



Religions and Development Research Programme

Corruption, religion and moral development

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Lacking in much of the current research on religion and corruption is a sense that there may be alternative ways that people view corruption, which in *their minds* may be moral. It is clear that if we are to truly develop an understanding of how religion influences people's attitudes and behaviour towards corruption, we must focus on understanding the views of individuals.

The methodologies used in many current studies are not adequate to study what is ultimately an individual decision, and one that is at least in part informed by a person's own ethical and moral standpoint. As such, starting research with the mindset that particular types of activities are corrupt, and thus 'wrong', may prevent researchers from uncovering why people develop particular attitudes to corruption, or why they choose to behave in a way labelled by some as corrupt.

If corruption research is to explore some of these issues at the individual, as well as the regional and national levels, it is important to learn from existing work that examines how attitudes are formed, with respect to both religion and the impact that religion has on attitudes to moral issues and on moral reasoning. A review of a number of studies, few of which deal specifically with corruption, establishes useful ways forward for corruption researchers.

Research on religion and attitudes towards deviant behaviour shows that individuals' interpretation of messages on moral behaviour is significant in determining their acceptance or rejection of deviancy. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the religious are any more likely than the non-religious to reject behaviour that is 'anti-social'. Indeed, there is little

evidence to suggest that religion, in terms of religious content, impacts upon individuals' attitudes to public morality. Membership of a religious community that rejects behaviour seen as being 'corrupt' seems more likely to have an impact, but a lot depends upon whether members of the community are encouraged to use religious principles to think through moral issues, or expected to interpret religious teachings literally.

The implications of this for research on corruption are

- The messages individuals receive about behaviour that is deemed to be moral and behaviour that is seen as 'deviant' may be conflicting
- The ways in which people interpret messages about appropriate behaviour influence their ideas about what constitutes 'corruption'.
- People are part of multiple communities – religious, family, friends, work, professional and so on – and may not separate their lives into 'public' and 'private' spheres, governed by public and private morality.
- The communities of which individuals (including researchers and those involved in anti-corruption initiatives) are part (including religious communities) all, in one way or another, impact upon their attitudes towards corruption and so research must focus on individuals not in isolation but as members of wider communities.
- To understand *why* corruption occurs, therefore, it may be necessary to put aside prior assumptions about what corruption is and why people engage in it.

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