement in corrupt practices throughout the duration of the relationship. *“It’s about survival in this environment. If I don’t give back when I should, I risk losing my standing,”* an official from the Ministry of Transportation explained this, pointing out the serious risks involved.

From the businesspeople’s view, practical obligation is not just something they feel; it is something they create and use on purpose. They give favors and build relationships to induce in the officials a sense of obligation. Their goal is to get future benefits, like winning contracts, getting permits, receiving useful information, or making sure government processes go smoothly. They see their early “gifts” or “favors” as important investments to gain this future advantage. As one business owner said, *“You give first to create that hook... so when you need something, they are more likely to deliver because it’s in their own interest to keep the relationship going and maybe get more later.”*

Importantly, it is crucial to distinguish pragmatic obligation from more straightforward cost-benefit calculations, as they operate in fundamentally different ways. Cost-benefit calculation is primarily a cognitive process that governs discrete transactions based on economic logic. This method of calculation is defined by its precision in determining the values assigned to each party’s “give” and “take.” Furthermore, it necessitates that both parties perceive they have achieved a fair gain from any given transaction. In contrast, pragmatic obligation functions as a normative process that guides a series of exchanges within an ongoing relationship based on norm of reciprocity.

Notably, pragmatic obligation also allows the participating actors to hold a looser grasp on the value associated with “give” and “take” in every interaction. The requirement for equivalence can thus be satisfied in a flexible manner over the long run, instead of after every transaction. The practice of pragmatic obligation makes accountability boundaries uncertain because it enables parties to continue cooperative relationships by maintaining mutual obligation without demanding clear understanding

between specific transactions. For businesspeople, this flexibility is advantageous, allowing them to make varied investments that accumulate into a general sense of obligation in the official, which can be strategically utilized later.

3.2.2. Manifestations of pragmatic obligation

Data show that pragmatic obligation can be manifested in three distinct forms. The first manifestation of pragmatic obligation is the continuation of relationship. The informants overwhelmingly acknowledged that most bribery exchanges take place in the context of ongoing relationships rather than isolated and discrete transactions. Both parties are likely to engage in these bribery exchanges when they have established confidence in each other's intentions. As one official noted, *"Once you've established a rapport with someone, it feels almost innate to return the favor. It keeps doors open."* From the businessperson's side, maintaining this relationship is a core pragmatic goal. They know that if they stop giving favors, they might lose their access and waste the efforts they made earlier. *"If you stop giving, they forget you, or worse, they might see it as a sign you don't value their help anymore. You have to keep nurturing the relationship,"* stated a consultant. The successful completion of returned favors thus builds foundational confidence. On the other side, not giving back might hurt the relationship and make future interactions less likely. In summary, the secret to keeping bribery going over time is to keep the give-and-take flowing.

The second form of pragmatic obligation manifests through reputation management. In this sense, an official's reputation is kept by returning favors to a bribery partner. Otherwise, the official risks damaging his or her reputation in the related networks. Positive reputation management can significantly affect an official's future career advancement. Many of the informants recognized that it is commonplace for a businessperson to secure introductions or endorsements from higher-ranking officials to initiate relationships with targeted officials. Moreover, some businesspeople have even proactively attempted to signal to the targeted official their connections to influential individuals. By doing this, the businessperson builds mutual trust and makes their relationship with the official even stronger. As articulated by an official and several others, *"If you're known as someone who doesn't give back, it can hurt your reputation quickly. People will remember."* For businesspeople, their reputation in the industry and among others can also rely on how well they handle the system. This often means building give-and-take relationships. Being seen as "well-connected" is a pragmatic

asset. *“If you can get things done, get the permits, win the contracts, people respect that. They know you have the right relationships,”* a developer commented. The pressure to conform to the accepted norms of reciprocity within these established networks serves a pragmatic purpose for both officials (career/standing) and businesspeople (business success/credibility), ensuring the stability of these interconnected relationships. Conforming to the accepted norms of reciprocity serves a pragmatic purpose, ensuring the stability of these interconnected relationships. In this way, the relational aspect of obligation can expand, as actors on both sides are looking for ways to handle the complexities of their roles and the expectations surrounding them.

The third manifestation of pragmatic obligation is the risks of punishment associated with non-reciprocation. Here, the officials perceive real risks of punishment if they fail to return favors to their bribery partners. Some bribers may have access to data that proves their target has breached relevant public duties, thus allowing him to gain some subtle position in this bribery of their relationships. Conversely, strain created when accused of bribery or even so subtle pressures can also induce a great deal of apprehension to the officials. It raises the stakes for them to repay in a positive way. Businesspeople also understand this dynamic and may subtly or explicitly remind officials of their prior “investments” or shared history to exert pressure. Other businesspeople may call upon powerful figures within their networks, such as high-ranking officials, to “gently remind” the public official to “take care of business”. *“The network keeps you in line. If you fail to hold up your end of the bargain, someone may reintroduce the issue that shines a light on past indiscretions,”* recalled an official in the financial sector. For businesspeople, the risk of punishment for them if the relationship sours include losing their substantial investment, facing bureaucratic challenges, increased scrutiny, or even direct retaliation by the official or their network. *“You put in so much time and money building these relationships,”* a business owner shared, *“the thought of it all being wasted because they turn on you, or worse, try to cause trouble, is a real fear. That’s why they [officials] have to deliver sometimes.”*

Several interviewees from both sides shared a common sentiment when becoming engaged in a bribery relationship. It is the feeling of a loss of control where an individual’s will is overridden. The narrative emerged that some officials may find themselves a part of a “bribery machine”, a corrupt system that grows increasingly difficult to escape as the relationship evolves over time. Businesspeople, too, can feel trapped, needing to continue paying to ensure their operations run smoothly or to protect

previous gains. In this complex situation, the official feels strong pressure to return illegal favors. This is because doing so might bring future benefits or help avoid serious punishment for not returning the favor. Similarly, businesspeople feel compelled to continue their investments and demands for reciprocity to protect their prior investments and ensure the viability of their businesses. *“There is a story we all know: A Provincial Chief of Police was removed to other localities. It turned out that someone spent lots of money just to remove him because he did not cooperate with them [bribers],”* recounted a local official in Can Tho, which highlights the serious ramifications faced by those who fail to establish reciprocal relationships in environments characterized by corruption.

Pragmatic obligation, therefore, develops through a series of investment-oriented exchanges, wherein other parties, such as subordinates or business entities, invest resources in a relationship with the official. A common way this investment happens is through giving gifts to public officials, hoping to get favors later. These gifts may be given intermittently on specific occasions, on special personal milestones, or for no obvious reason. Interestingly, each time this gift is offered, there is no expectation of a direct favor in return. However, over time, the cumulative effect of consistent gifting builds a mutual understanding that at some point, the official will return some favors. On occasion, it may even be the case that it is the official who recognizes or actively creates advantageous opportunities and suggests them to the gift-givers.

“A gift is given not necessarily related to a specific project but may simply be to ‘pull strings’ [gửi gắm] to future opportunities,” stated an official from the Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Tourism, underscoring the implicit understanding of mutual benefit that characterizes these exchanges. Or as an official in Son La province has mentioned: *“A businessperson repeatedly extended gifts or invited an official to a trip as an expression of sentiment. As the relationship becomes close, the businessman could access business information from the official long before his/her competitors could.”*

In addition to this dynamic, another form of investment-oriented exchanges is contributions to an official’s advancement. As told in the discussions, subordinates or businesses could contribute resources for the official to campaign or give (bribe) related authorities to get the promotion. The official, once gets the promotion, would return favors based on his/her new position. In these deals, businesses and officials collude to conduct corrupt acts. The risk in these investments is the “invested” official may not get the promotion. Once the official successfully gets the desired promotion, there emerges an expectation that they will return favors based on their new authority and standing.

“Firms may ‘feed’ [nuôi] some officials for a long time. To get a project, a firm may have built a relationship with the official in charge for years, 5 years or more,” shared an official from the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, revealing the long-term commitment often required in these corrupt exchanges.

In these collaborations, businesses and officials can engage in corrupt acts that compound the problem at hand. Such acts create a symbiotic environment where both parties benefit at taxpayers’ expense while risking their professional integrity. Of course, this kind of investment also comes with risks. If the official who received support does not get the expected promotion, it won’t bring any return on investment for the people who gave the official support. This demonstrates the careful calculations and real risks involved in these obligation-based relationships.

3.2.3. Moral obligation

While practical obligation is based on defined advantages and disadvantages, another type that impacts bribery is moral obligation. For the public official, this is the obligation that comes with the feeling of owing a favor and the expectation of return that is deemed socially right and appropriate. This obligation is rooted at the official’s moral values rather than benefit calculation or norm compliance. In this context, the norm of reciprocity is internalized by the official in a way that makes it a personal ethical imperative rather than something externally governed, as is the case with pragmatic obligation. On the other hand, businesspeople carefully create situations that build strong moral obligation in officials because they know it helps ensure long-term support. For the businessperson, this “moral obligation” is not about their own sense of right or wrong. Instead, it is about understanding and using the official’s feelings of duty and gratitude. They see the official’s moral obligation as a tool (something that makes the official feel they must repay the favor, even if it conflicts with their formal duties).

Participants from both sides have remarked that the return of favors in these cases of bribery may at times contradict their professional values or ethical boundaries. In turn, the need to facilitate bribery exchanges must be strong enough to override professional values and moral principles, leading to the pervasive moral obligation. The interviews indicated that moral obligation frequently arises when bribery exchanges culminate in social debts that are difficult, if not impossible, to convert into monetary forms. It is found that moral obligations could become especially pronounced when

bribery exchanges manifest as social debts that escape straightforward monetary conversion. Two common types of social debts emerged in the findings as being capable of generating strong moral obligations for officials, and which businesspeople often strategically leverage.

Social Responsibilities: The first type of social debt refers to the favors made by partners to help officials fulfill their social responsibilities. These may include gestures that benefit the official's family members, such as providing academic assistance for the official's children, providing healthcare aid for the official's family members, or even organizing religious and divine worship services. Such favors compensatory acts that bridge the gap created by the official's busy schedule, which otherwise prevents them from effectively attending to family needs. Businesspeople know that helping an official's family builds a deeper and often stronger bond than just giving money.

During the discussions, a notable example emerged: a businessman frequently visited an official's elderly mother. One day, the mother fell unconscious, and the businessman was there to take her to the emergency department. *"That was a big debt,"* said one informant, stating the burdensome debt of social expectations that may accompany such actions, particularly in the Vietnamese context. *"They [businesspeople] do not need to give gifts to the official. Instead, they take care of the official's family. I know a case where a businessman regularly takes the official's wife to the pagoda since she is very religious. When you win the wife's opinion, you get the official's support,"* shared a local official in Da Nang, reflecting on the social dynamics at play in these relationships. *"We've all seen it happen. They don't even need to give the official gifts. Taking care of family members shows loyalty, and that means everything in our culture,"* remarked a local official in Hue, further illustrating the social aspect of a bribery-prone relationship that generates moral debt. A businessperson commented on this tactic, stating, *"Direct gifts can look bad. But helping with a child's schooling or a parent's health... that creates a personal connection, a debt he 'feels'."* The data reveals that the most potent forms of pragmatic obligation are generated not through direct financial gifts, but through favors that target an official's personal and family life, thereby creating a moral debt that is more difficult to refuse. The example of a businessman caring for an official's elderly mother is highly instructive. This act transcends a simple favor; it strategically embeds the businessperson within the official's sacred family circle. As one official noted, such acts create a "big debt" precisely because they cannot be easily repaid or dismissed

like a transactional gift. By 'taking care of the family,' the businessperson is not merely being kind; they are weaponizing cultural norms of filial piety (Confucian concept of showing respect and care to elders) and social responsibility to create a deep, personal, and emotionally resonant sense of obligation in the official. A businessperson confirmed this strategy's efficacy, stating that helping with family 'creates a personal connection, a debt he 'feels', making it more powerful than a direct payment

Sacrifice and Risk bearing: The second type of social debts is the partner's sacrifice of time or even dignity to help the official achieve his/her personal/career objectives. According to the informants, it was common to see a subordinate or businessperson informally campaigning for an official's promotion, connecting the official with influential people, or working hard on tasks that belong to the official's responsibility. Businesspeople articulated that taking on these tasks, even if inconvenient or ethically grey, is seen as 'paying dues' or demonstrating commitment.

In some extreme cases, these partners might even conduct illegal work for the official, such as bribing others or even using gangster forces. Sextortion is another type of bribe that also falls within this category of bribes. In these transactions, the partner incurs significant risks relating to potential exposure and penalties. Such sacrifices of reputation and personal safety create substantial social debts that the official is surely expected to repay. This framework of moral obligation aligns with Shohet's (2013) interpretation of "sacrifice as a gift" which exists in Vietnamese society to explain reciprocal relationships that yield complicated ethical duties. Public officials face ethical dilemmas because social debts generate complex webs of obligation that lead them to weigh between calculating the intricacies of their duties versus following their ethical principles.

"We all know Mr. T. is not qualified to become a member of the university's council, but he is supported by a university Vice President. Five years back, Mr. T. worked very hard [including dirty work] to help the VP become a parliament member. The VP owes him," narrated an official from Ho Chi Minh City, illuminating the lengths to which individuals might go to support one another in a system with corrupt practices. A business source corroborated this, saying, *"Sometimes you have to get your hands dirty for them [officials]. Campaigning, fixing problems they can't touch... that creates a debt they can't just ignore. It's more binding than money. Sextortion exists but is very hard to prove. That may be direct or indirect [the briber has someone served the*

official]. *This gift is intangible and hard to value.*” Another official at the central level shared this, showing how complex and difficult it is to deal with moral obligations in corruption; especially when they involve personal or sensitive sacrifices.

3.3. Generalization: A reciprocity view of bribery

Based on the rich conclusions drawn from the findings, the author proposes the norm of reciprocity as a theoretical lens to analyze the dynamics of bribery exchanges. In this view, a bribe is an initial favor or “gift” a party extends to another party to create an obligation of illegal/immoral repayments, i.e., obligation-based bribe. This dynamic shows how obligation-based bribery works, with businesspeople trying to gain influence and government officials reciprocally responding in both practical and moral ways. Bribery exchanges differ based on the level of personal connection between the donor and the receiver. This section is specifically going to examine that dynamic, capturing the different motivations and the many ways that engage both businesspeople and officials.

3.3.1. Relational focus

It is recognized that bribery exchanges can vary significantly in their relational focus, which refers to the varying levels of personal relationships existing between the briber and the bribed. To illustrate this relationship structure, it is helpful to plot common types of bribes along a relational dimension, which serves to further aid in contrasting obligation-based bribes against other categories of bribes (see Table 3.1).

Positioned at the “Low relational focus” extreme, the author categorizes bribes that are predominantly calculation-based. This form of exchange bases its purpose on rational assessments through which parties (both businesspeople paying and officials receiving) give money to bypass single administrative procedures and negate imposed fines and other law enforcement requirements. Relational exchanges at this extreme focus solely on immediate transactions because the relationship stays limited to the exchange of goods and services, with minimal personal history or expectation of future interaction beyond the immediate corrupt act.

Conversely, at the “High relational focus” extreme, the researcher finds that public officials may extend beneficial acts toward individuals whom they trust from their friend or family network. Evidence of corruption at this point uses favorable treatment for relatives along with preferential treatment of people from one’s personal network. Strong personal relationships can influence how likely public servants are to

take part in corrupt actions. In these cases, the relationship pre-exists the corrupt opportunity and is not strategically built for it, although businesspeople who are already within an official's trusted circle may benefit from this type of favoritism.

Obligation-based bribes, which are strategically situated between these two extremes, embody a sophisticated blend of both calculative and relational elements. This type of bribery illustrates the extent to which bribery is multifaceted. It represents a relationship that the businessperson builds on purpose to gain leverage through give-and-take. The course of contact with the official continues to follow the same pattern of steps with the expectation of receiving something in return.

3.3.2. The logic of obligation-based bribes

The essence of obligation-based bribes differs from calculation-based and trust-based bribes in some fundamental ways. First, the people involved in obligation-based bribes are mainly seen as those who give and return favors. They seldom attempt to maximize short-term gains in the same way as one might find in calculation-based bribes, which emphasize immediate outcomes. They also do not usually give favors just because of personal feelings, like in trust-based bribes. Instead, both businesspeople and officials give favors based on what the other person has done before and what they might offer in the future, acknowledging the relational aspect of these transactions. For the businessman, this translates into a carefully structured timeline strategy; incrementally providing investments and over a lengthy period to instill a sense of obligation in the official. For the official, the obligation is to respond to 'gives' with 'takes' so that the relationship is sustainable and so is their access to the benefits. This allows for a variety of configurations on the form, value, and timing of bribes and repayments, depending on the partners' tolerance for the ambiguity of future exchanges.

Second, obligation-based bribes are enforced through a combination of pragmatic and moral obligation to reciprocate, operating on both sides of the relationship. Pragmatic obligation pressures a partner to return favors for his/her own benefits in the long run. For the businessperson, the pragmatic driver is the anticipation of future contracts, permits, information, or protection that outweighs the cost of the initial and ongoing 'investments' (bribes). For the official, this differs from the short-term calculation in that the incentives are long-term and conditioned on past and future reciprocity. Rather than focusing on immediate gain, individuals understand the enduring consequences of their actions and the necessity of maintaining reciprocity. For businesspeople, this means continuing to provide favors to keep the official obligated;

for officials, it means providing the requested favors to maintain the beneficial flow of ‘gifts’ and avoid potential negative consequences from the business partner. By contrast, failure to reciprocate may cause punishment from the partner and his/her network, even when it costs the punishers to do so. On the other hand, moral obligation induces a partner to reciprocate because it is perceived by the partner as morally right. As mentioned earlier, businesspeople purposely create situations that make officials feel morally indebted. They take advantage of cultural values like gratitude and loyalty to do this. Here, the norm of reciprocity overshadows other moral values, including the sense of fairness to the population at large. This distorted moral compass prioritizes the commitments within the corrupt association above broader societal considerations, thereby justifying the unethical conduct for the official, and providing a powerful manipulative tool for the businessperson. For these reasons, obligation-based bribery is hard to combat solely through legal and economic measures because bribery exchanges are mixed with legal/moral ones, and also because the links between initial favors and repayments are blurred.

Table 3.1: Logics of obligation-based bribes

	Low Relational focus High		
	Calculation-based bribes	Obligation-based bribes	Trust-based bribes
Typical types of corruption/ bribes	- Prolonged administrative procedures and/or pressures to solicit bribes - Arm-length exchanges (e.g., traffic fines)	- Contract kick-backs - Regular “gifts” to ensure future favors from officials	Favoritism and nepotism to family or close friends
Behavioral foundation	Partners maximize short-term gain	Partners reciprocate	Partners rely on trust and emotion
Variety of preferences	Relatively homogeneous: self-interests	Relatively heterogeneous: Reciprocal favors vary in forms, timing, and values	Relatively homogeneous: favor to trusted partners
Enforcement mechanisms	- Short-term incentive - Coercive	- Reciprocal incentives - Targeted punishment - Reciprocity as a moral order	Emotional attachment

Source: Author

3.4. A process model of bribery-prone relationship evolvment

As shown previously, corruption can happen in a long, complex relationship between an official and a businessperson. This relationship can start seemingly benign but eventually turns into a bribery-prone relationship. To further understand this relationship in depth, the author developed a model that explains the psychological processes involved in both the initiation and perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships. The model integrates insights drawn from both government officials' and businesspeople's experiences, demonstrating how affective experiences, cognitive processing, the norm of reciprocity, and moral disengagement mechanisms interact across different stages of the relationship's lifecycle.

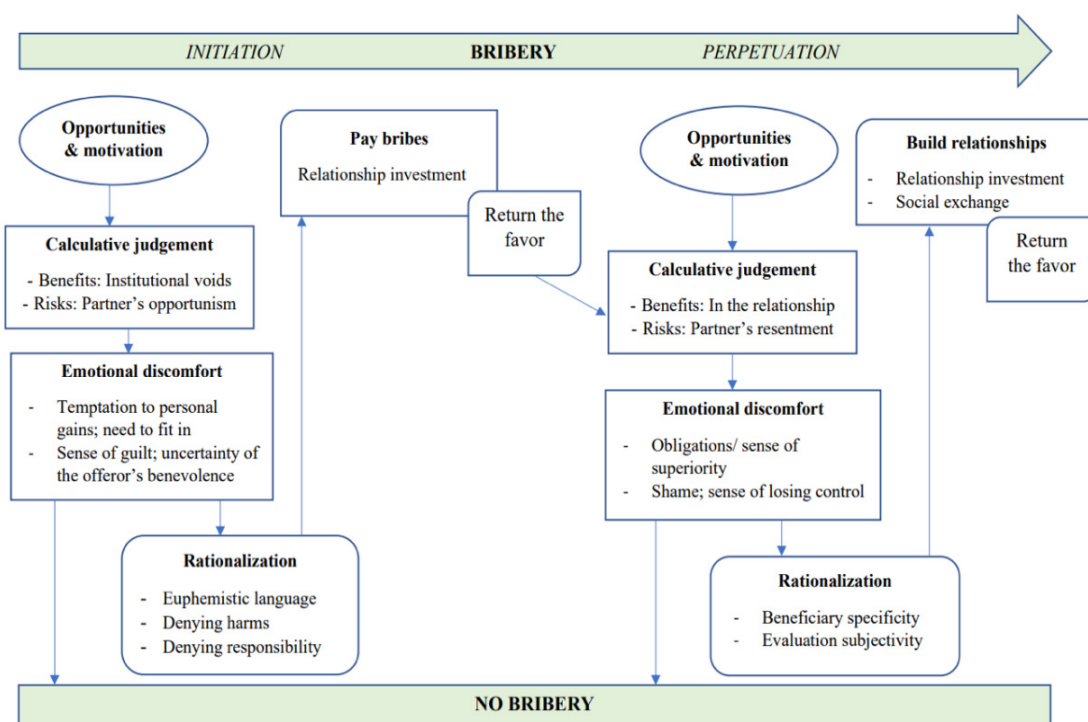


Figure 3.1a: Process model of the initiation and perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships (government official's perspective)

Source: Author

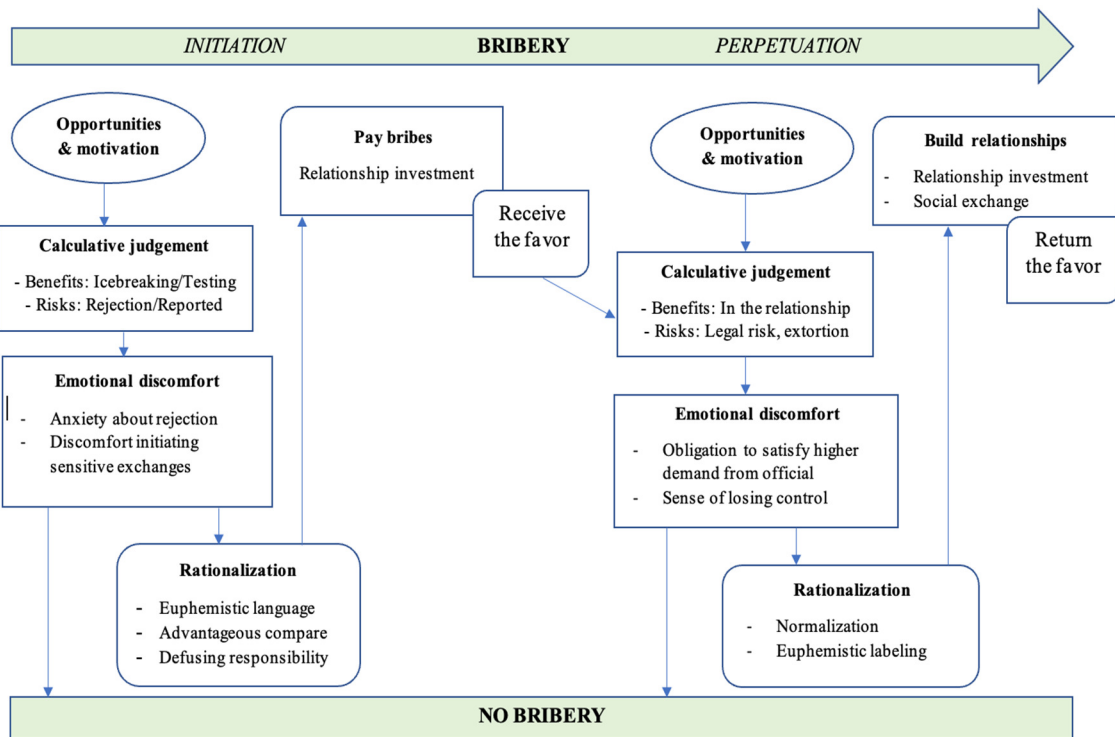


Figure 3.1b: Process model of the initiation and perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships (businesspeople's perspective)

Source: Author

3.4.1. The Initiation stage of bribery-prone relationships

At the initiation stage, the data indicates that two critical factors, including opportunity and motivation, must exist, but these factors alone are insufficient to drive an official to engage in a bribery-prone exchange. This stage is often triggered by a businessperson identifying an opportunity to start a potential relationship with the government official. The opportunity could be a birthday occasion, a holiday/festival, or even the official's family event. This step is a deliberate action by the businessperson, intended to create a connection, which initiates the potential bribery-prone relationship.

An official's deeply embedded ethical considerations may at the same time disengage from the conduct of bribery. When faced with the prospect of accepting illicit favors, the official may experience some kind of emotional discomfort. Two powerful motivations shape this dilemma. On the one hand, the attractiveness of a bribe, combined with societal pressure to fit within a broader corrupt political and business network, strongly encourages officials to accept the offered favors. For businesspeople, initiating a potentially bribery-prone relationship is often accompanied by emotional discomfort due to the risk involved (being refused, being exposed or sued, etc.). *"You have to understand who you are working with,"* noted

a business owner from Ho Chi Minh City. *“Sometimes, if you’re not careful, the officials will not only turn down your offer, but they will also put you on a black list”* (BP-14). The official, on the other hand, feels guilty, scared, and unsure about the favor-giver’s good intentions and what the favor offeror could want in the future. This circumstance is full with contradicting feelings that make the official feel even worse. In this context, they may find themselves tempted to accept the bribe while implicitly rejecting self-identifying as a corrupt individual.

“The hardest part is not just the act of accepting a gift, but all the expectations that come with it. No one wants to see themselves as corrupt” (GO-2). This vignette illustrates the ways in which these transactional exchanges are intertwined with existential tensions. For example, the explanation from a businessman as to why something is offered often labels the offer as a “gift” or “expression of sentiment.” This means that the official is left to resolve their internal dichotomy. As one business development manager in Da Nang explained, *“We don’t call it a bribe. It’s a ‘thank you’ for their time, for their understanding, for making things run smoother. It’s about building ‘goodwill’”* (BP-11). But the businesspeople are not always doing this as a pain-free strategy. Some individuals may experience discomfort as a result of the paradox of the perceived advantages grounded in acquiring contracts or evading delays and the dominating sense of wrongdoing. Here, the interplay of internal strife is in fact common to both sides.

This emotional discomfort, triggered by conflicting desires, compels officials to engage in rationalization processes. These processes are what their psychology goes through to make engaging in the bribery exchange more morally acceptable. The official may only commit to the bribery-prone act if they are satisfied with the rationalization they construct. The study reveals several common forms of rationalization for engaging in corrupt acts, including the use of euphemistic language and denying responsibility for their choices. The practice of gift-giving plays an important role in this rationalization process. This is especially true when the word “gift” is used as a form of “euphemistic labeling” for what is really a bribe. The businessperson uses these euphemisms on purpose. This helps the official justify accepting the gift. It makes the act feel less like corruption and more to be a normal social exchange. *“If you present it as a genuine gesture of appreciation, not a demand for something, they’re much more likely to accept,”* (BP-13) said a construction firm CEO in Hanoi. At the same time, businesspeople aim to lessen the emotional discomfort and moral conflict that come with initiating connections that could be corrupt. Here, different rationalization strategies are

deployed. These strategies are based on Bandura's (1999) mechanisms of moral disengagement. They help people justify their actions without fully seeing them as immoral. As one businessperson in Nghe An put it, *"No one wants to do things you deem as wrongful, but sometimes when you have no other option but to do it, you'd find ways to ease your mind so you can sleep at night"* (BP-17).

The acceptance of a "favor" at the initiation stage triggers an obligation to return the favor and moves the relationship to the perpetuation stage. The official may return the favor(s) right after accepting initial offers or delay returning it. In either situation, the official experiences a new round of emotional discomfort. On the one hand, the sense of obligation (if under-returned the favor) or superiority (if over-returned the favor) encourages the official to continue the bribery-prone relationship that has started. From the businessperson's perspective, the official's acceptance and subsequent reciprocation solidify the informal bond and signal the potential for a mutually beneficial, although illicit, ongoing relationship. *"Once they take the first step, it's easier to build on that,"* a business owner in Hanoi remarked. *"It creates a certain understanding, a mutual dependency"* (BP-20). On the other hand, a feeling of guilt for breaching professional moral values and a worry of losing control for both parties hinder the continuity of the relationship.

"Accepting favors creates a cycle that feels like a trap. One day you might come to realize you're in too deep" (GO-18), a policy coordinator emphasized the frequently illicit nature of these relationships that keep people trapped in cycles of expectation. The businessperson's ongoing involvement and possible escalation of demands, which conforms with the established pattern of reciprocity, further reinforce this entrapment. *"We see it as an investment,"* a representative from a transportation company in Hanoi shared. *"You invest in these relationships, and over time, they pay off. It's about long-term cooperation"* (BP-19).

3.4.2. The perpetuation stage of bribery-prone relationship

Like the initiation stage, these opposing emotions during the perpetuation stage strain the official's need to rationalize their continued engagement in such relationships. Awareness of the norm of reciprocity is significant but inadequate on its own. The official must convince themselves that adhering to the norm of reciprocity carries more weight than maintaining their professional ethical values. Two common strategies are employed in this rationalization process: "beneficiary specificity," which involves focusing on helping specific individuals (namely, the briber and their

affiliates) rather than addressing broader societal contributions, and “evaluation subjectivity,” which is blurring the links between favors and returned favors. From the businessperson’s side, they may help the official justify the act. They might do this by focusing on the personal benefit to the official. They may also present the exchange as a personal favor, not as a transaction that affects the public. A property developer in Hanoi said, *“We always make sure they know it’s about them. It’s not about the company; it’s about our personal connection”* (BP-12). Ultimately, the continuity of the bribery-prone relationship relies, in part, on whether the official is satisfied with their own rationalizations.

As the relationship progresses into the perpetuation stage, where illegal/immoral exchanges are embedded with legal/normal ones. Genuine gifts (e.g., as expression of gratitude, benevolence, friendships) mingle with bribery gifts (i.e., those with expectations of returns of illegal/immoral favors). Opportunities are not only proposed by the bribe-giver. They are also suggested by the receivers. Businesspeople learn to understand what the official needs. They also learn to see possible opportunities. Then they offer favors or create situations where the official can easily return the favor. *“You start to anticipate what they might need or want,”* an export executive from Nghe An explained. *“It’s about being proactive, not waiting for them to ask”* (BP-7). The performers might not wait for chances to bribe them to show up. They might even make them happen. Over time, both sides may feel some emotional attachment. Gradually, rationalization may no longer be needed to continue their bribery-prone relationships. The actors may step out of their limits to create and exchange favors. They identify with each other and collude in sustaining their bribery-prone relationships. *“The interactions can progress to the point where they both know the game, and through time, they built a sort of understanding beyond ethical concerns”* (GO-12), explained an official from Da Nang, showing how familiarity can desensitize individuals to ethical reservations. This shared understanding shows a deeper level of involvement and mutual dependence between the businessperson and the official. *“At a certain point, it’s less about the specific favor and more about maintaining the relationship itself,”* a representative from a prominent business association in Ho Chi Minh City remarked. *“You become partners, in a way”* (BP-5).

Over time, emotional attachments naturally develop between the parties involved, allowing rationalization needs to decline as the relational dynamic deepens. The businessperson often makes this emotional connection by staying in touch with the

other person on a regular basis. They are loyal and care about the official's personal life or problems. *"We'll invite them to family events, send gifts for their kids' birthdays,"* a wholesaler manager in Son La described. *"It's about building a genuine bond, showing you care beyond just business"* (BP-8). People learn how to deal with the blurry line between their work and personal lives. They become more willing to cross old boundaries to give and receive favors and might start to feel that they are tied to each other. This creates a sense of belonging, which helps sustain their bribery-prone relationship. This collaboration implies that both sides are interested in such illicit relationship. As a matter of fact, both parties want to protect their shared interests and keep the business going. A real estate developer in Hanoi said, *"You're both in it together. There's an unspoken agreement to look out for each other, because if one falls, the other might too"* (BP-12).

To clarify the dynamics present within the process model, the author has mapped these elements onto the two distinct stages of bribery-prone relationships described above. Table 3.2a and 3.2b summarize the various elements involved in the psychological processes operative at these stages for each party. In the following sections, these elements of each stage will be discussed.

Table 3.2a: Government Officials’ Processes at Different Stages of Briber-prone Relationships

	Initiation Stage	Perpetuation Stage
Form and purposes of offered favors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Purposes: 1) Initiation of bribery transactions; 2) Investment in bribery-prone relationships (for future benefits) - Forms: Monetary and/or material forms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Purposes: 1) Investment in bribery-prone relationships (for future benefits); 2) social bribery exchange - Forms: Monetary, material forms and non-monetary/material forms
Risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The official may not be sure of the offeror’s benevolence and expectation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Uncertainty of the partner’s expectation (forms, values, and timing of returned favors) - Unsure of his/her own authority to return the expected favors - Partner’s resentment from dissatisfaction with the relationship
Emotional discomfort	<p>The emotional discomfort is rooted at the conflict between two feelings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The temptation to accept the offers and the need to fit in with wider network of businesses and public officials - The sense of guilt of breaching professional values; conflict of interest and the uncertainty of the offeror’s benevolence 	<p>The emotional discomfort is rooted at the conflict between two feelings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The obligation to return favors or the sense of superiority (if the returned favors exceed the initial favors in values) - Shame and/or a sense of losing control
Rationalization strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Euphemistic language, e.g., gifts, favors, helps - Denying the harm: e.g., Just small gifts - Denying responsibility: The offers were voluntary; there was no better choice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Beneficiary specificity: Helping specific people/groups is better than serving general, abstract entities, such as “society” - Evaluation subjectivity: The links between initial offers and returned favors are blurred, and thus any moral evaluation is subjective

Source: Author

**Table 3.2b: Businessperson's Processes at Different Stages
of Briber-prone Relationships**

	Initiation stage	Perpetuation stage
Forms and purposes of offered favors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Purposes: 1) Initial 'icebreakers'; 2) Establish rapport; 3) Test receptiveness - Forms: meals, small gifts, introductions, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Purposes: 1) Sustained gift-giving; 2) Proactively identifying or creating opportunities for official to reciprocate; 3) Maintaining and deepening the relationship - Forms: expense coverage, "dirty work", permits, contracts, etc.
Risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Risk of rejection - Risk of being reported. - Damaging reputation if approach is mishandled. - Uncertainty about official's response and expectations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased legal risk due to higher value/frequency of exchanges. - Extortion or blackmail by the official. - Losing the established advantage if the relationship sours or the official is removed. - Risk of the relationship demanding favors that are too costly or risky.
Emotional discomfort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Potential discomfort or awkwardness when initiating sensitive exchanges. - Anxiety about acceptance/rejection. - Unease if actions conflict with personal ethics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discomfort often decreases as the relationship becomes normalized and routinized. - May experience anxiety related to the security of the relationship or the demands of the official. - Discomfort if asked to perform actions outside established boundaries or face serious risk.
Rationalization strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Euphemistic labeling/Moral justification: e.g., framing gifts/favors as relationship building ("quan hệ"), cultural practice, or legitimate business expense/hospitality - Advantageous comparison/Diffusion of responsibility: Justifying actions as necessary to compete in the market - Distortion of consequences: Focusing on the potential business benefits and return on investment; - - Evaluation subjectivity: Blurring the link between initial favors and future expected returns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Normalization: Rationalizations become less explicit as the behavior is routinized - Euphemistic labeling: Utilizing shared language ("our way of doing business") and unspoken agreements

3.5. Affective processes in the bribery-prone relationships from the public official's perspective

3.5.1. Affective processes in the initiation of bribery-prone relationships

3.5.1.1. Forms and purpose of offered favors

Throughout this research, it was highlighted that during the initiation stage of a bribery-prone relationship, the offered favors (referred to herein as “offers”) could serve two purposes. First, these offers can act merely as euphemistic labels for transactions that amount to bribery. In this context, the offers are presented as “gifts” (món quà) that typically manifest in monetary or material forms. This labeling is a clever “test the water” method between the gift-giver and the receiver regarding the expectations that accompany those favors. According to the informants, by presenting a bribe as a “gift”, the briber could subtly demonstrate his/her intention and test the official's expectation. The language of “gift-giving” gives the briber a way to back down in case the official does not respond favorably. *“I’ve seen it many times. You’d be surprised how easily words change the game. A simple ‘gift’ opens many doors, while ‘bribe’ closes them”* (GO-8), contended an official from Thai Binh, emphasizing the power of language in the construction of these corrupt exchanges.

Second, these offers can function as investments for future bribery exchanges. The intention behind such investments is to develop lucrative relationships with officials who may be in a position to return desirable favors. Beyond being characterized solely as “gifts”, these offerings could also be framed as “expressions of sentiment” (thể hiện tình cảm) or “as an introduction” (để ra mắt), indicating a level of emotional or social investment rather than transactional exchange. This type of “offer” has unspecified returned favors in forms, timing, and even values. These offers induce an uneasy feeling from the uncertainty and potential conflict of interests, but also blur the link between the given gifts and returned favors, facilitating the rationalization for accepting the gifts.

When viewed through this lens, these offers come with a level of discomfort. There is an inherent unease coming from uncertainty about expectations, as well as possible interest conflicts that may arise from the transaction. This uncertainty serves to obscure the connections between the given gifts and the expected favors, therefore assisting the ongoing process of rationalization for officials when deciding whether to accept the favors.

3.5.1.2. *Emotional discomfort in entering bribery-prone relationships*

When partners want to start a new bribery-prone relationship with a public official, they are frequently uncertain about how the official will respond. If the official refuses, the partner runs a risk of appearing to act unethically or illegally. By contrast, the official also faces certain risk since he/she is not certain of the offeror's benevolence and/or expectation.

"Accepting a gift or favor, you may fall into a trap. You may not know what they [gift-givers] expect in return", said an official from Son La province (GO-7), highlighting the cautiousness that accompanies these transactions.

The public official, then, experiences considerable emotional discomfort that emerges from a conflict of moral processes and competing feelings. On one hand, the temptation of accepting valuable offers (e.g., "gifts") can be compelling, especially in cases where officials occupy low-salary positions. The urge to blend in with a bigger group of corporations and public officials who are already doing dishonest things makes this problem much worse. Refusing the offers, the official may lose an opportunity to join a network of relationships that could be beneficial for economic gain and career development.

"You refuse their offers; you do not fit in with their network. Can you advance at work?", said an official in Thai Binh (GO-8). *"When you say no, you also say no to connect with people who could help your career. It's a difficult position to be in."* An official from Nghe An (GO-11) noted this, showing the strong pressure to follow corrupt norms.

"If you return gifts or report them, people may think you are out of your mind." Another official at the central level (GO-1) stated this, showing how society often rewards complicity instead of ethical behavior.

"Nobody is stupid to say I give a gift in exchange for a project. When they 'smell' an opportunity, they would extend a gift to people in charge." commented an official from Hanoi (GO-5), further portraying the systemic roots of corruption as normalized behavior.

However, the respondents also said that they sometimes feel guilty when they break professional ethical rules. Some officials could feel "conscience-stricken" or worry about being evaluated when they take favors that could be corrupt. Even if they are not expected to return the favor right away, accepting it can still make them feel uncomfortable. Here, they may feel inner conflict and a sense of possible indebtedness.

“Accepting a high-valued gift may make one feel as being ‘looked down’.” An official from Da Nang (GO-15) shared this, showing the stigma that often comes with such exchanges.

In addition, officials may feel fear about being trapped or betrayed by the favor-giver. This is especially true when the exchange involves something illegal. These fears make the emotional discomfort even worse. This blend of conflicting emotions thus creates an environment of more unease and subsequently motivates a need for rationalization as the official struggles with the possibility of accepting the offered favor without compromising their integrity.

3.5.1.3. Rationalization strategies

The data suggests that public officials often employ a number of rationalization strategies to justify their acceptance of bribes. The first and most prevalent strategy involves euphemistic language to disguise the fundamentally corrupt nature of the exchange. Terms such as “gifts” for bribes, “favours” or “help” in reference to the official’s reciprocation of favours, and “sentiment” to characterize the relationships that are mixed with bribery undertones are very common in this context.

Some respondents have shared that they have even taken the euphemism further, presenting their material “offer” (perhaps a decorative plant) as a “trading good,” effectively “selling” it to the official at a fraction of the actual market value. In the Vietnamese culture, gift-giving could also be seen as sharing “windfall” with others, which is traditionally believed as a necessary act to invite more “windfall” in the future. This cultural backdrop promotes adherence to behaviors that individuals feel are socially necessary and acceptable, creating a convenient mask for acts that could be deemed unethical or illegal. Gift-giving becomes a common practice that a party would need to conform to in order to fit in, to be seen as “behaved in good sense” (*biết đường ăn ở*), and thus becomes a good disguise for bribes.

“In our culture, giving is seen as a way to build relationships. The moment you add the label ‘gift,’ suddenly it feels right, doesn’t it?” commented an official from Ho Chi Minh City (GO-16), shedding light on the cultural context that helps to facilitate these practices.

The second rationalization strategy is denying the perceived harmful impact of accepting bribery-prone offers. Officials convince themselves that no damage has been done by accepting the favours; common justifications offered include statements such as “the gifts are small, no harm has been done” or “this is just an expression of friendship.”

Some participants went further by claiming that *“if the gifts [bribes] were presented after the favor had already been granted by the official, they simply serve as ‘thank you’ gifts”* (GO-6). This rationalization is fortified by the use of euphemistic terms perceived as benign, combined with a lag time between the receipt of the gift and the expectation of reciprocation, which detaches the “gifts” from any immediate associations with work-related decisions. Some officials attempt to assure themselves that *“this is a personal gift, which does not relate to work at all”* (GO-6).

Denying responsibility is another rationalization strategy that emerges from the data. One way to deny is to shift the responsibility to the favor offeror. Several respondents suggested that if the official did not explicitly request the gifts, then the acceptance of such gifts should not be viewed as problematic. Many situations unfold in which partners, such as businesses or citizens, persistently and “voluntarily” give gifts to officials. Some officials rationalize that declining gifts could hurt the feelings of the gift-givers or induce unnecessary anxiety.

“Many times, we did not ask for [gifts]. The partners insisted on giving gifts, and refusing the gifts may worry them,” shared a local official (GO-22).

“If they [partners] voluntarily give to us, there is no problem. Only when we ask for then ‘gifts’ become problematic,” echoed another respondent (GO17).

Another way for an official to deny responsibility in accepting the offers is to convince themselves that “there are no better choices.” Several lines of justification may accompany this reasoning, including assertions such as “everyone does it, and you do not want to be an extreme” or “you need to survive in order to do good things.” This rationalization strategy suggests that public officials have to compromise their moral values [accepting bribery-prone gifts] at certain times to survive, and then they could do good things for society. Or *“The salary is too low. Public officials also need to feed their families,”* stated an official from Hue (GO-9), pointing to the economic pressures that often serve to combat moral dilemmas.

Interestingly, the findings reveal that this need for rationalization is frequently the most intense in new relationships. The urgency of rationalization tends to diminish for those officials who have previously engaged in bribery exchanges. As one respondent acknowledged, *“People may feel uneasy at first, but after several times, they get used to it [accepting favors or gifts with a potential conflict of interests]”* (GO-4). However, when they enter a new relationship, the uncertainty of the partners’ expectations and benevolence remains, retaining a need for rationalization.

3.5.2. Affective processes in the perpetuation stage of bribery relationships

3.5.2.1. Forms and purpose of offered favors

In the comprehensive analysis, the author identified two roles that offered favors have in facilitating the perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships. First, within the evolving context, these “offers” serve as ongoing investments in the relationships. Such offerings are primarily observed in material and monetary forms, frequently referred to as “gifts.” As the relationships evolve, the “offers” can be extended at different times, in many different forms, to different recipients, such as family members.

A noteworthy aspect of these gifts is that the accumulation of these gestures over time can build a mutual understanding among the parties involved. As the relationship progresses, the expectation that the official will eventually reciprocate these favors materializes. Even though the value of offerings may not be significantly high on a one-off basis, the cumulative value can be substantial over time. The quote below from the informants illustrates the point:

“He [a businessman] just gave an official a gift last month. He regularly took care of the official’s family members but has never asked for anything. What should the official do? Well, if there is a lucrative opportunity, the official should think about him. That is implied,” articulated an official from the Ministry of Construction (GO-3), illustrating the implicit understanding that can develop from seemingly friendly, benign gestures.

“Firms may ‘feed’ [nuôi] some officials for a long time. To get a project, a firm may have built a relationship with the official in charge for years, 5 years or more,” elaborated an official from the Department of Natural Resources and Environment (GO-17), shedding light on the deliberate tactics employed to gain the trust of the partner over time.

“A businessperson repeatedly extended gifts or invited an official to a trip as an expression of sentiment. As the relationship becomes close, the businessman could access business information from the official long before his/her competitors could,” given by an official from Son La province (GO-10), reflecting on the advantages that arise from sustained relationship-building based on gift-giving.

Second, these “offers” can serve as a form of bribery-prone social exchange. In this form, these offers are often disguised under social interactions rather than existing solely as material or financial transactions. While these offers can be a combination of both material and non-material contributions, the most impactful elements come from non-material gestures.

Various forms of offered favors emerge within this category. One common form involves the time and resources the offerors invest to help the official fulfill specific objectives, such as achieving promotions or gaining recognition. In other instances, offerors may allocate time and resources to care for the loved ones of the official as a means of expressing understanding for their demanding job. Another variant of these “offers” could involve the offerors’ sacrifices regarding their dignity or reputation in order to support the official’s interests. The offerors could conduct dirty works for the official, such as bribing others or using underworld forces for the official’s purposes. Sextortion is another “offer” in this category. In these conducts, the offerors incur a risk of being detected and punished. These non-material offers gradually create a sense of identification between the offeror and the official, inducing returned favors when there are opportunities.

The accumulation of these non-material offers creates a sense of identification between the offeror and the official, thus improving the likelihood that favors will be returned in the future when opportunities arise.

3.5.2.2. Emotional discomfort after entering bribery relationships

Once officials accept a series of offers from partners, they may face some uncertainty regarding what the partner expects from them in terms of reciprocation. In numerous cases, the anticipated returned favor remains vaguely implied, requiring interpretation on the part of the official. Some expected favors may be perfectly legal and moral, while others may not. The official is sometimes unsure if they have the right authority and freedom to respond appropriately, which keeps the situation tense. Also, the schedule and exact amount of these repayments are often not made apparent. Instead, the exchange depends on unspoken understandings that can be interpreted in different ways. Nevertheless, respondents generally agreed that most offers encountered in their professional contexts align with bribery-prone transactions, embedding elements of corruption or potential conflicts of interest within the relationships.

Engaging in some first exchange(s) of the relationship, the official continues experiencing some emotional discomfort. On the one hand, accepting the offers generates feelings of obligation or indebtedness toward the favor-giver. Should the official perceive that their return of favor holds less value than the gifts they have accepted, the obligation will persist, resulting in feelings of “shyness” or “lack of confidence” during interactions. If the official believes they have over-compensated in returning favors, they may develop feelings of superiority as they presume to have

granted additional value upon the partner. In this case, a new sense of obligation may shift to the offeror's side, potentially giving rise to new expectations for reciprocation from the official. These emotions, whether feeling indebted or feeling superior, push the official to keep the bribery-prone relationship going.

On the other hand, participation in bribery-prone exchanges can also generate feelings of discomfort and shame stemming from the breach of professional values that are expected of public officials. In addition, many respondents conveyed a sense of "losing control" once they became involved in a bribery-prone relationship. When officials accept gifts and promise to repay (often in illegal or irregular ways), they take a big risk. They may reveal important secrets to the other person. This could hurt their job. Consequently, they may feel as though they are becoming part of a corrupt "machine," making it increasingly challenging to disentangle themselves from these damaging relationships. These uneasy feelings induce the official to exit the bribery-prone relationship. Similar to the previous stage, these conflicting psychological processes create an emotional discomfort, which in turn triggers a need for rationalization.

"He frequently visits the official's mother. One day, the mother told the official that 'He takes better care of me than you do. Last week, if he was not here to get me to the emergency, I may be gone'. That is a big debt!" recounted an official from Thai Binh province (GO-8), detailing the emotional intricacies that emerge in such corrupt exchanges.

"We all know Mr. T. is not qualified to become a member of the university's council. But he is supported by a university's Vice President. Five years back, Mr. T. worked very hard [including dirty work] to help the VP become parliament member. The VP owes him," noted an official from Ho Chi Minh City (GO-16), bringing to light the interconnectedness of obligations and indebtedness that characterize these unethical relationships.

3.5.2.3. Rationalization strategies

The findings suggest that while the norm of reciprocity plays a significant role in providing a rationale for ongoing participation in bribery relationships, it is not solely sufficient to direct the influence of professional moral values, which continues to pose challenges for officials. Officials must construct strategies to justify their actions such that adherence to the norm of reciprocity either overpower or does not compromise their ethical standards. The first rationalization strategy involves "beneficiary specificity," whereby officials prioritize aiding individuals within their immediate networks while

neglecting their contributions to the general society. Some officials believed that they were doing a good thing by illegally helping a company or a group of people to survive. While being aware that returning illegal favors to the bribe-giver violates professional values and may harm the society, the officials tried to turn attention to “close and specific” subjects, i.e., bribe-giver and his/her organizations. To them, “the ‘society’ is an abstract concept” while “these people (bribe-giver’s organizations) are flesh and blood; they need help.” According to this strategy, doing good for a specific group of people justifies for a violation of “vague” professional values that protect “distant and abstract” entity, such as ‘the society’.

The second rationalization strategy involves the effort to blur the links between initial favors and any subsequent (illegal) returns, an approach dubbed as “evaluation subjectivity.” Some officials suggested that establishing a direct connection between initial favors and subsequent reciprocation is challenging, as the two are delivered in different forms, at varying times, and rarely hold equivalent value. In many instances, favors may be directed at the official’s family members rather than the officials themselves, thereby creating a subjective justification for separating professional decision-making from the personal interactions involved. *“There is rarely black or white. Good or bad are in the eyes of beholder,”* commented a local official (GO-19), underscoring the relativity of ethical interpretations in these circumstances.

Over time, trusted relationships may develop further between the two parties, fostering an emotional bond that further engage participants in these corrupt exchanges. The official may begin to experience feelings of identification with their partners, leading to proactive behaviors that he will proactively create opportunities for future exchanges. Gradually, the need for rationalization may decline to even almost disappear, as the actors become increasingly comfortable operating within established norms of conduct that sustain their bribery-prone relationships.

3.6. Affective processes in the bribery-prone relationships from the business people’s perspective

Understanding the businessperson’s perspective is important to fully understand bribery as they are often the ones who initiate and continue these exchanges. While the official’s feelings focus on dealing with the ethical limits of their public role, the businessperson faces different concerns. These include business needs, building relationships, managing risks, and personal ethics in an environment that may involve corruption.

3.6.1. Affective processes in the initiation of bribery-prone relationships

The initial stage for businesspeople involves strategic actions aimed at gaining favor or access, often accompanied by a degree of uncertainty and the need to manage potential ethical conflict.

3.6.1.1. Forms and purpose of offered favors

In the initiation phase, businesspeople use different types of “favors” or offerings to build a connection and to test if a public official is open to the approach. These first offerings are often called “icebreakers” that include seemingly insignificant offerings like free meals, small gifts, or meetings arranged through mutual acquaintances. In Asian business cultures, offering gifts is considered to be a gesture that shows respect, gratitude, and friendship. Such action is a significant component of building and preserving solid relationships. This is especially true in Vietnam. Vietnamese give gifts as part of doing business, but outsiders who do not understand the culture well can misconstrue this as bribery.

The main purpose of these initial gifts is to create trust and a foundation for a future relationship since it is uncommon to ask for a direct or illegal favor right away. Businesspeople use this method to “test the waters.” They send a quiet message that they want to build a helpful relationship. “*You start small, a nice meal, a local specialty as a gift,*” said a manager from Da Nang (BP-2). “*It’s about opening a door, not demanding something right away.*” These offerings are often described using softer terms, such as “expressions of sentiment” (thể hiện tình cảm) or “as an introduction” (để ra mắt). These phrases make the action seem more social or emotional, rather than a business deal. “*We call them ‘relationship building expenses,’*” said a logistics manager in Ho Chi Minh City (BP-10). “*It’s never a ‘bribe’ on the invoice, it’s always ‘entertainment’ or ‘client development’.*” This strategically unclear wording is important since it gives the businessperson a way to back out if the official is not interested. This way, they do not look openly corrupt or get rejected in a way that could hurt future chances. The goal is to make a small connection or feeling of obligation that can grow over time. Later, this may help getting access to better treatment, faster service, or a business edge.

3.6.1.2. Emotional discomfort in entering bribery-prone relationship

For businesspeople, initiating a relationship that may involve bribery often causes emotional discomfort stemming from several sources. One major source is the inherent risk involved. Giving a gift or favor with hopes of future return, especially when it may cross legal or moral lines, is risky. It could be refused, exposed, or lead to legal trouble.

“The first time, your heart is really pounding,” said a construction company director from Thai Binh (BP-16); *“You’re thinking, ‘What if they report me?’”* Businesspeople may worry about how the official will respond. The official might accept, reject, or even report the offer. It is much harder to know what’s “inappropriate” because it is not always apparent what that means. This is especially true in places where giving gifts is common but against the law.

In addition to these concerns from the outside, businesspeople can often feel conflicted *on the inside*. They could feel a split between their personal ideals and their corporate aims. They might feel guilty or uncomfortable when doing something they believe is wrong. “No one wants to feel like they’re doing something wrong,” said a CEO in Hanoi (BP-4). “But sometimes, it feels like the only way to get things done.” The discomfort comes from this clash between gaining something *beneficial* (like winning contracts or avoiding delays) and knowing it may be wrong. Businesspeople must *balance* the need to “survive” or “compete” *with* their own sense of right and wrong. The unclear nature of the first exchange *not only* adds to the discomfort *of the businesspeople but also* creates *potential* confusion *from the official* about what is expected *of them*.

3.6.1.3. Rationalization strategies

Businesspeople employ a variety of justification methods when initiating exchanges that could be corrupt, which can be emotionally and morally challenging. These strategies are based on Bandura’s (1999) mechanisms of moral disengagement that allow people to commit wrongful acts without the feeling of guilt.

One typical strategy is to use Advantageous Comparison. Businesspeople might not have a different assessment of their own doings when comparing themselves with their competitors. They can internalize their actions as morally acceptable because they are just a “cost of doing business” or that “everyone else is doing it.” This view minimizes the perceived ethical transgression by framing it as a standard, perhaps even unavoidable, practice within their industry or location. *“In my area, especially for larger projects, it’s almost expected,”* a construction company director there added (BP-16). *“You can’t get anything off the ground if you stick strictly to the rules.”*

Euphemistic Labeling is also used extensively by framing initial offers as “gifts” or “relationship-building” gestures instead of bribes. By using softened language, the businessperson lessens the harmful or illicit nature of the exchange, making it appear less ethically questionable. *“We never talk about ‘bribes’; we talk about ‘facilitation fees’ or ‘speed money’,”* an investment fund executive in Nghe An revealed (BP-6). *“It makes it*

sound less serious, just a way to make the process more efficient.” Referring to payments as “speed money” or “facilitation fees” is also part of this strategy. It modifies the name of unlawful payments so that they look like they just help speed up slow processes.

Businesspeople may also use Disregard or Distortion of Consequence by reducing the seriousness of their actions. They can intentionally choose to focus only on the short-term gain for their company. At the same time, they may ignore or downplay the harm to fair competition or the public. *“It’s not like I’m hurting anyone directly,”* a small business CEO in Hanoi reasoned (BP-4). *“I’m just trying to keep my business afloat and feed my family.”* Corruption is so prevalent in their environment that businesspeople may feel their actions have little impact on the big picture.

They might also use tactics like Displacement of Responsibility and Attribution of Blame. Businesspeople might shift responsibility to the system, the bureaucracy, or the officials themselves. This is done by arguing that businesspeople are forced into these actions by unreasonable regulations, demands from officials, or the corrupt nature of the environment. *“The regulations are so confusing, and the bureaucracy is so slow, you have no choice but to find ways around it,”* a transport company owner from Hanoi added (BP-18). They may feel they “have no choice” if they want their business to survive, thus displacing agency for their actions onto external pressures. This may collide with Moral Justification. In this situation, the bad thing is done to help the greater good. Businesspeople can claim that they are only doing it to keep their company stay in business. They believe this is acceptable because their company provides employment and supports the economy. *“If my company thrives, it creates jobs, it pays taxes,”* a manufacturing executive in Ho Chi Minh City argued (BP-14). *“So, in a way, what I’m doing is good for society, even if it’s not strictly by the book.”*

Lastly, businesses may create excuses that make it harder to see the link between the first favor and the expected return, stressing on how “exchange” is subjective or framing it as developing long-term “trust” instead of a bribe. This form of justification is related to Disregard or Distortion of Consequences by making the unethical link less clear and harder to confront consciously.

3.6.2. Affective processes in the perpetuation stage of bribery-prone relationships

As a bribery-prone relationship grows over time, the businessperson’s feelings begin to change. The early discomfort may become less intense. However, new psychological issues can appear as the relationship becomes closer, and the risks become higher.

3.6.2.1. Forms and purpose of offered favors

In the perpetuation stage, the nature and purpose of offerings become clearer and more established. These actions start to become part of the businessperson's routine way of dealing with the official. At first, the exchanges may have been small and careful, like "icebreakers." But over time, the favors often grow significantly in terms of value. They also become more directly connected to specific goals, such as winning contracts, getting permits faster, or receiving special treatment. *"It's no longer just about getting to know them; it's about getting things done,"* said a real estate developer from Hanoi (BP-12). *"The gifts become bigger, more specific to what we need."* It is not simply about getting to know each other anymore. They are now about keeping access and making sure the official continues to make favorable decisions.

The types of exchanges can change. They could start as small presents and escalate into bigger financial payments, expensive items, or perks given to the official or their friends and family. *"Sometimes it's 'lucky money', sometimes it's a trip for their family, or helping their relatives get a job,"* an import/export firm owner in Nghe An detailed (BP-7). The goal is evident now. It is about retaining the benefits for both sides and building on the trust and responsibility that have evolved over time. Reciprocity is still very important. But today it is less about initiating a relationship and more about keeping an informal arrangement going. These talks that happen all the time help maintain the partnership strong. They arrange it so that both sides need each other to keep reaping rewards.

3.6.2.2. Emotional Discomfort after entering and perpetuating bribery-prone relationships

Businesspeople involved in perpetuated bribery relationships may experience new or different kinds of emotional discomfort, even as the original ethical discomfort largely disappears as the action becomes more common and acceptable. Getting used to and accepting corruption in their workplace can reduce the cognitive dissonance initially felt within. The unethical behavior becomes embedded in their standard working procedures. Thus, their actions requires less conscious ethical deliberation.

However, discomfort can still happen, especially if the relationship or the demands from the official increase. Businesspeople may feel increasingly trapped or dependent on the corrupt relationship. They may fear bad outcomes, such as "retaliation," "loss of business," or "being targeted by the official," if they try to stop or say no. *"You get deeper and deeper, and then you realize it's hard to pull out,"* a retail goods consumer in Thai Binh admitted (BP-9). *"If you stop, you risk losing everything*

you've built, and they might even cause problems for you." This dependence can create significant anxiety. In addition, the businessperson may have to deal with newly emerged moral difficulties as the bribes or favors become more lucrative or illegal, even if the activity has become more commonplace. The discomfort might shift from the initial anxiety to fear of getting caught. The bond has grown quite strong, and the risks are now greater. Feeling "in too deep" can cause serious mental stress. *"The higher the stakes, the more nervous you get,"* a logistics manager from Ho Chi Minh City confessed (BP-10). *"Even if you've done it a hundred times, there's always that fear in the back of your mind."*

3.6.2.3. Rationalization strategies

Rationalization strategies are still used in the perpetuation stage. However, they may become more automatic and less explicitly expressed as the behavior feels more normal. These strategies help businesspeople manage the residual discomfort and justify their ongoing participation.

In the perpetuation stage, rationalization strategies become more implicit and collaborative, functioning as a shared script that sustains the relationship. Euphemistic labeling evolves from a personal justification into a mutual, unspoken agreement. As one exporter explained, the language of *"nurturing the connection"... is understood without having to say it directly"* (BP-1). This shared language is critical because it maintains a veneer of legitimacy, allowing both parties to continue the exchanges while collectively sidestepping the uncomfortable reality of bribery. It represents a form of collusive moral disengagement, where the normalization of the behavior is reinforced through mutual, coded language. Similarly, the business manager who justified his actions to protect his employees' jobs (BP-2) demonstrates a more advanced rationalization that is moral justification. Here, the corrupt act is reframed as a prosocial duty, a necessary evil undertaken for the greater good of his organization, effectively transforming a vice into a virtue.

Moral justification continues. It often centers on the idea of loyalty to the person in charge or to the relationship people are in. This method of justification can be used to frame the corrupt exchange as to maintain necessary "partnership". The fear of negative consequences resulting from the link being cut off could also be seen as a moral reason. Businesspeople may justify that keeping involved in corrupt exchanges is vital to the business and its workers. *"I have employees, their families depend on this business,"* an energy company manager in Da Nang (BP-2) asserted. *"If I don't play the game, they all lose their jobs. So, I have to do what's necessary."*

Displacement of Responsibility and Attribution of Blame can become even stronger when the businessperson feels more forced or dependent on the official or the system. They may blame the constant bureaucratic problems or the official's explicit or implied demands for their continued actions. *"It's not my fault the system is broken; I'm just adapting to it,"* a business owner from Nghe An declared (BP-17). *"They make it so difficult, you have to find shortcuts."*

While not being one of Bandura's original mechanisms, the concept of Normalization (Ashforth & Anand, 2003) is critical here. Through repetition, socialization, and the development of shared rationales, the behavior becomes less likely to induce moral self-sanctions. *"After a while, you don't even think about it anymore,"* an infrastructure company CEO in Thai Binh admitted (BP-15). *"It just becomes part of doing business, like paying taxes or electricity bills."* The need for explicit rationalization may decline as the behavior becomes a taken-for-granted part of the business-government interaction. But the fundamental mechanisms of disengagement make this normalizing process possible.

3.7. Integrative model of obligation-based reciprocity and moral disengagement mechanisms

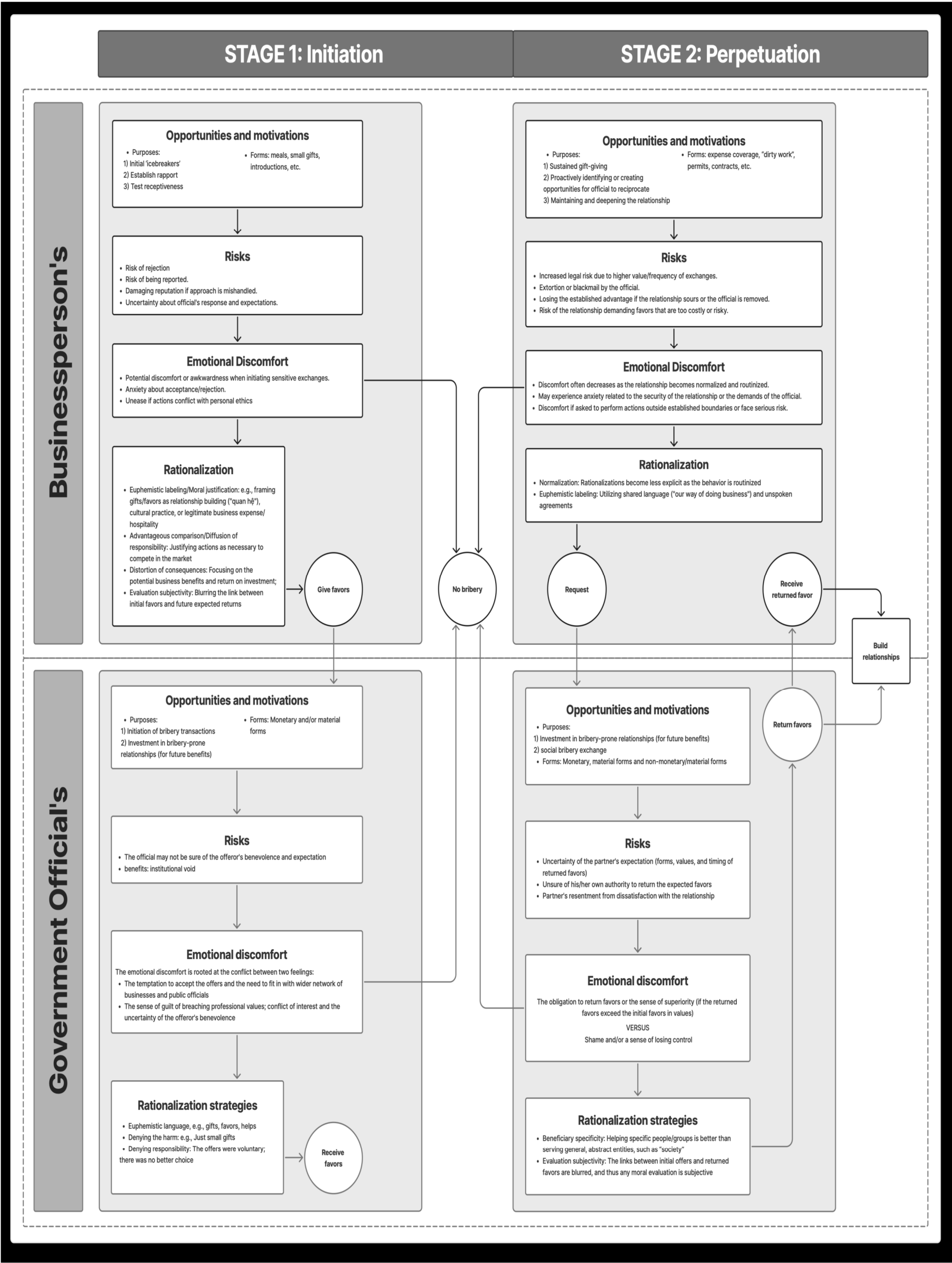


Figure 3.2. Process model of the initiation and perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships

Sourced & Developed by the author

The proposed model, shown in Figure 3.7, offers an integrated framework to understand how obligation-based reciprocal relationships initiate and perpetuate. In nations like Vietnam, such exchanges typically take place between businesses and governmental agencies and breach moral norms. This framework draws on key constructs from social exchange theory, the norm of reciprocity, and Albert Bandura's moral disengagement theory. It describes the dynamic interaction of a variety of factors, including perceived opportunities, motivations, inherent risks, emotional discomfort, and the crucial role of psychological rationalization strategies in facilitating and sustaining such exchanges. The framework shows that such relationships exist in two primary processes: initiation and perpetuation. Such processes reveal how pros, cons, and perspectives changed over time. They also investigate how individuals would think of themselves as good even though they commit bad things.

3.7.1. Stage 1: Initiation

The first phase of the framework, "Initiation," focuses on the beginning of the bribery-prone relationship. At this point, both sides have to deal with ambiguity and ethical ambiguities. For the businessperson, this phase is driven by strategic goals, such as "icebreaking," creating trust, and carefully testing how amenable the government official is to meeting informally. The favors given at this stage are usually small and subtle. They often include meals, small gifts, or introductions to useful contacts. These small actions are done on purpose to frame the interaction within a social, rather than explicitly transactional, context. However, this stage presents a significant amount of risks for the businessperson as well. They may face rejection, be reported for attempted bribery, or suffer damage to their reputation if things go wrong. At the same time, the government official may see this as a chance to start a transaction or "invest" in future relationships that involve bribery. The favors they receive are often of material value, but still in quite an insignificant amount.

A critical aspect of the "Initiation" phase is the emotional discomfort both sides feel at first. This discomfort comes from fear of rejection or from doing something that feels wrong, and even grows stronger when the action goes against their personal morals or work values. This inner conflict is often called cognitive dissonance, calling for psychological coping strategies. To navigate this discomfort and rationalize their own behaviors, both the businessperson and the official employ moral disengagement mechanisms. Businesspeople, for instance, may use euphemistic labeling by considering their gifts or informal payments as "relationship building," "networking expenses," or

“cultural courtesy.” They might also use advantageous comparison, comparing their small gifts to bigger ones to make their actions seem less problematic. For government officials, rationalizations might involve using similar euphemistic language such as “gifts,” “favors,” or “tokens of appreciation” to obscure the true nature of the exchange. They may employ denial of harm, arguing that the “small gifts” cause no real damage or do not impact their professional duties. Furthermore, denial of responsibility might be utilized here, suggesting that offers were “voluntary” and harmlessly common in the business environment. These mechanisms allow individuals to bypass internal self-sanctions and reduce feelings of guilt.

3.7.2. Stage 2: Perpetuation – Entrenching Reciprocal Obligations

The “Perpetuation” stage starts once the relationship is established. This level is concerned with sustaining the relationship. Here, the businessperson moves beyond building rapport to shift focus onto regular “gift-giving” practice and proactively identifying new opportunities for reciprocation. The forms of favors exchanged become significantly more substantial, including expense coverage, assistance with “dirty work,” or the expedited granting of permits, licenses, or contracts. The underlying norm of reciprocity creates an expectation that promotes continued engagement. The businessperson now faces more serious risks. These include legal trouble from giving high-value items, the chance of being extorted, or being asked to do something too expensive or risky. For the government official, this stage means continuing to “invest” in the relationship. They may take part in “social bribery” through money, goods, or even non-material support. Risks for the official at this stage include uncertainty regarding the partner's escalating expectations for returned favors, and even resentment from dissatisfaction if expectations are not met.

At this stage, the initial emotional discomfort may become less noticeable because the behavior has become routine. However, new anxiety can appear. These include fear that the relationship might be exposed or that they will be asked to do things that overtly cross established boundaries. To deal with this highly complex ethical dilemma, the rationalization strategies employed in this stage often become more subtle. Businesspeople may treat these actions as normal. They might call it a “shared language,” a “cultural way of doing business,” or something that cannot be avoided when working in that country. This normalization reinforces the belief that “everyone does it,” which eases guilt. Government officials may justify their actions by beneficiary specificity, justifying that they only help “specific people groups,” like local companies or individuals who are struggling. This shifts the focus from fulfilling one's duty to

genuinely assisting others. Another strategy is evaluation subjectivity, where the links between initial offers and returned favors are deliberately blurred, making it difficult to objectively evaluate the moral implications of the entire transaction. These complex rationalizations allow both parties to keep acting unethically without feeling significant internal conflict.

3.7.3. Overarching Dynamics and Contribution

The overall flow of the model illustrates a cycle that repeats itself and is reinforced over time. It starts when the businessperson "Give favors"; usually without calling it "bribery." Then, the official's action of "Receiving favors" happens in the following step. This sets up a dynamic where the businessperson can then "Request" a specific action or outcome, prompting the official to "Return favors," which completes a cycle of "Receive returned favor" and contributes to "Build relationships." This cycle keeps going, supported by the changing interests of both sides and by how they use moral disengagement tactics to lessen their guilt. These repeated activities turn little, innocent transactions into patterns that are hard to change. This framework significantly contributes to the literature by providing a process-oriented understanding of how corruption takes root and persists in business-government interactions, especially within contexts where informal norms of reciprocity are strong like Vietnam.

3.8. Triangulation and validation of findings

This section explains the triangulation process used to improve the study's validity. The data came from two sources: in-depth interviews with government officials, and semi-structured interviews with businesspeople. Including the views of businesspeople was important. It helped confirm and support the themes found in the officials' stories. It also provided an external lens into the evolvement of bribery. This triangulated method added depth to the study and enhanced the overall credibility of the findings. It also revealed how businesspeople and government officials experience and rationalize obligation-based bribery.

In-depth interview sessions among public officials provided rich insight into practical and moral obligations that facilitate their involvement in favor exchanges. Multiple respondents described how institutional and bureaucratic pressures often compelled them to engage in these unethical practices. The respondents often rationalized these exchanges as necessary survival strategies. Yet, they also experienced significant moral dissonance. Officials faced a dilemma between their professional duty

and personal ethics and utilized justification strategies to ease themselves into bribery-prone relationships.

Complementing these findings, the semi-structured interviews with businesspeople confirmed and expanded on the themes that emerged from governmental sources. The interviews were guided by the discussion framework presented in the appendix. They deliberately explored the complex nature of favor exchanges in the private sector. The business participants often said that their dealings with government officials came with a quiet but strong expectation to return favors. One business owner noted, *“There is an unspoken agreement in our dealings, we give a little to get a lot in return. It’s as if our business cards come with an implied promise”* (BP-4). Another respondent emphasized, *“In our industry, keeping a good relationship with officials is a kind of currency. It might not be documented formally, but it’s real”* (BP-12).

The empirical data from the business interviews did not just confirm the officials’ perception. They also gave unique insights into the moral and emotional problems that people in the private sector encounter. Several participants expressed that, while favor exchanges were pragmatic necessities, they often left them feeling conflicted. One businessperson remarked, *“If you don’t see the good side [justification] of the deal, you won’t be able to sleep at night”* (BP-3). Another added, *“Maintaining these relationships is a double-edged sword. On one side, you can get the deal; on the other, you know you did something wrong”* (BP-1).

Furthermore, the business interviews revealed that competitive pressure and the need for market survival heavily influenced decision-making within these reciprocal arrangements. A representative from the private sector eloquently explained, *“In a competitive environment like ours, there is constant pressure not just to innovate, but also to secure every possible advantage. Sometimes, that means engaging in practices that we might privately question, but collectively, they are normalized”* (BP-9). These quotes highlight that these exchanges are part of a larger system. They support the notion that both the public and private sectors are part of a shared network of cultural and organizational expectations.

It is important to note that several business participants stressed the value of relational trust and long-term reciprocity. An entrepreneur explained, *“It’s never a one-off deal. A small favor at seemingly out of nowhere can turn into a great deal of return. With trust and time, this becomes a silent contract between us and the officials”* (BP-17). This perspective was consistent with the findings from public officials. They also

explained that initial favors, even if small on their own, often grew into serious obligations that were hard to break.

Another striking point was how businesspeople described their rationalizations. Many admitted that rationalizing these exchanges was a coping strategy to mitigate guilt. One participant shared, “*It’s just the way business works in this country. Play by the rules if you want to survive*” (BP-3). This rationalization is similar to what the officials described. Both groups used some form of moral disengagement mechanisms to explain why they continued bribery-prone practices even though they felt a strong inner ethical conflict.

Overall, the findings from both public officials and businesspeople underscore a consistent pattern. Bribery based on obligation is not merely a personal problem but a systematic issue supported by significant cultural and organizational forces. The business interviews provided critical external validation. They confirmed that the problematic interplay between pragmatic actions and moral disengagement can be pervasive across sectors.

In summary, the triangulation of data from officials and businesspeople does more than simply validate the study's findings. It reveals the fundamental asymmetry at the heart of obligation-based bribery. While both groups seem to have the same corrupt system, they execute it in different ways. Officials consistently frame themselves as passive recipients, caught in a web of social obligations they feel compelled to repay. Their narratives are dominated by themes of moral discomfort and reluctant compliance. In contrast, the business people’s accounts reveal a reality of proactive, strategic, and patient cultivation. They are the architects of the system, intentionally creating the very obligations that officials feel trapped by. This divergence is the study's central finding: the 'uneasy balance' is not a symmetrical partnership. Rather, it is an unbalanced dynamic where one party strategically leverages cultural norms to create a system of indebtedness that the other party. This triangulated perspective moves beyond a simplistic model of 'two corrupt actors' to reveal a more realistic process of entrapment, rationalization, and mutual dependence

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSIONS OF RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATION

4.1. Discussion of results

This research sought to analyze the socio-cultural and psychological dimensions of bribery-prone relationships in Vietnam. Particularly, it focuses on their evolution into bribery-prone relationships. With the syntheses of theoretical constructs of social exchange theory, namely the norm of reciprocity, and moral disengagement theory, this study presents a novel explanation for how bribery is initiated, sustained, and normalized. The core of this explanation is the discovery of a deliberate process where an initial, transactional 'pragmatic obligation' is strategically converted into a durable, personal 'moral obligation'. The findings provide important insights into how these constructs interact to underlie corrupt behavior that exists in spite of regulatory as well as ethical constraints. This section integrates the overall findings of the study and illustrates how the findings satisfy its objectives. It also critically examines how the findings elucidate the broader issue of corruption in Vietnam.

4.1.1. Socio-cultural dimensions of bribery: Norm of reciprocity and obligation-based bribery

A key finding of this study emphasizes the role of reciprocity as a social norm that governs various personal and professional exchanges in Vietnam. The norm of reciprocity creates an implicit obligation to return favors. This obligation could be either legal or illegal, but in both senses, it forms the foundation of what the study identifies as obligation-based bribery. The results indicate that bribery is not solely a transactional behavior derived from cost-benefit analyses. Rather, it is deeply embedded in Vietnam's socio-cultural context, which prioritizes interpersonal relationships and informal networks over formal rules and regulations (De Jong, Tu and van Ees, 2012; Gillespie et al., 2020). This conclusion builds on the literature on bribery beyond the rational-choice perspective in that it claims bribery is more likely to be the outcome of a moral obligation rather than financial interests.

Such transactions are motivated by two primary forms of obligation: moral obligation and pragmatic obligation. Crucially, the findings reveal that the central dynamic of a developing corrupt relationship is the methodical transformation of pragmatic obligation into moral obligation. When an individual offers something to another individual, he or she expects definite and practical reciprocations. This type of

exchange focuses on getting immediate economic benefits. For instance, as the respondents in this study made clear, companies often offer bribes in exchange for special treatment, faster paperwork, or receiving clearances. This kind of reciprocity is instrumental in nature, where the briber calculates the chance of getting a future return of investment from the official in the future. As a businessperson puts it: *"When we first approach a new department, of course we don't go empty-handed. A small gift for Tết, a nice lunch... it's not a bribe. It's an investment in the relationship. You show you are a serious partner"* (BP2). Meanwhile, pragmatic obligation reflects the transactional dimension of bribery, but its persistence as an operational norm in Vietnam is intertwined with socio-cultural norms that promote its acceptability.

On the other hand, the concept of moral commitment was found to be critical in the formation of bribery-prone relationships. This form of commitment is less about reciprocating quick economical gains. In fact, it is unique in that it emphasizes the importance of being loyal and maintaining favorable connections. It is also associated with meeting personal and social expectations. This study argues that this sense of moral obligation is often the intended result of the briber's earlier, seemingly pragmatic, relationship-building efforts. Public officials, for example, may feel compelled to reciprocate favors offered to them, not necessarily because of greed or self-interest, but out of fear of ruining long-standing relationships or losing their reputation (Karhunen et al., 2018). As an official puts it: *"After a few years, you get to know them. It's no longer just business. When they ask for a 'small' favor, saying no feels like a personal betrayal"* (GO-6). And *"Once you know their family members, it feels personal now, not professional"* (GO-10). Moral obligation is more enduring because it becomes internalized as part of cultural norms. The findings suggest that failing to reciprocate favors in Vietnam leads to social anxiety and a fear of losing "face" (Sun and Ai, 2020), therefore making bribery ethically defensible within the context of interpersonal duties.

These socio-cultural mechanisms of reciprocity present a distinct obstacle to initiatives aimed at controlling bribery. The study shows that transactional and obligation-based types of bribery often happen at the same time. This is a tangled web of wants and needs and it is rarely feasible for bribery transactions to be deconstructed into a succession of discrete, independent transactions. They are instead part of a long-term relational system that is built up over time. This relational system is constructed and fortified through the deliberate conversion of instrumental, pragmatic favors into deeply felt moral debts. This insight not only reinforces the argument that bribery is

relational in nature but also highlights the need to address the socio-cultural dimension for anti-corruption measures.

4.1.2. Emotional and psychological mechanisms: Moral disengagement in bribery-prone relationships

Bribery has a significant psychological component. However, this facet has not been thoroughly investigated in traditional corruption studies, which generally emphasize institutions, funds, or legislation. This research addresses such gap by examining the emotional discomfort and rationalization strategies employed by individuals engaged in bribery-prone relationships. The findings indicate that public officials usually experience emotional distress, particularly in the initial stages as they are faced with a conflict between professional moral values and the socio-cultural expectation of reciprocity. However, the study also reveals distinct psychological processes at play for businesspeople, although the nature and intensity may differ.

One main finding is the emotional discomfort public officials experience when bribery is first initiated. This discomfort stems from the conflict between their professional ethics and external pressures. As an official demonstrated: *“You think everyone wants extra money right? No, it’s your morality that feels bad, and even if you don’t care enough, I think people are smart enough to realize the expectation on themselves after receiving the free stuff”* (GO-11). In addition, they may feel torn between fulfilling their job duties and missing out on being a part of an influential network. The study found that officials use “cognitive rationalization” to justify why they take part in bribery. For example, euphemistic language is the renaming of bribery as “gift-giving” or “expressions of gratitude”. As an official puts it: *“It’s always ‘a little something to show our gratitude’ (chút quà cảm ơn) or ‘support for the brothers’ (hỗ trợ anh em). It’s about “tình cảm” (affection/feeling), not money”* (GO-12). Here, the officials see corrupt actions as morally neutral or even beneficial. Similarly, denial of responsibility enables officials to shift blame to the socio-cultural factors, accepting that bribes is the only way to survive in a corrupt environment. Businesspeople also employ rationalization strategies, often reframing bribes as necessary “facilitation fees,” “relationship building,” or even essential “business investments” in a competitive environment. Denial of responsibility among businesspeople frequently involves attributing the necessity of bribes to systemic corruption or the demands of officials (*“they required it to process the paperwork”*).

As bribery-prone relationships evolve, the findings suggest that emotional discomfort becomes weaker over time. This, in turn, reduces the need for rationalization

for government officials. In later stages of the bribery-prone relationship, officials often form emotional bonds and trust with their partner that allow them to see bribery as a less unethical behavior. At this point, the relationship is no longer just about obligation. It becomes supported by mutual dependence and shared interests. This emotional shift is a direct consequence of the successful reframing of the relationship from a transactional one governed by pragmatic obligation to a personal friendship rooted in moral obligation. For businesspeople, the need to rationalize at the beginning may be lower. This is because they see the act in a strategic, cost-benefit way. But over time, as they continue, the behavior becomes normal. The relationship also shifts for businesspeople. It moves toward mutual dependence, where keeping the connection is a key business strategy. This makes the exchanges seem more legitimate. This dynamic aligns with Bandura's (1999) concept of moral disengagement, which argues that individuals neutralize ethical conflicts by rationalizing their actions, ultimately reducing guilt and discomfort. The findings confirm that this disengagement is not a static phenomenon but evolves with the bribery-prone relationships for both government officials and businesspeople.

A very important discovery is the role of rationalization strategies in perpetuating these relationships for both parties. The research reveals two primary mechanisms:

“Beneficiary Specificity” focuses on helping small groups of people or people of close networks instead of the whole society. Officials justify their actions by highlighting the direct assistance they provide to individuals or groups. By doing so, they could successfully ignore the harm done to society. For example, some participants claimed it was reasonable to give illegal help to the briber since it “helps them survive”, positioning the action to be out of compassion rather than corruption. As an official puts it: “*A very small company can actually be responsible for hundreds of families, helping these families out seems to be a good enough reason*” (GO-15). This rationalization reflects a common phenomenon that people care more about helping real people than following abstract moral norms. Businesspeople also utilize beneficiary specificity to rationalize payments by concentrating on the specific benefits their company or even certain employees would have, rather than the harm that corruption does to society as a whole.

“Evaluation Subjectivity” happens when people intentionally blur the connection between early favors and later corrupt actions. They claim that these exchanges are not direct or equal in terms of value. This reframing makes it easier for individuals to perceive bribery as an act of friendship or symbolic reciprocity, rather than outright corruption. This blurring is a key tactic used to facilitate the transformation of a simple pragmatic gift

into the foundation for a future moral obligation. For instance, presents given at the beginning of a relationship may seem like actual “tokens of appreciation” instead of early moves toward bribery. A businessperson shares: “...when a big project comes up, you are not just a bidder; you are a trusted friend. They help you because they want to. The two things feel completely separate” (BP-19). When businesspeople view these early presents or favors as just part of the culture or a way to build relationships, they are also using “evaluation subjectivity.” They separate their offered favors from subsequent illegal requests or deals, making the exchange feel less corrupt.

The findings underline the need for corporations and regulators to address the mental processes that enable bribery for all parties involved. Most traditional anti-corruption plans focus on structural solutions, such as increased monitoring or reduced power for officials. This study suggests that understanding and intervening in rationalization strategies may offer a more sustainable way to reduce bribery. For example, countering euphemistic framing and denial of responsibility in organizational training programs can help minimize moral disengagement among officials and employees, and similar awareness campaigns or ethical training within the business sector are crucial to challenge the rationales used by businesspeople.

4.1.3. The interaction between reciprocity and rationalization

Importantly, a key contribution of this research is the integration of reciprocity norms and rationalization mechanisms to explain bribery-prone relationships. The research indicates that these two concepts are not independent but rather work in sync to initiate and maintain bribery-prone relationship between government officials and businesspeople. This interaction is powered by the conversion of obligation: pragmatic reciprocity creates the initial need for rationalization, while the establishment of moral reciprocity makes that rationalization far more potent and sustainable. An official has shared: “Feeling indebted when someone helps you, especially with family matters, is unavoidable” (GO-15). The results reveal that “reciprocity” is often what triggers the bribing process. Meanwhile, “rationalization” helps sustain the relationship over time. This interaction highlights the relational nature of bribery, emphasizing that corrupt exchanges are not isolated events but part of ongoing social systems with social expectations and psychological processes.

Specifically, when a party is offering or receiving favor to/from another party because of the rule of “reciprocity,” whether it's a gift from a businessperson or an expedited process from an official, an obligation to reciprocate is created. This

obligation, particularly when it involves actions that conflict with formal rules or personal ethics, causes emotional discomfort in the individual (as discussed in the previous section). Rationalization mechanisms, such as euphemistic labeling (e.g., calling bribes "gifts" or "fees") or denial of responsibility (e.g., claiming "everyone does it"), are then employed by both the giver (businesspeople) and the receiver (officials) to alleviate this discomfort and justify their participation in the exchange. Crucially, these rationalizations become significantly more effective once the relationship has been successfully redefined from a pragmatic one to a moral one, as justifying 'helping a friend' is psychologically easier than justifying 'accepting a bribe'. This successful rationalization not only makes the initial act psychologically less stressful but also opens doors for future similar exchanges. The perceived benefits of the relationship by both parties (e.g., secure permits for businesses, informal influence, or supplementary income for officials) further reinforce the rationalizations used to maintain the tie over time.

This interplay means that lawmakers will need to deal with both parties simultaneously to end bribery. Targeting only the transactional aspect of bribery is insufficient without also addressing the underlying social norm of reciprocity that initiates exchanges and the psychological mechanisms that perpetuate them. For example, to weaken "obligation-based motivations", actions should aim to reduce chances for "rationalization". This could include challenging the euphemistic language used to describe bribes. It could also mean directly tackling the belief that engaging in corrupt exchange is a necessity or that it causes no harm to any parties. These steps can be included in anti-corruption training. Similarly, businesses must understand that their position in "reciprocity-based exchanges" can increasingly become corrupt action, occurring through the build-up of "reciprocal obligations" and "rationalizations." Understanding this dynamic is crucial for developing effective programs that address the psychological pressures faced by employees and provide alternative strategies to avoid bribery.

4.2. Theoretical contributions of the research

While this research initially drew inspiration from moral disengagement and Social Exchange theories, the resulting framework is a product of a grounded theory approach. Rather than merely testing pre-existing hypotheses, this study allowed a new conceptual model to emerge organically from the rich, qualitative narratives of public officials and business practitioners in Vietnam. Consequently, the theoretical contributions are organized to reflect this inductive discovery process.

This study makes several important theoretical contributions to understanding bribery. It does so by integrating theories of “social exchange theory” and “moral disengagement theory.” The study delves into the dynamics of bribery-prone relationships and broadens paradigms in multiple aspects. Specifically, it reveals how socio-cultural norms and psychological processes work together to form and maintain corrupt transactions. These contributions have implications not only for understanding corruption in Vietnam but also in broader contexts. This section elaborates on the key theoretical advances made by this research.

4.2.1. Advancing social exchange theory: Norm of reciprocity in obligation-based bribery

One of the main contributions of this study is its application and extension of social exchange theory (Gouldner, 1960) to conceptualize obligation-based bribery. In the past, social exchange theory mostly focused on fair and legal exchanges. However, the findings of this study indicates that it also applies to illegal exchanges such as bribery. The “norm of reciprocity”, which explains why people feel the need to return favors, has usually been studied in positive exchanges (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). This research provides empirical evidence from Vietnam that shows the “norm of reciprocity” is a foundational mechanism for why and how bribery initiates and perpetuates. It works not only between people who belong to a close network, but also between people without a pre-existing connection. The qualitative data from interviews with both government officials and businesspeople illustrate how the initial offering of gifts/favors creates a felt obligation on the recipient, activating a cycle of reciprocal. This extends the understanding of reciprocity in driving ethically ambiguous or illegal transactions, where the expectation of return is often implicit but powerful.

This research also contributes to the social exchange theory, specifically to the norm of reciprocity, by categorizing obligation into pragmatic and moral types. Beyond merely categorizing them, the study's primary contribution is revealing the deliberate process through which businesspeople convert pragmatic obligation into moral obligation to entrench the relationship. “Pragmatic obligation” is largely based on the calculation of benefits in the future, while “moral obligation” derives from both a belief in doing the right thing (reciprocity) and sentimental feelings from past interactions. The outcomes of this study indicate that initially, individuals can act out of utilitarian practicality. But over time, repeated interactions and non-material support can build a feeling of “moral obligation” and personal connection. This transformation is not an accidental byproduct of interaction; it is the core strategy for making the relationship

resilient and productive for corrupt ends. This makes the relationship stronger and longer-lasting. It can also lead to bigger returned favors, even if they are still illegal. The proposition that moral obligation is more enduring and induces more lucrative returned favors is subject to further empirical examination.

In addition, norm of reciprocity, while important, is not sufficient to sustain a bribery-prone relationship. For a bribery-prone relationship to be perpetuated, the norm of reciprocity needs to outweigh the official's professional moral values. The empirical data highlights that officials frequently experience a conflict between the social pressure to reciprocate favors and their professional ethical duties. This suggests that the impacts of the norm of reciprocity on corrupt acts needs to be examined in conjunction with the actors' moral values. Future research could look at how the norm of reciprocity and societal ethical norms of integrity govern situations involving bribery. Gouldner (1960) argues that the norm of reciprocity is second-order, while status duties, resembling role expectations and general ethical norms, is the first order. This implies that the norm of reciprocity is less powerful in governing bribery exchanges in contexts of developed market institutions where role expectations are clearly specified and/or in low-context cultures that promotes universal values of integrity. These insights enrich social exchange theory by showing that reciprocity norms go beyond logical exchanges and also appear in morally questionable areas like bribery. They also illustrate that the power of these norms depends on a person's moral views and the cultural and institutional setting. The research provides a more profound and realistic understanding of how the concept of "reciprocity" manifests in corrupt systems through the examination of these patterns in Vietnam.

4.2.2. Expanding moral disengagement theory: Emotional and cognitive processes in bribery

Another significant theoretical contribution of this research is its application and extension of moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1999) to explain the emotions and mental processes that facilitate participation in bribery. The theory has previously been applied to examine ethical decisions in the workplace; yet little has been done in examining bribery. This study bridges this gap by showing how individuals employ psychological justifications to reconcile their personal ethics with cultural and social obligations.

The research contributes to "moral disengagement theory" (Bandura, 1999, 2016) by presenting a dynamic model that incorporates both emotions and rationalizations.

The study found that people undergo different types of emotional distress and use different justifications depending on whether they initiate or continue a bribery-based relationship. This step-by-step perspective confirms the contention that moral disengagement assists individuals in managing feelings such as guilt and shame prior to and following engaging in wrongful actions. These emotional discomforts and the need for rationalization strategies may disappear when the relationships evolve to the highest level where the actors identify with each other. The model depicts a slippery slope of corruption where even some decent government officials may find themselves trapped. The risk of engaging in a corrupt relationship is not always recognizable because corrupt exchanges could be disguised in euphemistic language and mixed with legal exchanges. The model also suggests that an official may feel emotional discomfort or even struggle with their conscience when taking part in bribery acts. Later work could explore when and how they become stronger and lead to extreme outcomes, such as suicide.

The results show that people use rationalization methods such as “euphemistic labeling,” “distortion of consequences,” and “diffusion of responsibility.” In the research on moral disengagement, these strategies are sometimes identified as means to justify unethical conduct, reduce personal responsibility, or lessen the perceived gravity of the consequences of one’s actions. These strategies help enable public officials and business representatives to justify their actions. They also allow individuals to deal with the internal conflict from their role expectations (such as adhering to professional ethics or rule-based norms) and the external obligations to return the favor. For instance, officials call bribery “gift-giving” or “helpfulness” to make it sound acceptable (Bandura, 1999). Businesspeople, similarly, might rationalize their actions by claiming it is “just how things are done” in the local context, effectively displacing responsibility or invoking advantageous comparison.

More importantly, the study establishes a developmental trajectory of moral disengagement within bribery-prone relationships. It illustrates that the emotional discomfort is most intense at the starting point of bribery, when people go through a high level of contradiction between their work ethics and the expectations of society. Such initial discomfort captures the emotional burden people feel when they transgress their own moral standards, although they later justify what they did. However, as time passes, they no longer feel the need to justify their actions, as the bribery becomes routine. This corresponds with Bandura’s (1999) assertion that persons who perpetually excuse their actions progressively relinquish their moral compass, hence enabling the participation in questionable activity. However, this research adds a new dimension to

the theory. It shows how the combination of norms like “reciprocity” and individual rationalization processes hastens the erosion of ethical awareness. The study thus illustrates how moral disengagement not only enables corrupt acts but also facilitates the gradual normalization of corrupt relationships.

The study further expands on “moral disengagement theory” by adding emotional connection and trust to the mix. Traditionally, the theory mostly looked at individual’s cognitive process, overlooking the relational aspect of moral disengagement. While previous work has touched upon how emotions can act as predictors or reactions to corrupt acts, this research uniquely demonstrates how the formation of positive emotional bonds and trust between the parties involved in bribery actively contributes to the moral disengagement process. In bribery-prone relationships, individuals create emotional relationships that transform corrupt deals into expressions of friendship bonds and loyalty relationships and efforts to sustain relationships. This transformation from a corrupt deal to an act of friendship is only made possible by first establishing a sense of moral obligation, which provides the essential psychological foundation for these potent rationalizations to take hold. This relational lens suggests that moral disengagement in corruption is not solely an individual cognitive process but is deeply intertwined with interpersonal dynamics, where loyalty and perceived friendship can override internal moral standards. This finding helps researchers develop an understanding of moral disengagement by recognizing its social and cultural elements in corrupt settings.

4.2.3. Integrating socio-cultural and psychological frameworks: A relational perspective on bribery

The most unique theoretical contribution of this research may be its integration of social exchange theory and moral disengagement theory to enhance the understanding of bribery-prone relationships. This study offers a more thorough comprehension of bribery by synthesizing several perspectives. It characterizes bribery as a “socio-cultural” and “psychological” phenomenon that develops over time. The “principal-agent” model was used in most studies in the past. This model is based on the assumption that people make choices depending on the calculations of risks and benefits. However, this study goes beyond that economic view to highlight that social and psychological factors are also play a critical role.

Most recent studies examine either external systems or individual cognition, but not their interplay. Some research, for instance, examines personality traits and cognitive patterns that drive individuals to engage in corrupt acts. Other research

examines social norms and customs that affect how individuals perceive what is right and what is wrong. This research, on the other hand, assumes a relational approach. It views bribery as a dynamic process coming from both social norms and individual perceptions. This aligns with calls in the literature for more research into the "social psychology of corruption" and how social and cognitive psychologies interact. Here, bribery-prone relationships are seen as evolving systems. They start as simple reciprocity-based exchanges that increasingly deepen as actors justify their behavior and distance themselves from moral concern. This is how little, apparently trivial favors can create widespread corruption once people become increasingly reliant on each other in illegal affairs.

This integrated framework is unique because it considers the entire panorama of bribery. Whereas previous research looked at bribe acts as isolated episodes, this research considers how they are linked and follow a pattern as an integrated framework. This research provides a fuller explanation for how individuals can become "trapped" in corrupt relationships despite having no initial intent to carry out crimes by recognizing that corrupt behavior is not an isolated event but is an integral part of ongoing social systems. This relational perspective also leads to noticing how emotional intimacy and social ties can, in a surprising way, enable people to engage in ethically questionable exchanges. This understanding shows how small, benign favors can turn into corruption. The engine of this entire process, from small favors to entrenched corruption, is the strategic transformation of pragmatic obligation into moral obligation. Increasingly, people depend on each other in these illicit exchanges. This study, therefore, provides a significant theoretical advancement by explaining the interaction between social expectations (reciprocity) and individual psychological processes (moral disengagement) in the evolution and perpetuation of bribery.

4.2.4. Context-specific contributions: Bribery in Vietnam's business-government interactions

Finally, this study contributes to the increasing body of work on corruption in emerging economies by providing a context-specific analysis of bribery in Vietnam. In Western nations, state policies generally dictate interpersonal relations. Yet in Vietnam, cultural rules and informal networks significantly shape the way businesses and governments interact with one another (Malesky et al., 2020). Most developing or transitional economies utilize informal means where formal institutions may be weak or incomplete.

The culture's focus on accepting and giving favors has a strong influence on the way bribery works and how it is viewed by individuals. Concepts like *guanxi* (a Chinese term that deals with networks and relations focusing on trust and reciprocal obligations) are an important part of business in the majority of Asian countries, such as Vietnam. This renders it challenging to differentiate between providing lawful gifts and unlawful ones. This study addresses a literature gap by demonstrating how cultural forces create an enabling context through obligation-based bribery, where participants perceive a moral obligation to engage in corrupt transactions, despite acknowledging the practice is unethical nature. People who bribe others in such a way do so because they have a feeling of social obligation and would like to maintain their long-term relationship. It is different from instrumental bribery that is exclusive of cost-and-benefit approach. This reflects the deeper issue that stems from culture. Indeed, evidence indicates that illegal payments are prevalent in government and business environments in Vietnam despite anti-corruption efforts.

This study applies social exchange theory and moral disengagement theory in the Vietnamese setting to demonstrate how cultural values like “reciprocity” merge with an individual's cognitive processes, leading to persistent and deeply rooted forms of corruption. The findings revealed that bribery often follows the rule of reciprocity. This includes both pragmatic and moral obligations, even between people who were not initially of close network. The study sheds light on how culture shapes bribery-related behaviors. It offers useful insights for corruption across other developing nations with comparable cultural backgrounds. To effectively combat corruption, it is essential to understand these cultural nuances. Anti-corruption efforts should go beyond enforcing legal frameworks or penalizing individuals and should also consider the impact of social and cultural factors.

4.3. Practical implications

This study offers important practical insights for businesses, managers, policymakers, and anti-corruption agencies looking to understand bribery-prone relationships. The need for businesses to implement strict internal 'gift-giving' thresholds is further supported by VCCI and USAID's Provincial Competitiveness Index (PCI) reports, which consistently show that 'informal charges' remain a top concern for SMEs in Vietnam. By aligning internal corporate policies with the macro-trends identified in these secondary reports, businesses can better insulate themselves from the 'Reciprocity Traps' identified in this study. Crucially, the research shows bribery isn't just a single transaction; it evolves within relationships. Therefore,

strategies to reduce bribery must consider the interplay of cultural norms, personal ethical disengagement, and weaknesses in systems. These insights can help improve business practices, company policies, government actions, and anti-corruption programs in Vietnam and similar cultural contexts. This section provides specific recommendations for managers and policymakers to address bribery challenges.

4.3.1. Managerial implications

Bribery-prone relationships create significant risks for businesses, such as harming their reputation, leading to legal trouble, and inefficient use of resources. However, managers should realize that stopping bribery involves more than just enforcing compliance rules. By emphasizing the socio-cultural dimensions of reciprocity and moral disengagement, these findings help businesses grasp how bribery starts. More importantly, they show how it can be anticipated, reduced, and ultimately transformed into ethical interactions. Unlike traditional methods that rely heavily on top-down rules, this study emphasizes the importance of internal company practices, leadership actions, and actively engaging with stakeholders. These business-oriented implications provide practical guidance to establish competitive advantage without compromising integrity. The findings of this study offer several strategies for managers to implement.

4.3.1.1. Recognition of dual obligations

In-depth interviews with public officials made it evident that favor exchanges are driven by a mix of practical benefits and moral considerations. Many officials shared that, on the one hand, they pursued certain favor exchanges to achieve both official operational convenience and gain future official backing as well as administrative process assistance. On the other hand, these same acts simultaneously brought forth substantial moral dilemmas. Apart from losing a potential chance an official stated that declining favors might lead others to consider you as disconnected from group values. By this statement the official highlights how unwritten rules of business behavior place an unspoken expectation to follow accepted practices despite ethical conflict.

Managers should develop decision-making guidelines that clearly distinguish between professional networking benefits for business opportunities and activities that may breach ethical principles. For example, these guidelines could create a "bright-line" rule: any gift or favor that cannot be openly discussed with a supervisor is prohibited. Guidance systems should specify what kind of beneficial relationships managers can perform but also define ethical limits to stop illegal behavior patterns. Organization-wide guidelines require development to establish which types of business meetings are

acceptable and the amount of gift offerings that meet ethical standards and proper documentation methods for all exchanges. This includes maintaining a mandatory and regularly audited "gift and hospitality register" that records the purpose, value, and attendees for any exchange. Management teams must establish a workspace culture that allows employees to challenge situations between useful networking and bribery activities. This could be supported by creating a formal, confidential channel, such as an ethics ombudsman, where employees can seek advice on ambiguous situations without fear of reprisal.

4.3.1.2. Integrating ethics into business practices

The research also showed that many businesspeople interviewed feel significant discomfort and internal conflict when they take part in favor exchanges. Their comments reveal a common tension: the drive to compete effectively often clashes with the desire to operate with integrity. To handle this tension, companies must truly integrate ethics into their core business strategies. Ethics shouldn't be treated as secondary or optional.

One concrete way to do this is through required ethics training sessions and workshops. These sessions should do more than just list ethical rules; they need to tackle the complex moral dilemmas people face in their day-to-day work. For instance, training could use real examples from this study to start conversations, such as the struggle between "winning a deal" and "compromising integrity." Specific scenarios could include role-playing how to politely decline an inappropriate "gift" from a potential partner while preserving the business relationship, or how to respond when a competitor is clearly using bribes to win contracts. Interactive sessions with role-playing and group discussions can help employees learn how to navigate these ethical issues effectively.

In addition to training, ethical performance should become part of how employees are evaluated. Managers can align employee incentives with ethical actions by rewarding transparency and integrity just as they reward financial performance. For instance, a salesperson's performance review could evaluate how a sales target was achieved, not just that it was achieved, with specific metrics for compliance adherence. This dual focus sends a clear message: pursuing good business deals should never mean sacrificing ethical conduct. Furthermore, setting up an ethics committee or naming a specific ethics officer can reinforce the company's commitment to responsible business. These leaders or groups can provide guidance and act as impartial advisors for ethical problems, strengthening accountability within the organization. Such a committee's role would include proactively reviewing high-risk transactions, such as those involving

intermediaries in foreign markets, before they are finalized.

4.3.1.3. Culturally sensitive anti-bribery training

The study highlights that bribery is deeply rooted in the Vietnamese culture, where the norm of reciprocity shapes people's behavior. Managers need to understand that anti-bribery strategies from Western countries may not work as well in cultures with obligation-based bribery. For example, compliance programs that exclusively focus on obeying regulations may not function in areas where people give gifts and constantly look for ways to build new relationships (De Jong et al., 2012). Hence, cultural education should be a part of training programs. This can assist managers and workers in understanding when the rules of reciprocity are being manipulated to commit fraud.

Companies can use workshops to teach employees the difference between acceptable relationship-building practices, like gift-giving, and unethical behavior. Training modules should feature specific, culturally relevant red flags, such as distinguishing between a modest, reciprocal gift given during a holiday like Tết (Vietnamese New Year) versus a lavish, unsolicited gift offered immediately before a critical contract decision. For example, employees who deal with clients should be trained to decide if an interaction remains professional or poses the risk of ambiguous future obligations. This can be achieved by using local case studies and having respected local business leaders facilitate discussions on navigating these grey areas. Anti-bribery programs might be more successful and gain more employee support if they focus on fostering ethical practices to build relationships, rather than rejecting traditional social norms entirely. This approach is supported by research showing that culturally sensitive ethics training is more effective at changing behavior in collectivist cultures (Hofstede, 1980; Gelfand et al., 2017).

4.3.1.4. Promoting transparency in relational interactions

A key finding from this study is that bribery often develops within long-term relationships based on trust and emotion. Because these relationships have a personal element, it becomes crucial to prevent them from crossing into unethical territory. To stop these relationships turning unethical, managers should make interactions within the organization more transparent. Transparency in key business processes is also important because it reduces reliance on the informal personal networks where obligation-based bribery often starts. These systems prevent the private, unmonitored spaces where pragmatic obligations can be quietly converted into binding personal moral debts. This systematically reduces the company's reliance on informal personal networks – those

'who you know' connections where favors can be exchanged and obligation-based bribery often takes root. When rules and steps are clear and the fair for everyone, it becomes harder for these informal deals to influence results. Businesses that work in high-risk areas like sales, lobbying, or procurement need to have internal systems to keep track of gifts, entertainment costs, and decisions that are made with care.

For instance, setting up a formal, non-punitive way to report gifts or client entertainment can help spot risky relationships early before they solidify. A digital dashboard accessible to management and internal audit could track interaction frequency and expenditure per client, automatically flagging relationships that show signs of excessive or disproportionate engagement. Transparency should also cover financial deals, contracts, and purchasing decisions. Research on corporate transparency shows that open systems decrease chances for corruption and guide managers towards ethical decisions (Cuervo-Cazurra, 2016).

Publicly sharing company policies and financial information increases transparency. This promotes external accountability and helps deter bribery. When companies openly show they act ethically, they protect themselves from legal and financial risks. This also improves their reputation with customers, partners, and regulators. Inside the company, employees should be judged on how well they follow ethical rules, not just on financial results. Rewarding staff who act ethically, especially in tough situations, encourages others to do the same.

Additionally, implementing peer audits or rotating relationship managers from time to time can help stop bribery by breaking the intimate personal ties that may form. This rotation policy should be standardized for all high-value accounts, making it a routine business practice rather than a punitive measure against an individual. By bringing objective oversight to these relationships, companies lower the chance that employees feel pressured to engage in obligation-based corrupt practices.

4.3.1.5. Internal ethical leadership

Findings from this research suggest that moral disengagement rationalizations (e.g., euphemistic labeling) play a central role in sustaining corrupt practices. Therefore, managers need to build a strong culture of ethical awareness and accountability within the organization. This culture must directly challenge these ways of thinking that excuse bribery. Such an effort depends heavily on visible ethical leadership. Senior executives and department heads must serve as clear role models. And leaders must send out a clear message that corruption, in any form, will not be tolerated. This message is most

powerful when demonstrated through action, such as when a leader publicly celebrates an employee who walked away from a corrupt deal, even if it meant losing a contract.

One of the primary ways businesses can benefit from these findings is by promoting ethical leadership within their organizations. Managers and senior executives have a critical role in establishing ethical norms that resist the cultural and relational pressures to engage in corrupt practices. Ethical leadership refers to the consistency and commitment to fairness. This particular type of leadership should transform words to everyday actions. Leaders must model exemplary conduct by refusing opportunities to engage in reciprocally illicit exchanges, even when they are masked as culturally acceptable practices. For example, a CEO could write a company-wide memo explaining their decision to withdraw from a bidding process due to unethical demands from a potential partner, thereby turning a potential loss into a teachable moment about corporate values. But more importantly, to avoid being seen as a social abnormality, leaders should inform other team members ahead about the trap of bribery-prone relationships. Leadership transparency throughout a business creates a culture where staff members feel authorized to uphold ethical practices. Furthermore, establishment of ethics committees functions as an effective way for organizations to build internal oversight of integrity commitment. The established committees perform reviews of risky financial transactions as well as stakeholder interactions in order to detect and minimize bribery risks. The organization should develop transparent reporting methods for employees who expose unethical conduct while simultaneously protecting their reporting status to enhance trust throughout the organizational structure.

Importantly, managers in Vietnam must shift the perception of anti-bribery policies as a formal exercise imposed by external forces. Instead, they can position leadership actions around relational integrity and “face-saving” ethics that extend positive reciprocity to customers, vendors, and the government. These efforts should be further enhanced by rewarding individuals who demonstrate ethical practices under pressure. Research on ethical leadership suggests that employees are more likely to exhibit ethical behavior when leaders are proactive and consistent (Treviño et al., 2003).

4.3.1.6. Aligning organizational and ethical goals

Many businesses in Vietnam and other emerging economies often find it a challenge to maximize financial gains while adhering to not only legal but also ethical standards. The findings reveal that obligation-based bribery often comes from a fear of missing competitive advantage. It is without a doubt that companies can gain

tremendous benefits from forming favorable relationship with decision makers, the benefits can even grow larger if unethical behavior like bribery is involved. Thus, companies facing such pressures should shift their focus toward cultivating long-term, value-based relationships with clients and stakeholders. This involves creating a business strategy where the company's value proposition is based on superior product quality, innovation, and reliability, explicitly positioning these as alternatives to winning business through personal favors.

The research indicates that businesses operating in Vietnam need to modify their methods of building relationships with other stakeholders rather than primarily just with government representatives. Reciprocity norms should shift from informal obligation-based exchanges to structured, transparent interactions. Practically, this means replacing informal "handshake" agreements with formal Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) or partnership contracts, even for community-based projects, to ensure all expectations and deliverables are documented. Companies can achieve reciprocal value creation by means of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives as an alternative strategy. Educational programs vocational training projects along with public infrastructure development which communities benefit from also help organizations create a positive public perception. Such activities allow businesses to fulfill socio-cultural expectations of reciprocity without resorting to unethical behavior. Moreover, businesses can employ culturally sensitive strategies that act in accordance with "face-saving" ethics. By framing anti-corruption policies as support for "positive reciprocity," it is able to help protect relationships and strengthen organizational values while reducing bribery.

Organizations should create a strong ethical foundation by using corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. Evidences suggest that over time the ethical reputation of organizations will lead to increased trust among businesses even in regions known for corruption (Christensen et al., 2020). For example, when organizations unite with NGOs to combat corruption issues or demonstrate public backing for anti-corruption reform, they are creating a counter-norm mechanism which show ethical reciprocity , not collusion, as core organizational values.

4.3.1.7. A framework for proactive ethical management

To translate the study's theoretical insights into a practical and memorable implementation guide, managers can adopt the "SAFE" model. This model organizes the necessary actions into four distinct but interconnected stages: Scrutinize, which

involves deeply understanding and assessing relational risks specific to the organization; **Act**, which focuses on implementing clear behavioral guides and policies to mitigate those risks; **Foster**, which aims to promote a culture of ethical reciprocity; and **Evaluate**, which establishes a system to continuously monitor, measure, and adapt the organization's ethical framework over time.

Implementing this model begins with the Scrutinize stage, requiring a thorough relational risk assessment that goes beyond standard financial audits to identify specific vulnerabilities. This involves mapping key roles and departments that regularly interact with external stakeholders, such as sales and procurement, and identifying high-risk scenarios like permit applications or public tenders. Confidential interviews with employees in these roles are crucial to understanding the real-world pressures they face. Informed by this assessment, managers can then Act by developing and deploying clear behavioral guides. These should include a "no grey area" gift and hospitality policy that requires all items, regardless of value, to be logged in a central, transparent register with a clear business purpose. To disrupt the immediate cycle of reciprocity, a "cooling-off" period could be implemented for high-stakes decisions, requiring a secondary level of approval from a manager not involved in the preceding interaction. Furthermore, anti-bribery clauses must be embedded in contracts for all third-party agents, with transparent, itemized billing that forbids euphemisms for any payments.

However, policies alone are insufficient; they must be supported by efforts to Foster a culture of ethical reciprocity. This requires providing employees with culturally sensitive training that includes role-playing on how to politely refuse inappropriate requests in a manner that saves face for all parties involved. Organizations should also publicly celebrate and promote "positive reciprocity champions", employees or teams who achieve success through transparent, value-based means, to create positive role models and reinforce desired norms. Crucially, this cultural shift must be driven from the top, with senior leaders openly modeling ethical behavior and sharing their reasoning when choosing integrity over questionable shortcuts. Finally, to ensure these measures are effective and sustainable, the Evaluate stage requires creating a system for monitoring and adaptation. This includes establishing anonymous reporting channels, such as a "speak-up" hotline, where employees can report concerns without fear. To ensure accountability, adherence to the ethical framework should be integrated into formal performance reviews. This entire framework should be reviewed annually to

adapt to new challenges, creating a living system that embeds ethical resilience deep within the organization's operational DNA.

4.3.2. Government policy implications

This research holds significant implications for government policy and regulations in Vietnam, extending beyond the private sector. The socio-cultural patterns uncovered in this study demonstrate that traditional anti-corruption efforts, including monitoring and punitive measures, are inadequate. These tactics are ineffective when bribery is entrenched in personal connections and psychological dynamics. To be effective, policymakers must develop responses that take into account the cultural elements that make bribery possible. These solutions should lead to changes in the system, both at the level of laws and at the level of individuals.

4.3.2.1. Cultural targeting in anti-corruption campaigns

The Vietnamese government implements its anti-corruption measures by adopting global anti-bribery approaches, using enhanced monitoring and heavy penalties for bribery violations. However, the cultural integration of reciprocity norms necessitates more effective approaches. Public education programs serve as essential tools for redefining proper customs of reciprocity between ethical and legal standards. Anti-corruption campaigns should train people about what counts as unacceptable gift exchange rather than portraying all gift-sharing as immoral. For example, instead of painting all forms of gift-giving as inherently corrupt, campaigns can educate the public about the thresholds where traditional social practices cross into corruption.

The government can also support public campaigns that promote integrity and match Vietnam's cultural values. These can include messages about keeping long-term relationships strong through "honesty" and "fairness." In countries like South Korea, anti-corruption messages have worked well when they connect with cultural ideas like moral duty in Confucianism (You, 2005). This demonstrates that these tactics are effective in collectivist societies.

Also, offering government officials and corporations that demonstrate "ethical reciprocity" public recognition and awards can inspire others to behave positively. For instance, making a public list of "ethically innovative organizations" or publicizing their successes on national TV can help promote ethical relationship norms.

4.3.2.2. Reforming bureaucratic processes

A lot of participants in this study claimed that bureaucratic inefficiencies in Vietnam are a big reason why they pay bribes. Many feel compelled to make unofficial payments in order to bypass lengthy procedures or unclear legal requirements. This suggests that policymakers should focus on clarifying regulations and streamlining administrative processes, making it less likely for corruption to happen. Countries like Estonia offer a useful example. Estonia is widely seen as a leader in anti-corruption efforts. They showed that using digital tools for government services and setting clear, standard steps can reduce the control of individual officials. This makes it less likely that people will try to bribe someone (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015).

Vietnam could get advantages from adopting similar e-governance solutions. If it is able to use digital systems for licensing, registration, and public buying, it is also able to cut down on a lot of times when relational bribes arise. Transparent digital platforms might take the role of face-to-face interactions, which are often subject to shady transactions and corruption. These systems do cost a lot of money at first, but the long-term benefits, like saving money and earning the public's trust, will probably be worth more than the money spent at the start.

4.3.2.3. Independent anti-corruption agencies

A final recommendation stems from the necessity of establishing independent anti-corruption agencies. Experts agree that an effective solution would be creating autonomous anti-corruption bodies that handle bribery investigations and follow-throughs. Numerous stakeholders have identified systemic deficiencies in enforcement mechanisms as the main cause of ongoing bribery-prone relationships according to the study. Nonpolitical Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) in Hong Kong serves as a model for establishing independent anti-corruption agencies that would fight against bribery in Vietnam. However, for such bodies to succeed in Vietnam, they must adapt to the local cultural context. For example, investigators should get training on how to move through "relational networks" while trying not to harm legitimate personal relationships.

4.4. Limitations and directions for future research

This study provides significant insights into bribery-prone relationships and its implications for enterprises; however, it possesses certain limitations. Knowing these limits helps highlight where the current findings end and where future studies might build on them and contribute to what already known. This part outlines the main limitations with the study and suggests direction for future research.

4.4.1. Limitations in methodology

From a methodological standpoint, employing qualitative interviews and case studies limits the study's reach because of the naturally reduced sample sizes linked to these approaches. Qualitative methods are superb for comprehensive examination of complex relational difficulties, such as bribery. Nevertheless, further research could improve this by utilizing quantitative approaches. These could include questionnaires or economic studies in order to test whether or not the results are applicable to a wider group. A "mixed-methods approach" using a mix of both qualitative and quantitative research methods would be ideal. This will enable the researchers to gain a better insight into culture and relationships and also make the results statistically valid and reproducible.

While the qualitative methodology adopted in this study was essential for capturing the rich, subjective experiences and "how-to" mechanisms of bribery-prone relationships, it is accompanied by inherent methodological limitations. Specifically, the use of in-depth interviews and focus groups focuses on the depth of understanding rather than the breadth of statistical representation. Consequently, the findings are derived from a relatively small sample size of 23 public officials and 20 business practitioners.

Although this sample provided sufficient saturation for a grounded theory approach, the small scale limits the ability to generalize these results across the entire Vietnamese population or all industrial sectors. Qualitative methods are excellent for a comprehensive examination of complex relational difficulties—such as the psychological discomfort and moral rationalization explored here—that quantitative surveys might fail to capture due to social desirability bias.

To build upon the foundations laid by this dissertation, future research should consider a mixed-methods approach. Specifically, the grounded theory model developed here could be operationalized into a set of hypotheses to be tested through large-scale quantitative surveys. By utilizing a larger and more diverse sample size, future studies can statistically validate the prevalence of "obligation-based bribery" and determine if the moral disengagement mechanisms identified in this research vary significantly across different professional hierarchies or regions within Vietnam.

Specifically, to build upon the findings of this dissertation, future studies could adopt a deductive approach by operationalizing the following hypotheses through large-scale quantitative surveys:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): The Reciprocity-Justification Correlation There is a significant positive correlation between the level of perceived "Social Debt" (Reciprocity) and the frequency of "Euphemistic Labeling" (moral disengagement). Specifically, as the felt obligation to return a favor increases in a collectivist setting, individuals are more likely to reframing illicit acts as "hospitality" or "thank-you gestures" to maintain their moral self-image.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The Moderating Effect of Relationship Length The relationship between moral disengagement and Bribery is moderated by the duration of the relationship. In the early stages of a bribery-prone alliance, actors require high levels of conscious rationalization; however, as the relationship matures and the "Automation Loop" takes effect, the positive impact of moral disengagement on bribery will strengthen while requiring less cognitive effort.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Institutional Transparency as a Disruptor High levels of institutional transparency and frequent personnel rotation act as a negative moderator that weakens the strength of the "Automation Loop" in bribery-prone relationships. Specifically, frequent changes in the public-sector partner increase the "social capital cost" for business practitioners, thereby reducing the probability that a pragmatic favor will transition into a long-term moral obligation.

4.4.2. Limitations in capturing behavioral complexity

Another limitation is that it is challenging to fully capture the complex behavior of people and organizations involved in bribery. This study identifies factors like moral disengagement and social norms. Corruption, on the other hand, is often caused by other outside factors, like disparities in authority, economic pressures, and problems with institutions.

People and businesses may also not talk about or fully admit to bribes. They often fear the legal consequences or harm to their reputation. This study tried to get honest answers by keeping interviews anonymous and neutral. However, the results may not accurately reflect the prevalence or severity of unethical behavior.

It is important to note that the process model presented in this study primarily focuses on the continuous maturation of bribery-prone relationships. This focus was intentional, as the research sought to uncover how the norm of reciprocity and moral disengagement interact to sustain illicit bonds in a collectivist culture. Consequently, this study does not provide an exhaustive analysis of the dissolution phase or the conditions under which these relationships cease (discontinuity). Future research might

benefit from a comparative study focusing specifically on 'collapsed' corrupt alliances to identify the factors such as institutional shocks or moral re-engagement that lead to relational breakdown. By maintaining this specific scope, the current dissertation ensures a deep, concentrated examination of the catalysts of corruption rather than a broader, less detailed overview of the entire relationship lifecycle.

Future research could use other methods such as experiments or simulations. Researchers might use these controlled settings to observe how people make decisions. For example, behavioral experiments could shed light on how people justify or avoid bribery in different situations. Additionally, future long-term studies could track how ethical behavior and bribery relationships change over time. This would be especially useful when businesses began to implement anti-corruption policies

4.4.3. Limitations in addressing institutional interventions

This research emphasizes how company practices and cultural norms drive bribery. However, it doesn't fully examine the institutional factors that might reduce or sustain this behavior. For instance, the study doesn't look closely enough at the role of regulations and how effectively they are enforced to combat bribery.

While the research offers practical suggestions for governments and policymakers, it doesn't measure how structural changes, like introducing e-governance systems or setting up anti-corruption commissions, impact bribery within organizations.

Future research could focus specifically on how well these kinds of anti-corruption efforts work at an institutional level. Such studies could investigate how reforms change relationships prone to bribery and whether they tackle the underlying relational and cultural issues identified here. This comparison of nations with disparate histories of corruption could also be helpful, revealing which institutional remedies work best.

4.4.4. Limitations in context

While the findings of this dissertation provide a deep understanding of the socio-psychological mechanisms of bribery, it is important to acknowledge the specific contextual boundaries of this research. The data and resulting model are primarily situated within the unique socio-economic and political landscape of Vietnam.

First, the dynamics of "obligation-based bribery" identified in this study are heavily influenced by Vietnam's collectivist culture. In such a setting, the pressure to maintain social harmony and fulfill reciprocal duties often outweighs abstract legal or

professional standards. Therefore, the findings regarding the transition from pragmatic to moral obligations may differ significantly in individualistic cultures, where personal autonomy is prioritized over relational debt. Furthermore, the interplay between informal networks and formal institutions is specific to Vietnam's status as a transition economy with a unique administrative structure. In nations with different governmental systems or higher levels of institutional transparency, the cognitive mechanisms of moral disengagement might manifest differently.

Consequently, the "social grammar" of corruption described here should be viewed as a context-specific framework. Future research is encouraged to apply the grounded theory model developed in this study to different cultural and regulatory settings such as individualistic Western economies or different types of emerging markets to determine which aspects of the bribery-prone relationship are universal and which are unique to the Vietnamese experience.

4.4.5. Expanding the theoretical framework

The research provides a relational model of explaining bribery by integrating social exchange theory and moral disengagement theory to account for the way cognitive reasoning mechanisms and socio-cultural norms give rise to corruption. Although this integrated framework is highly explanatory, more research could enhance it by integrating other theoretical views. For example, institutional theory or resource dependence theory can be utilized to analyze how external institutions and resource scarcity shape bribery-related decisions.

Moreover, the focus on relational dynamics could be extended by exploring network theory to analyze how informal networks impact not only individual decisions but also organizational behavior. Such an approach may show how corrupt acts are passed through networks across organizations. This is especially helpful in industries that include public-private transactions, for instance, construction or procurement.

4.4.6. Exploring new contemporary issues

Finally, advancements in technology, governance, and business ethics around the world are making it tougher for bribery and corruption to happen. This research examines the relational dynamic inherent in Vietnamese socio-cultural norms. However, the study does not conduct a comprehensive analysis of the impact of digital tools and artificial intelligence on bribery practices. Subsequent study may investigate the

influence of technology such as blockchain, automated compliance processes, or real-time monitoring systems on the prevalence and characteristics of bribery within enterprises. Similarly, studies could explore how “global anti-corruption standards” from multinational enterprises influence local businesses in more connected markets.

Another avenue for further investigation is the influence of “environmental, social, and governance (ESG)” factors in mitigating bribery within organizations. As more businesses embrace strong ESG norms, researchers may look into how the need for openness and ethical governance influences how companies handle “reciprocal and relational dynamics” in culturally complex places like Vietnam.

This study establishes a substantial basis for understanding relationships susceptible to bribery and their ramifications, offering insights to both theory and practice. There are still limits, nevertheless, on the scope, strategy, behavioral focus, institutional depth, and coverage of new trends. These gaps suggest domains for subsequent research to augment and broaden this comprehension. Future research can examine the intricacies of bribery by employing broader theoretical frameworks, incorporating quantitative and longitudinal methodologies, and examining the impact of technology and institutions on behavior. This can help reinforce corporate administration’s anti-corruption programs.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has carefully examined the relational dynamics of bribery-prone behaviors. In culturally complex environments like Vietnam, reciprocity and relational loyalty strongly influence business practices. By integrating theories of social exchange and moral disengagement, this study has offered a better understanding of how bribery emerges. Here, bribery is not merely a transactional act but is part of an evolving network of relationships shaped by cultural and institutional factors. This research elaborates on the interplay between socio-cultural norms and an individual's psychological process to highlight the complexity of bribery-prone relationships.

From a practical standpoint, the research findings help emphasize the importance of implementing ethically and culturally sensitive strategies in organizations operating in a bribery-prone environment. This dissertation has raised a framework where business managers can balance between competitiveness and ethics in relationships with government officials. This actionable framework includes emphasizing ethical leadership, fostering transparency, and designing operational processes that mitigate corruption risks. The research also emphasizes the important role of government and policymakers in tackling structural drivers of bribery. By effectively utilizing the findings of this research, businesses as well as institutions can create an environment where ethical reciprocity is prioritized and sustainability is fostered.

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges key limitations, including its context-specific focus and its reliance on qualitative insights. These limitations, however, provide exciting opportunities for future researchers to expand on this work by employing broader, comparative designs across regions or industries. Quantitative techniques can be employed to strengthen generalizability. Additionally, the rapid emergence of digital tools changing global governance expectations calls for further investigation into potential technological solutions for bribery.

In conclusion, this research makes a critical contribution to the field of business administration by merging ethical, cultural, and managerial perspectives to address one of the most enduring challenges in global business environments: bribery. By providing scholarly insights with actionable recommendations, this dissertation equips both academics and practitioners with more effective strategies for anti-corruption reform. Ultimately, this work lays the foundation for a future where businesses succeed not through shortcuts but by cultivating trust, transparency, and lasting value in their relationships.

**LIST OF WORKS THAT
THE PHD CANDIDATE HAS PUBLISHED**

1. Nguyen, T. V., Doan, M. H., & Tran, N. H. (2021), ‘The perpetuation of bribery–prone relationships: A study from Vietnamese public officials’, *Public Administration and Development*, 41(5), 244–256.

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APPENDICES

In-Depth Interview Guide (for Government officials)

I. Introduction (5-10 minutes)

Welcome the participant and thank them for their willingness to participate. Reiterate the purpose of the interview: to understand their experiences and perspectives on favor exchanges and their impact on decision-making within the government.

(Emphasize the complete confidentiality of the interview. Assure them that their name and any identifying information will be kept strictly confidential and that the interview will not be recorded. Explain that the research is endorsed by reputable third parties.)

II. Section 1: Understanding of “conflict of interest” (25-30 minutes)

- Participant's personal definition and understanding (the "in your own words" meaning).
- Real-world examples and gray areas they have observed.
- The perceived pressures (family, business, personal finance).
- Consequences of these situations (on trust, on internal morale).

III. Section 2: The role of gifts, relationships and cultural norms (25-30 minutes)

Questions:

Let's talk more about gift-giving. Vietnamese culture places great value on showing gratitude ("biết ơn").

- The role of "gratitude" (biết ơn) and gift-giving in their professional life.
- The internal logic used to distinguish "appropriate" from "inappropriate" gifts.
- The unwritten rules of personal relationships (quan hệ) vs. formal procedures.
- Feelings of obligation vs. genuine social custom.

IV. Section 3: Institutional responses and individual actions(15 minutes)

Questions:

- Perceived effectiveness of formal codes of conduct and regulations.
- The "on-paper" rules vs. the "in-practice" reality.
- Barriers to reporting or challenging colleagues (e.g., fear of confrontation - *ngại đụng chạm*).

- Pressures from the institutional culture (colleagues, superiors).

V. Conclusion (5-10 minutes)

Thank the participant again for their time, candor, and valuable insights. Ask if they have anything else they would like to share or any questions they would like to ask. Reassure them once more that their responses will be kept confidential and used only for research purposes.

Semi-structured Interview Guide (for Businesspeople)

Business perspectives on favor exchanges (45-60 minutes)

I. Introduction (2-3 minutes)

Briefly introduce yourself and your research on bribery and corruption in Vietnam. Inform respondents of the confidentiality of the discussion and thank them for their willingness to share their experiences. Emphasize that you are interested in their honest perspectives.

II. Relationship with government officials (10-15 minutes)

- Generally speaking, how important are good relationships with government officials for businesses in your industry?
- Have you ever felt that cultivating a personal relationship with a government official was necessary to achieve business objectives? If so, could you elaborate?
- Do you know of situations where businesses offer gifts, services, or other benefits to government officials? What are the perceived motivations behind these offerings?
- Have you ever felt obligated to return a favor to a government official? Can you describe the situation?
- Conversely, have you ever had a government official return a favor to you or your business? What was the nature of the favor?
- Do you have any "friends" who are government officials who have helped you with current or past business issues? Could you provide any information about this relationship, without mentioning names?

III. Initiation of relationships (10-15 minutes)

- How did you or people that you know initiate a more personal relationship with an official? What steps were taken?
- What are some common "icebreakers" or ways to establish rapport with a government official?
- At what point does a professional relationship transition into a more personal one? What are the signs?
- What types of initial favors or exchanges are common in your industry?
- What kind of risks for the businesspeople when they seek to give favors?

IV. Perceived psychological processes and justification mechanisms of officials (15-25 minutes)

- In your experience, what motivates a government official to accept a favor from a business? And what motivates business people to give?
- Have you ever witnessed a government official struggling with the decision to accept or return a favor? What were the signs?
- Based on your interactions with government officials, what do you think are some of the internal justifications they use to rationalize accepting or providing favors? (Prompt: Do you think they see it as "just part of doing business," a personal obligation, or something else?)
- In your opinion, do government officials feel any emotional discomfort when engaging in favor exchanges? How do they manage this discomfort?
- Have you noticed any differences in the way government officials behave or justify their actions at different stages of a relationship (e.g., initiation vs. long-term relationship)?
- From your perspective, do you think officials feel obligated to return favors, even if they are questionable?
- Have you ever observed officials prioritizing the interests of a specific business or individual over the public good? How do they seem to rationalize this?
- Do you think officials are more likely to engage in favor exchanges if they feel they are benefiting a close friend or a "deserving" individual?

(Then ask the business person the same questions but about themselves)

V. Conclusion (2-3 minutes)

- Thank the participant for their time and valuable insights.
- Ask if they have any final thoughts or comments they would like to share.
- Reassure confidentiality.