

A working class theory of corruption. Thematic analysis of workers' ideas about corruption and its consequences¹.

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to analyze workers' definitions of corruption and their judgments of its individual and collective effects. This analysis takes into account that people's theories about society and corruption are interwoven with the beliefs and emotions that they relate to corrupt practices. Data come from 39 interviews with open-ended questions conducted in October 2004 among male and female workers of the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires. The paper discusses the methodological issues related to a thematic strategy of data analysis based on the systematic reading of the full verbatim transcriptions of narratives. The aim is to recover people's voices identifying different interpretations, definitions and the theoretical concepts used by workers to explain corruption.

Key words

Corruption : Working class : Actors' perspective : Witnesses' reflections

Introduction

Corruption has seriously damaged Latin American democracies, not only because of its effects on the performance of economic institutions but also because it has generated public distrust on public institutions. Many authors have studied this problem, analyzing the legal definitions of corruption (Moreno Ocampo, 2000), its level of diffusion in different countries of the world (Transparency, 2005) or describing well-known cases of corruption (Joly, 2003). These various studies are based on an “expert” perspective of society, usually supported by multilateral organizations’ global policies to fight corruption. From a Latin American perspective, we criticize these policies because they do not address the social context of poverty and social inequality of our countries as well as our specific cultural background. In brief, corruption does not have the same meaning in Argentina as in France or USA. In order to bring a hidden side of corruption, an issue not well known in academic circles of Latin America, we decided to study the interpretations of those who suffer the consequences of corruption. Our research focuses on the study of people’s interpretations of corruption. This perspective is related to our interest in the study of people’s interpretations of social processes of overwhelming presence in their daily lives. Our previous research had already studied those social practices that middle class people categorized as corrupt, the arguments they develop to explain the occurrence and persistence of such practices and their ethical judgments of corruption (Sautu, 2004a).

Deepening on this perspective of analysis, this paper expects to reconstruct working class people’s theories of corruption. This analysis is based on 39 in-depth interviews carried out in October 2004, which looked into working class people’s ideas of corruption and democracy. While their ideas of democracy are described in Sautu, Dalle & Maidana (2005) this paper describes cases of corruption as well as the criteria people use to categorize a practice as

corrupt. Here we shall deal exclusively with those cases people categorized as a corrupt practice, leaving for a future paper the analysis of its attributed causes and consequences that we expect will complete our understanding of working class theories of corruption. We shall endeavor to discover what moral and behavioral dimensions are involved in their interpretation of the meaning of corruption. With this purpose in mind we shall begin describing those situations our interviewees define as cases of corruption, which they have known through personal experience, that of friends and relatives, or through the media. We assume that the construction of meaning is based on people's biographical experiences and their interaction with others (Sautu, 2004b).

Research design to study working class people's ideas of corruption

During the in-depth interviews we asked our interviewees about their ideas and interpretations of corruption and democracy. However, applying a thematic strategy of analysis we did not expect to reconstruct subjective meanings but we tried to find out shared interpretations or common responses, significations and in general interpretations or representations of the issue of corruption (Maines, 2000). People have their own interpretations, based on their life experience and their interaction with others. The objective of this research is to represent these shared meanings and describe them as faithfully as possible. In order to achieve our objective (to study people's meanings of corruption) as well as our purpose (to respect those meanings as faithfully as possible) we developed a thematic strategy of analysis consisting in different stages.

First, we organized a collective collaborative team with the participation of many people in the design of the study, the collection of interviews and in their analysis. This collective collaborative work allowed us to question our own ideas and emotions. All our research steps

were critically analyzed, putting under reflexive examination our taken for granted assumptions on research methods, interpretive practices, and ideological commitments.

Second, once the basic conditions for the selection of cases were established, sociology students organized the fieldwork and carried out open interviews in October 2004, guided by a minimum of orienting questions. The questions guided the conversation to the topics of our interest but at the same time allowed the interviewers to “explore, probe, and ask questions that elucidated and illuminated [our] particular subject [of interest]” (Patton, 2002: 343). This non-directing strategy of interviewing is particularly appropriate to study people’s experience with corrupt practices, as interviewees are able to recall all the cases of corruption that they have personally experienced or known through the media.

Third, all the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed as verbatim transcriptions that were systematized using the Atlas-ti software for qualitative analysis. This systematization resulted in as many content categories as appeared in the text. To begin with, the research team divided the interviews among its members, who individually began the task of systematization and category construction. Then all the categories were collectively re-analyzed and a new system of categorization applied to systematize all the verbatim texts.

Fourth, all the transcriptions were treated as a unique text and all the analytic categories pulled together into several grand categories created around the core issues contained in the texts; as many as the material rendered. The authors of this paper analyzed this set of grand categories containing diverse issues so that each one would carry out an independent reconstruction of our interviewees’ thoughts. The grand categories that resulted in the analysis of workers’ interpretation of corruption were: corruption causes and consequences, definitions of corruption, corrupt practices, feelings generated by corruption, metaphors of corruption, diffusion and ways out. All these grand categories include the different dimensions of workers’ theories about corruption (in table 1 of the Appendix the relationship between these

grand categories is shown). As we have already said, because of limited space, in this paper we shall exclusively deal with those practices that workers categorize as corrupt.

Fifth, the joint research team (those who analyzed democracy and the authors of the paper on corruption) made a selection of transcripts of our interviewees' answers and organized new interviews with working class people. They are our witnesses. We presented very short transcripts to the interviewees and asked them to say what their meaning was. The interviews were verbatim transcribed. The comparison of our reconstruction of the transcript meanings and the interpretation of the witness-interviewees is briefly presented at the end of our papers. This transcription will be thoroughly analyzed in the future.

The factory, the streets and the neighborhood: the study of workers' personal experience with corrupt practices

The analysis of those practices that working class people categorized as corrupt has to take into account the difference between people's personal experiences and those practices that people know through the media. Both types of narratives allow us to explore the meaning of corruption. On the one hand, those corrupt practices that people knew from the media refer to well-known cases of corruption, which usually took place in the public sphere. On the other hand, those corrupt practices related to people's life experience, involved different agents of the public and private sectors with whom the workers interact in their daily life such as the factory, the neighborhood and the local government.

Personal experiences with corruption occur in different spheres of workers' daily life in their interaction with different social agents. As we shall see, most of these situations imply abuse on the part of social and economic agents who hold different positions of power. The nature of specific corrupt practices depends upon the context in which they occur but all testimonies are part of lived experiences. In their narratives, workers mention agents of the public sphere,

such as public officials of the local government and the police, with whom they interact mainly in their neighborhood of residence. On the other hand, workers describe corrupt practices developed by entrepreneurs and trade union leaders mainly related to their own work experience.

Generally, situations that take place in the public sphere are encounters with local authorities or the police. Our interviewees define the municipal government *“as a disaster; the current Mayor makes the public believe that streets have pavement when the neighbors know that they are blank soil, and people have to pay for inexistent pavements”* (I. 13/13) Another corrupt practice mentioned by one interviewee refers to bribes that have to be paid to the authorities of the local government: *“...some council-man usually comes to the shop where I work and asks the owner for a bribe. They think that they have the right to have a share. I have personally experienced this situation; they always find some reason to ask for a bribe...”* (I. 14/14). In both situations there is power abuse from public officials with the objective of increasing their personal benefits, what implies a serious damage to the victims.

Another type of corrupt practice in the public sphere is related to the allocation of state subsidies to unemployed people. Most narratives suggest that people needing a state subsidy have to pay a bribe to public officials or members of the party in government in order to get it. One interviewee said *“when my daughter needed the unemployment grant [of u\$ 50] she had to give someone 30 pesos [u\$ 10]; while her husband had to give this person 20 pesos [u\$ 7] if they wanted to keep the subsidy. When they refused to give him the money, this person just excluded them from receiving the subsidy”* (I. 4/21). This situation shows the abuse suffered by people who need state subsidies. This person's daughter survives with a monthly allowance of u\$ 50 and has to give a 15% of this income to the intermediary. In addition to direct victims of this abusive practice there is a damage inflicted to the state, by deviating public funds that should be oriented to social welfare.

As we have already said, workers' experiences also include police corrupt practices. Policemen are very powerful social agents at a local level, and according to the interviewees, most of the time their power is illegally employed against the workers and the neighbors. One interviewee said *‘the police is very corrupt. My mum sells food in the streets, because we belong to the working class and that is the only way we can earn a living. When she is in the streets the police usually demand her a bribe to let her sell food; and I believe that this is corruption. It is not that they say ‘you can stay but give me some food’; but the police uniform suggests the bribe’* (I. 7/37). As the police are connected to corrupt practices their uniform has become a sign of corruption. In addition, this interviewee is conscious that the working class is the main victim of corrupt practices. Another interviewee describes a case of corruption suffered by his brother, who is a foreigner: *“the police always ask my brother more and more documentation to prove that he is a legal resident. He has all the documents but the police always demand a new document, which is not legally compulsory but they all the same ask for it. My brother usually asks me 2 pesos or 5 pesos [u\$.65 to 1.65] to have pocket money when the police stop him and ask for a bribe”* (I. 16/16). As we can see, some workers experience corruption so deeply in their daily lives that they have to keep pocket money in order to pay the bribes every time they go to the streets.

In some situations, police corrupt practices are combined with other types of illegal procedures. One interviewee, who sells goods in the street, narrates, *‘the police demand bribes to people that want to sell goods in the streets: that is corruption. In addition, this neighborhood usually becomes a ‘zona liberada’ [an area where police surveillance is suspended] without policemen and where many thefts are committed ’* (I. 23/22). This interviewee narrates experiences of her daily life in neighborhoods where the police not only demand bribes to street workers but also coordinate and encourage robbery. Another illegal procedure is that *‘when the police confiscate stolen goods, they always keep something for*

themselves. They say that the robbers stole it but that is not true” (I. 5/12). Both situations show that the policemen look for their personal benefit through procedures that might be different from bribery but all the same have harmful consequences for some people. In some cases, the police is so corrupt that *“in my neighborhood there were important mafias, composed by policemen that hardly knew to read or write ”* (I. 6/19).

So far we have analyzed those corrupt practices that the workers experienced in their relationship with public institutions such as the local government and the police. The power abuse of public officials leads to some practices identified as corrupt by our interviewees who describe the harmful consequences for them. In addition to this, many interviewees identified corrupt practices that take place in their workplace and that were implemented by their employers or trade union leaders. These situations also imply a power abuse, which is clearly seen in the narrative of a construction worker, who said that *“I am 65 years and after working in different factories during many years, I began the procedures for my retirement. I went to the ANSES [Social Security agency] and found out that my employers had not paid my social security charges. I think that this is corruption; because they stole the money they had to pay me. Consequently, I cannot have a decent retirement. If this were a straight society they should have paid”* (I. 1/25). This situation implies a shared responsibility of the workers’ employers and the public institutions that should control social security payments. The interviewee considers as corrupt the violation of his right to have a decent retirement. This violation was implemented through the illegal practice of different firm owners. In this case, the power abuse of the employers is the mechanism that allows this corrupt practice to happen.

This mechanism also appears in other situations described as corrupt by our interviewees; such as the premeditated bankruptcy [vaciamiento] of a company, which had awful consequences for the workers: *“there was a manager that established that everything was*

forbidden for us. We could hardly communicate with each other. This manager developed corrupt businesses and took all the money from the company. After that, we began to have lower and lower salaries and many people got fired...including me" (I. 12/12). Premeditated bankruptcy might be implemented through different procedures, but it always has terrible consequences for the company's workers: *"they fired all the workers and took the money away. By that time I was pregnant. My husband and I were fired and consequently unemployed; I had a huge depression by that time. They did not give us any money, they had just run away, no one gave us an answer"* (I. 18/20). Premeditated bankruptcy has been a widespread practice among many Argentine firm owners. As we can see, it has terrible consequences for the firms' workers who denounce it as a serious corrupt practice based on the employers' power abuse. The interviewees also mentioned other types of corrupt practices experienced in their workplace, such as companies that force the workers to sign false receipts for expenses that have never been paid. All these practices have serious consequences for workers' lives and careers.

One of the main strategies that workers can implement to confront this power abuse in the workplace is to turn to the trade unions. Nonetheless, many interviewees stated that when they turned to the trade unions they also had to confront corrupt practices. This is the case of one interviewee who was working in a company that was *vaciada*. When the workers started to fight against this situation they found out that *"the members of the trade union received money from our employers to avoid confronting their interest. The trade union leaders lived on our money, but when we needed them they were not there, they just took bribes from our employers"* (I. 18/21). Another interviewee said that *"trade union leaders should represent the interest of the working class, but once they become powerful they change their behavior and duties in pursuit of other goals"* (I. 29/13). Summing up, *"they belong to the system and take their part. They negotiate with the employers and the state against the strikes. The trade*

union leaders get to their positions through corruption. They are a mafia that makes corrupt deals with the big companies to betray the workers” (I. 32/21). As we can see, corruption not only affects the workers in their relationship with employers but it also makes the trade unions a useless mechanism to fight against this situation.

Experiencing corruption through the media: tales of corruption involving politicians, judges and big companies.

This section of our paper analyzes the narratives of the interviewees that refer to cases of corruption transmitted through the mass media. These are well-known cases of corruption of contemporary Argentina, and took place in the public or the private sector. The first group of cases involves different high-level public officials, such as presidents, congressmen, ministers and judges; while the second group refers to corrupt practices developed by big private companies.

Those situations that occurred in the public scene include various corrupt mechanisms, such as ill administration of public sources, lies and illegal businesses. These mechanisms are related to the bribes as a medium of corruption and are pervasive to different areas of the public administration. This is the case of the judiciary and legislative powers: *“there you find public officials that live on bribes. Like the representative X who has money and wants more money. Or the other representative from Salta who admitted that he received a bribe. They corrupt the whole system, like the judges, who know that there is corruption but they are also corrupt” (I.31/22).* Besides the widespread of bribery, the interviewees identify as corruption the incapacity of the judiciary system to solve relevant cases: *“it is like the case of the AMIA terrorist attack [a Jewish Organization]. I think that some people, like politicians or*

policemen received a lot of money. It has been a long time since they put the bomb and there was no justice” (I. 30/19).

Other examples of the diffusion of corruption among the legislative power are denounces of bribes during the treatment of important laws. One interviewee narrates the case of the Labor law: *“I remember the Banelco [ATM cards] case. The government gave the senators a bank account and deposited money there so they approved the law” (I. 18/13).* The treatment of this law was a parody because *“the senators received money, and accepted a law that was for their own convenience, not people’s. The true winners are the big companies” (I. 24/7).*

The interviewees’ critical perspective regarding the diffusion of corruption also includes the election of authorities, a basic procedure of current democracies. They denounce that *“there is electoral corruption (...) the big parties buy people’s votes. The search for power is the origin of corruption” (I. 25/6).* As we can see, the corrupt behavior of the main political parties affects, according to one interviewee, the results of public elections, harming the whole democratic system. Besides considering that the government is elected through a corrupt mechanism, the interviewees also think that the functioning of the different governments is corrupt. One interviewee said that the current government is corrupt because *“they promised not to pay the foreign debt, but they are paying it through increasing people’s needs. They did not do what they promised. That is corruption” (I. 1/22).* Corruption of different governments can also be seen in the ill administration of public resources: *“when X was governor they planned three storeyed hospitals, but they only built up two floors. They stole one entire floor. When they built the Hospital X they paid USD 420.000 when they were supposed to pay only USD 240.000; and USD 180.000 instead of USD 80.000. In one year they have stolen USD 12.000.000 [sic]. There are many robberies, and you always find someone who is robbing to benefit the authority” (I. 25/8).* In this case corruption not only implies the personal benefit of

some public officials, but also generates harmful consequences for poor people, that usually attend public hospitals.

Most interviewees remember media cases of corruption that took place in the nineties. Corruption in that period is perceived as having widespread harmful consequences for most people. The argument runs *'he (the president) took the country for himself ...I think...now we are all paying the consequences...many people have no money to afford a living...others see that there is no safety'* (I. 18/2). During this period, corruption was so widespread that *'I remember that decade as a whole case of corruption'* (I. 35/8). People identify many cases of corruption related to that government, like the illegal sale of weapons to Croatia and Ecuador, the corrupt construction of Yacyretá and the illegal businesses of the PAMI (Retired people's health organization).

Other interviewees also associate corruption with the privatization of public companies, in the nineties: *"everybody knows that the sale of the state Airline to private companies was not a clean business. I think that the case of this Airline is the most accurate symbol of corruption"* (I. 27/8). The interviewees also consider corrupt the sale of the state's oil company (YPF): *'I remember when they sold our oil. The money was supposed to be oriented to improve retirees' situation, but the retirees are still fighting for a decent salary. They have worked their whole life, and the government does not answer their fair request '* (I. 1/1). This interviewee not only sees privatization as a corrupt practice but also identifies its harmful consequences for the retirees. But the privatizations are not exclusively public deals; they involve big private companies that have bought the state's assets. When they refer to this process, the interviewees identify big corporations by their names and remember the media accusation of the existence of payments of large sums of money to politicians, trade union leaders and public officials.

On the other hand, one interviewee questions the media for their compliance or ignorance of different situations: *“I know many people from the media who make interviews or comments just to sell them and make some money; lying and making up things. I consider that many TV shows are corrupt, because they are based on lies”* (I. 22/19). The problem with the media is that *“we receive the news that the authority wants us to receive. There are few independent journalists, but if they are too independent they disappear from the media”* (I. 32/22).

As we can see, the interviewees take from the media well-known cases of corruption that involve high-level public officials and big private companies. These cases of corruption do not belong to people’s daily life; they involve actors with whom the workers infrequently interact. When the interviewees evaluate the consequences of these corrupt practices they usually identify the whole society, the democratic system and the unprivileged sectors of society. The workers consider that corruption generated by important public institutions and big private business has serious consequences for a society that they hope it should be more equalitarian and fair.

Conclusion

Corruption is a widespread phenomenon in Argentine society. The experts, the media and lay people consider that corrupt practices are very diffused in our society and have harmful consequences for our country. The interviewees consider that corruption is a daily practice that became a fundamental mechanism for the working of different public and private institutions. In this paper we have analyzed the different cases of corruption narrated by our interviewees. Some of these cases were based on people’s personal experience, while others were taken from the mass media. Table 2 of the Appendix shows the underlying dimensions

of the different corrupt practices mentioned by our interviewees: the actors involved in the practice, the corrupt mechanism implemented and the consequences of those practices.

First, we would like to highlight the common patterns that emerged in the cases of corruption that people took from the media. These cases involve important actors of the public and private sectors, like presidents, ministers, governors, big private businesses and banks, with whom the interviewees have little or no interaction. Although they are not directly involved in the narrated cases of corruption, they do identify the harmful consequences of these practices for the whole society and the democratic institutions. They denounce the ill administration of public resources and the great ambition of public officials and private entrepreneurs, which are always trying to improve their profit, not caring for the society where they live. According to our interviewees, these corrupt practices were widely widespread in Argentina during the nineties, but they still exist today, and it is difficult to produce a change in the short term.

Those situations directly experienced by the people are related (as we can see in Table 2 of the Appendix) to unequal power relations that govern workers' daily interaction with different social and economic agents and institutions. Our interviewees live in poor neighborhoods of the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires; they are waitresses, factory operators, service workers, domestic servants and peddlers. They belong to a social class that continuously suffers the impositions of other social actors which are politically, economically or symbolically more powerful. As we could see during this paper, this experience of inequality is deepened by corrupt practices. The main corrupt mechanism denounced by the workers in their daily life is the power abuse of public officials, firm owners or trade union leaders.

We would like to finish this paper highlighting the differences between the working class experiences with corrupt practices just described and the experiences of the middle class, that has been analyzed in a previous research (Sautu, 2004). Workers' life and work experiences are very different from those of the middle class; so are their experiences with corruption. Our

research concluded that in several occasions middle class people consider corruption as an interchange that generates a benefit for all the parties involved. This is the case of a firm manager who asks for a bribe to sign a contract with certain suppliers. Many corrupt practices are for middle class people a mechanism to accelerate bureaucratic procedures in the public or private sectors. On the contrary, workers see corruption as deepening their experience of subordination. They identify corrupt practices of entrepreneurs, public officials and trade union leaders as impositions and great obstacles in their occupations and even a curtailment of their right to walk freely in the streets without being abusively jailed by the police. Corruption is seen as a deadlock in interviewees' life, progressively eliminating possible ways out. The interviewees do mention different strategies of self and collective defense to fight against the harmful consequences of corruption, which we shall analyze in a future paper.

Everybody agrees that corruption is deeply widespread and it has serious consequences for the Argentine society. However, it is important to note that different social classes have different experiences with corruption, and that the harmful consequences of this phenomenon do not affect them in the same way. If this is true, how accurate can our representations of working class people's experiences with corrupt practices be? Can we really understand workers' experience with corruption? We are doing patchwork pulling together arguments of persons with different individual trajectories assuming that they share life experiences and therefore some core interpretations of those experiences. Applying a thematic analytic strategy we endeavor to discover lines of thought, interpretations of those social practices that the interviewees categorize as corrupt and the underlying meaning of corruption that they imply. These re-constructed theories of corruption of course may be tinted with our own vision as observers. Multiplying the number of testimonies and the number of observers, we expected to reach with our analysis a representation of people's ideas as complete as possible. In order to improve our confidence in our own representations of people's interpretations of

corruption, we selected some working class witnesses to tell us what those transcripts meant to them. These “*second level*” interviews were verbatim transcribed and a tentative analysis was carried out with the intention deepening this analysis in the future. Our goal is to design two focus groups in order to see whether collective discussions of the transcripts render similar representation of the meaning of the analyzed data.

The witnesses were asked to evaluate our own interpretations of the selected transcripts. In the first place, we can say that the witnesses agreed with the interviewees and the analysts in their categorization of certain practices as corrupt. Those cases narrated by the interviewees were seen as very corrupt by the witnesses, who also agreed in identifying the harmful consequences of those practices. The witnesses also belonged to the working class, and thus shared many experiences with our interviewees. This allowed them to gain immediate sympathy with people’s narratives of corrupt practices. In addition, the witnesses confirmed our interpretations of the underlying dimensions of those corrupt situations. As we have stated in this paper, most of the corrupt practices experienced by the workers were a consequence of the power abuse of agents like entrepreneurs, public officials or trade union leaders. The interviewed witnesses also considered that those corrupt practices deepened the workers’ experience of subordination. They spontaneously referred to their own experience when they evaluated the transcripts, and confirmed some of the conclusions that we extracted from them. They also confirmed that each interpretation (including the analysts’) is done from a certain biographical experience and structural situation.

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Table 2: actors involved in different corrupt practices according to type of access to corrupt practice, corrupt mechanism and consequences

