

**Research article**

# Young Argentinians' Perceptions About Corruption: A Case Study

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**Abstract.** Over the past 30 years, corruption has been one of the most studied problems in the social sciences because, in every region of the world, it negatively affects institutional, political, economic, and social development. Despite the efforts to reduce and solve this problem, corruption extends to every sphere of social life. It is likely that the measures taken are not effective because countries such as Argentina mainly copy measures from developed countries without analyzing the social and cultural contexts. In this article, an attempt was made to identify how young Argentinians understand corruption, how they define it, and what practices of everyday life they consider corrupt. According to the results of the 10 interviews, for the young Argentinians, the situation of corruption always presumes the existence of a victim (a disadvantaged third party), the asymmetrical relation of power and self-profit or advantage. The idea of the existence of damage has a particular characteristic: it allows the subject to answer the question "Who will suffer damages, losses in one way or another?". At the same time, the answer to this question works as a moral justification or, on the contrary, as the rejection of corrupt practices. Often the idea of corruption is analyzed case by case: to evaluate its seriousness, it is necessary to examine who carries out the corrupt action, who it damages, and if there is a need or not. Corruption extends as a product of the capitalist system and as a way of achieving assets and services that, in other ways, people with insufficient resources could not achieve.

**Keywords:** corruption, youth, Argentina

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## 1. Introduction

Since around 30 years ago, corruption has been one of the most studied problems in social sciences because, in every region of the world, it affects negatively institutional, political, economic, and social development. In many countries, the fight against corruption has negative or disappointing results. Often, corrupt actions affect not only the state politics, legislation, and punishment but also certain features in the behavior of individuals and groups, and the conditions in which they carry out their everyday activities.

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Even though in countries with high levels of corruption, there is a strong legal-normative base, it does not materialize in practice [1]. Mainly, this situation is observed in developing countries, which differentiate from economically and socially developed ones in cultural relations. Effective measures in developed countries do not necessarily turn out effective in such countries as Argentina.

The youth are the most affected by corruption: according to the data from Transparency International, the probability that young persons aged 18–34 see themselves compelled to pay a bribe is twice as high as in people aged 55 or more [2].

In relative terms, reports from international agencies suggest that “poor households spend a higher share of their income on bribes than rich households and that small businesses pay over twice as much in proportion to their annual revenue in bribes than large businesses” [3, p. 10].

In this sense, it is evident that there is a need to find new explanations for the problem of corruption [4], as well as new instruments to fight it that do not mean the mere copy of measures taken by developed countries.

Even though most corruption takes place among those who occupy high ranking positions in state authorities and important companies, the level of expansion of these practices is wide because it includes citizens in different ways: be it active (including taking part as a victim) or passive.

The fact that citizens are involved in and take part in corrupt actions allows corruption to be reproduced at different levels and blocks the fight against it. In this way, the need to study specific mechanisms of connection between people’s motivations and corruption arises. With this objective, the article analyzes the following: How does Argentinian youth understand corruption? How do they define corruption? According to their perceptions, which practices of everyday life do they perceive as corrupt?

## 2. Methodology and Methods

The analysis of perceptions, opinions, and views about corruption allows understanding individuals’ motivations, the subjective implicit meaning of their actions. Tänzler affirms that in construction and healthcare environments, corruption is accepted, that is to say, it is not considered a felony [5]. In other words, corruption is not perceived as such. Therefore, “the perception or better non-perception of corruption is a condition of its social practice” [5, p. 4].

Qualitative methods of investigation allow the identification of important information about strategies and motivations, the relations and processes of making decisions, the

roles of the actors, etc. [6]. Despite the fact that quantitative studies are very useful, they do not completely explain how corruption affects people's everyday lives. In this sense, the qualitative analysis allows the reception of information concerning corrupt practices in different contexts [7], identifying and understanding the meaning the actors grant to the phenomena in which they take part in their everyday lives and according to which they act [8].

With the objective of answering the above questions, 50 interviews were carried out with young Argentinians aged 19 to 35 that live in the City Buenos Aires and Gran Buenos Aires, that is, the biggest and most urbanized area in the country. The interviews were carried out in August and September of 2020. For the current analysis, 10 interviews were selected randomly. The interviewed group consisted of 7 women and 3 men, most of which were more than 30 years old. Of them, 4 participants did not study at the moment, and the rest studied human and social sciences (political sciences, law, administration, and philology).

### 3. Results and Discussion

In this section, the most significant results of the analyzed interviews are described in 6 aspects: 1) the concept of corruption; 2) the relation between corruption and capitalism; 3) corruption, social network, and social repercussion; 4) types and levels of corruption; 5) the images of corruption; 6) the perceptions about corrupt practices.

#### 3.1. The concept of corruption

The first evidence that arises from the analysis of the interviews is the difficulty present when attempting to define the concept of corruption. On the one hand, as the interviewed point out, it is something that permanently appears in the means of communication, what everybody talks about, what is argued about with relatives, friends, and colleagues. It is even something "not to talk about" because it leads to serious quarrels. On the other hand, at the time of defining what do they mean when they use the word corruption, in general, there are ambiguities or difficulties in determining what it is in a concrete way.

However, such definitions have some elements in common that contribute to a better understanding of which are the characteristics of corruption in the notion of young Argentinians of the urban area most populated in the country.

In the first place, detriment to others appears as a central aspect of corruption. That is to say, there is corruption when somebody is impaired, when advantage is taken in a given situation or position not only for self-benefit but also when there is damage to “the ones who have less” [interview 4] (the poorest classes of the population), “those who should receive that benefit” [interview 3], “the person who is at the bottom” [interview 7] (the person who is at the bottom of a hierarchical structure), “the majority” [interview 8], “certain people or areas” [interview 22], “the general interest” [interview 32].

From this, two important conclusions are drawn. On the one hand, the more imperceptible is the harmed subject, the more difficult it is to identify certain actions as corrupt. That is to say, the further the harmed subject is, the more imperceptible the corrupt action as such. On the other hand, from an individual point of view, there could be a possibility of valuing who may (or deserve) be damaged and who may not. These arguments work either as a justification mechanism of their own actions or tolerance towards others' corrupt actions. For example, an interviewee points out: “in reality, I have never had much contact with the State, but in a private company it matters less, I think, if there is corruption [...] because in everybody's mind there is the idea that everybody does it... if everybody does it why shouldn't I? Or this money is not mine, why do I care...?” [interview 16].

Second, the idea of power or power asymmetry often appears. Corruption is something that somebody with certain power can do. That power is often related to a position (in the public area, in a company), to a job (with the capacity to do something), or to a certain role in social relations (older brother, father, teacher). In other words, corruption is improper and illegal but can be carried out only by a few, those who are in a position of power inside a given scheme of social relations. Thus, an interviewee points out that “corruption is a way of enforcing power over the weak” and that “it exists in every level, in any person that has a bit ... a bit of power” [interview 4].

Third, there is the idea of advantage, of self-benefit. That is, a corrupt action has an objective: obtaining a benefit. Without that goal, the corrupt action as such melts away. In that direction, an interviewee understands that corruption implies that “somebody that has certain power uses it to take advantage and this reverberates in the lives of others” [interview 9].

In basically all the definitions given by the interviewees, moral elements are incorporated. For them, the fundamental problem of corruption is not material, not an object to be obtained (be it money, assets, or services), but moral. The moral issue is mainly related to the damage caused to others. For example, an interviewee upholds that

corruption “contains a certain degree of evil... [...] but not only as a felony, but as a moral one which is deeper...” [interview 4].

Some interviewees point out that corruption refers to something dark, hidden, which is hidden and done away from everybody’s sight.

Finally, the interviewees also define corruption as breaking the established procedures to carry out a certain activity or a violation of the given norms: “I understand that something is corrupt because it breaks certain rules or procedures that are established by the State” [interview 5].

At the moment of pointing out what is contrary to corruption, the interviewees privilege some of the elements mentioned above. Thus, to define what the opposite of corruption is, five types of answers are highlighted: 1) those that allude to the secret or hidden aspect of corrupt action and point out that the opposite of corruption is “transparency” [interview 16], “the neat” [interview 32], “the clean” [interview 7]; 2) those that allude to the fulfillment of legal norms or norms established within the society such as “to do the right thing” [interview 32], “what is established, what is right” [interview 1], “follow the norms” [interview 8]; 3) those that highlight the benefit as an essential element of corrupt actions and understand the opposite in “solidarity, the will to give without caring what, without expecting anything in return” [interview 4], “working to help others without that benefit, the one that is achieved by corruption” [interview 16]; 5) those that highlight power as a determining element in corruption: “a person that can wield power without... taking advantage of it” [interview 9].

### **3.2. Corruption as a product of the capitalist system**

One of the outstanding characteristics in the analyzed interviews is the relation established by some interviewees between corruption and the capitalist system. Corruption from their perspective is a product of the socio-economical system.

Capitalism encourages the desire for accumulation, wealth, and power, but at the same time, restricts the opportunities for achieving such goals. Therefore, people appeal to diverse mechanisms to satisfy their desires and needs, among them those, which are corrupt. Thus, an interviewee expresses: “I believe that from the moment you have an economic or political system that reverberates inequality and does not grant equal opportunities... people always try to scratch something else...” [interview 5] (get something else).

On the other hand, capitalism encourages selfishness, thinking about one’s own wellbeing without caring about the general wellbeing: “corruption is... is more than

anything in this society that is... I don't know... capitalist... that insists we think about ourselves... and our wellbeing and... may be that of the people we care about, but not about the wellbeing of the society in general... that can be seen everywhere not only with politicians but as I said before in the society itself... [...] that encourages selfishness, so to speak..." [interview 8].

Another interviewee also points out that corruption is inert to the system because "society always makes you wish for more and the best and the latest and the newest and the most expensive so it can take you to search for ways of getting it in a form or other" [interview 4].

From the point of view of this interviewee, corruption could be avoided in a different socio-economic situation: "... society would be less corrupt if there were more equality in every sense... equality in the sense of opportunities, places... if all of us could access the same, if all of us had the means to access the same, more than anything if we all had those opportunities and... maybe the acts of corruption would be much less" [interview 4].

### 3.3. Corruption, social networks, and social repercussion

In the social digital era, all the interviewees assert that social networks are the main means by which they inform themselves in matters connected to corruption, even though they also mention traditional means such as radio and television. The social networks mentioned are Facebook, Instagram, and, in a smaller measure, Twitter. However, the interviewees also point out that the information, especially that concerning corruption, is not reliable. That is why they use these networks mainly to receive information from newsagents and "small" national media, not related to the big communication monopolies.

An interviewee mentions: "no, the hegemonic media... I don't know if they are called hegemonic... the ones such as TN, Clarín, etc... except when they speak about Cristina it generally does not appear... I follow the ones who are freelancer journalists, people that go and shoot videos, go around the neighborhoods and there most things are mentioned...mainly supporters, political parties, artists" [interview 7]. The interviewee perceives that the big mass communication media mention only the corruption concerning one political leader (Cristina Fernández, country president between 2007 and 2015). Both TN, a private TV channel, and Clarín, the largest circulation Argentinian newspaper, are parts of the biggest media holding in the country, the Clarín Group.

For another interviewee, the word corruption “is normally very much heard in the mass media, especially the hegemonic ones... that word is always present...then, also if you are in Argentina, you’ll normally have a chat on politics... because politics is discussed a lot in Argentina... and you’ll hear the word corruption...” [interview 16].

Another interviewee points out that by using social media as a way to be updated with every day’s news, they not only find out about the event itself, but also somebody’s opinion: “I follow referents from other places... from education... or whatever... that often give their opinion on a matter due to some news and it is then that I find out about that piece of news in particular, so maybe I don’t just find out about the event, but the event plus somebody’s opinion and that is a whole other thing...” [interview 4].

Some interviewees perceive that when confronted with corruption cases, society reacts differently, depending on the social class of the participant or their political affiliation. That is to say, corruption carried out by certain members of powerful or wealthy circles is not regarded as that bad, it is even associated with the idea of success, triumph, of those who understand how things are done. Whereas, those from lower classes that carry out corrupt actions are considered felons that damage moral values. For example, an interviewee affirms: “in society, not only with corruption, I think in a lot of things that happen there are certain levels... to which almost no responsibility is assigned or is not that badly seen...” [interview 22].

Another interviewee points out that “a corrupt person who is wealthy or has certain purchasing power is well seen... they’re smart, they did it... right? And we laugh, we smile and pad them in the back...now not when... when... it comes out from another place... that is it is a felony, an attack to moral values it absolutely everything... it’s Lucifer... or the other option... they have no choice, they don’t know or they are ignorant, right? So, if you’re on one side... if you gather certain characteristics emmm you are sly, you did it well and Wall Street and you know what you’re doing and if you’re on the other side there are two options either you’re a demon or you’re a poor fellow whose life is worth nothing so you have no choice... you’ll be a felon for the rest of your life...” [interview 9]. The interviewee adds that society justifies certain corrupt actions: “it depends on who does it... this that, for example, in the previous government, that of Macri, many times corruption was justified...” [interview 9].

### 3.4. Types and levels of corruption

The interviewees point out different types and levels of corruption.

First, some interviewees point out that there are levels or classes of corruption according to the detriment or damage they inflict on others. The detriment or damage depends, for example, on the number of people affected. From this point of view, the more people are affected by the corrupt action, the more relevant it is. In this sense, an interviewee affirms: “there are corrupt actions that have very-very serious outcomes or a great and negative impact and there are some corrupt actions that have a lighter result, but there will always be a result... I think that there are always some or many people that will be affected by it... by let’s say that behavior... that action...” [interview 5]. In this direction, another interviewee also affirms: “I suppose every act of corruption is important, but... yes, it is true that there are corrupt actions... I don’t know if it is important but they cause a greater impact ... let’s see... if the president is corrupt it is not the same that if the boss of a company or a police officer is corrupt” [interview 7]. This aspect is related to another issue also mentioned by other interviewees: there is corruption that originates in the need [interview 1, interview 4, interview 5 and interview 7] and therefore, each case in particular must be analyzed [interview 1], that is, who commits the act of corruption, why, in what context: “that is corruption is corruption... yes, I think there are serious cases and others... [...] that could be accepted and... I think it depends on the intention, who you’re hurting and who is doing it” [interview 7].

Second, even though an interviewee points out the existence of levels, he/she understands that the difference is qualitative and includes the idea of “doing something” for the other. In other words, confronted with two corrupt politicians, he prefers the one who “does something” for the people: “because unfortunately, it’s not the same, right?... that it’s hard to say this, but [...] it’s not the same when you have a politician that thinks only of their own corrupt pocket, and when you have the same but they do things to benefit the people... clearly, I’m going to prefer that politician... you see? There are something like levels...” [interview 16].

Third, corruption is only one, but it has many faces and there are differences related to the abuse of a position of power, from, for example, the police force: “I don’t know if there is something so determinate... but I think that... it’s not the same emm a cop who asks for a bribe to a trader, a shop... that the same cop grabbing a boy and hitting him or sending him to thief... for, for him... let’s say... right? So, there are differences...” [interview 32]



### 3.5. Images of corruption

Even though in repeated occasions, the interviewees affirm that corruption is everywhere in social life, at the moment of describing an image that represents corruption, they allude mainly to political institutions of the democratic system such as Congress [interview 5] and the House of Government [interview 12] or the security forces (the police) [interviews 7, 12 and 22]. In addition, they highlight elements such as money [interviews 16 and 22], bribes [interviews 7 and 22], the filth [interview 32], and death [interview 12].

Two images are striking. On the one hand, an interviewee associated corruption with the North American flag: “the face of a smiley elderly man with a blue and red hat with many stars to me that... that could be it” [interview 9]. On the other hand, an interviewee referred to the “White glove”, that is, to corruption connected with the powerful areas: “it would be like the image of a State building, something like the beautiful buildings that we have in Buenos Aires... and the white glove sticking its hand inside and taking many bank notes out” [interview 16].

The images of corruption as described by the interviewees are related to words spontaneously mentioned when confronted with the expression of “corruption in Argentina”. Actually, the words that are mentioned more often are “politics” and “police”. In the third place, the interviewees mention the following terms: “institutions”, “state”, “politicians”, “laundry”, and “means of communication”. However, when the interviewees are asked to choose only two of all the words mentioned, positions are reversed. The word mentioned the most is “police”, followed by “politics”. These appreciations reinforce the idea that even though the young interviewees point out the corruption exists in every area or social activity, it is mainly associated with politics and the forces of security, especially the police.

### 3.6. Practices that are considered corrupt

The practices that interviewees consider corrupt can be classified in the following way:

1. Practices that imply an improper benefit without establishing bonds with other people. For example: in a certain position, transport and minor expenses are covered. So, the employee renders bills from other expenses to increase the amount of money received [interview 1]. Another example: police officers claim to have done extra shifts to gain additional money (but they do not do them) [interview 32].

2. Practices that arise spontaneously: reception of bribes from the part of the transport police [interview 1], bribes due to illegal trade in the streets [interview 9 and interview 12], bribes for prostitution in the street [interview 12], etc.
3. Practices from everyday life. First situation: a technician that works for a private cable company installs a service in a house and every month he receives an “income” for this [interview 4]. Second situation: in the judicial system, a person appears as officially hired for carrying out certain activities and services in exchange for a sum of money (equivalent to an average salary). However, the person does not work there and every month receives a 5% of the sum for handing in a bill for fulfilling the job. The remaining 95% stays in the hands of the official who created this mechanism [interview 12]. Third situation: to formally work as a social worker, a registration number is required. To acquire this number, a person must have graduated from university. It is known that there are cases in which a graduated social worker hands in their registration number to another who is not graduated yet so that they can work and give the former a certain amount of money in exchange [interview 5]. Forth situation: regular payment of bribes to the police in order to practice prostitution in the streets [interview 12]. Fifth situation: the police take bribes from the shop owners of a certain neighborhood so as to provide security [interview 32].
4. Practices that imply abuse of power. First situation: police officers detain teenagers in the streets without any reason and “take them for a ride” all night in the police car [interview 12]. Second situation: commissary sends lower-ranking personnel to perform tasks unrelated to the duties of the function (for example, gardening at home) [interview 32].
5. Practices that imply organization, division of assignments and roles. Situation: a medicine peddler from a certain lab who offers money, travels to congresses and products and, in exchange, the doctor has to prescribe a determinate product. The pharmacist informs the lab what doctors and what quantity they prescribed and receives a percentage from it [interview 7].

The practices described as corrupt by the interviewees mainly consist of receiving a sum of money (bribe) to carry out certain actions. However, they also refer to fraud, deceit, and abuse of power as corrupt practices.

Two issues stand out as regards the corrupt practices brought forward by the interviewees. First, in the situation in which the technician illegally installs a service and every month charges the established sum of money [interview 4], a long-term bond

is established with the person who carries out the illegal connection (phone calls, chats). Either at the initial price or potential rises negotiated. Despite the fact that the technician may withdraw the service when he wishes, a more egalitarian relationship is established in comparison to that with the company, which may raise the price without previous negotiation. For example, as regards the technician, an interviewee states: “...one day he arrived and said what about making it this much next month... something like 100 pesos more... and my mum answered ‘What? No, wait... that’s like raising it about 50 per cent’... we added 50 pesos and he said ‘ok’” [interview 4]. For both parts, the bond is established in cash and there is no official contract, it is rather maintained by a social bond and trust.

Second, in the situation of the lab [interview 7], the corrupt action implies an organization where there is a division of roles and assignments among the lab, the medicine peddler, the doctor, and the pharmacy. There is neither contact nor social bond among all the parts. However, there is a strong mutual dependency. To receive the presents, the doctor needs that the pharmacy informs the lab of the product prescribed and the quantity. As in the previous case, the bond is in cash, and the circuit works due to the trust established among the parts.

## 4. Conclusions

An attempt was made in this article to describe the view young Argentinians have of corruption, starting from the supposition that perceptions and representations of determinate phenomena of social life influence people’s lives. Even though this knowledge does not allow predicting corrupt behavior, it provides a basis for understanding people’s motivations and senses in connection with corruption.

Despite the difficulty to determine this phenomenon by the interviewees, the analysis of the interviews shows that for young people when it comes to corruption it is always present: detriment of a third party, asymmetry of power, and advantage or benefit of others. In addition, the secrecy and breaking of legal norms or procedures for the accomplishment of a certain activity stand out. Corruption has a moral dimension.

The presence of the detriment of a third party is a fundamental characteristic in the definition of corruption because it allows determining who may or not be the victim and who deserves it. This works as justification criteria of their own actions and, in a wider context, it allows for the tolerance of corrupt actions. The identification of this characteristic allows evaluating the scale and the orientation of the corrupt actions: who carries it out, what needs they have, who causes damages, etc. From this point of

view, some interviewees relate corruption to the capitalist system. For them, corruption is an inherent characteristic of capitalism and a means to reproduce inequality.

Despite the fact that all the interviewees consider that corruption is in every sphere of social activity, the images of corruption are mainly associated with state institutions and the political system and are identified with a bribe (a way of corruption among others).

The practices that the interviewees consider corrupt also include characteristics such as the presence of self-benefit, the violation of established procedures. The relationships that include corruption become more effective due to social bonds and trust.

Taking into account these characteristics is a fundamental requisite to achieving more efficient anti-corruption measures.

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