

The Stressful Business of Corruption:  
the Relationship Between Social Identity Threat, Stress  
and Corrupt Group Behaviour



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Ketaki Porkess



## Thesis Abstract

Corruption in organisations is an on-going phenomenon. Previous academic research has examined corruption at structural and corporate levels. This research focused on small groups within organisations and the relationship between their corrupt behaviour and stress. Corruption, group behaviour and stress have all been studied in their own right, but this research brings these concepts together. The Social Identity Theory (SIT) with its focus on both inter-group and intra-group behaviour provided a framework for the work.

Previous research suggests that corruption in the workplace can occur when employees are put under pressure to meet difficult targets. SIT suggests that to support their group at such times, individuals who identify strongly with it may be prepared to modify their behaviour. Although, people may find behaving in ways contrary to their normal inclinations stressful, SIT also suggests that high identification with a group can lower stress levels. What was not known was whether these previous findings would apply in the case of corruption. The aim of this research is to investigate whether corruption is influenced by group behaviour, and whether stress is a factor in these acts.

A series of experimental studies was conducted in which the participants had the opportunity to behave corruptly. The results demonstrate that in all cases, this opportunity was taken, whether the participants were students or senior business executives. High identifiers behaved more corruptly than low identifiers and they experienced less stress. Women were found to be less corrupt than men. Leaders play a definite role in corrupt behaviour. Qualitative analysis showed that corruption in groups is highly contextual and is accompanied by rationalisation. When group identification is strong in a team, and conditions present the opportunity, corrupt behaviour may occur even when threat to the identity is not high. This has led to a new model of corrupt behaviour in which opportunity and social identification definitely play their parts, while threat and/or stress may or may not. The implication is that strong identification between members within sub-units may result in employees behaving in corrupt

ways that may run counter to the norms of the wider organisation. However, the increased understanding of corrupt group behaviour that this research has provided will help to prevent such behaviour from occurring.

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