

## Corrupt, corrupted, culprit: civil servants' narratives on corruption practices

*Sobre corruptos, corrompidos e culpados: relatos de servidores públicos sobre práticas de corrupção*

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes possible connections between deviant workplace behaviors and the occurrence of corrupt practices in public sector organizations. Based on narrative data from civil servants of a Brazilian state government, we observed their perceptions and experiences regarding acts of corruption. The literature on deviant workplace behavior suggests that corrupt practices vary in the degree of deviance behavior from serious to minor. In this article, the evidences indicate the use of mechanisms of acceptance and perpetuation of corrupt practices, such as an official position denying the corruption occurrence and the use of informal processes to deal with such cases, such as to investigate and to punish both informers and deviants.

### Resumo

Este artigo analisa possíveis articulações entre comportamentos desviantes no trabalho e a ocorrência de práticas de corrupção em organizações do setor público. A partir dos relatos de servidores públicos de um governo estadual, foram observadas as percepções e experiências desses servidores em relação a atos de corrupção. A literatura sobre comportamentos desviantes no trabalho sugere que as práticas de corrupção nas organizações variam de um grau de desvio de comportamento grave a aceitável. No caso analisado, as evidências indicam o uso de mecanismos de aceitação e perpetuação de práticas de corrupção, como um posicionamento oficial de negação de que tenha ocorrido corrupção e uso de processos informais para tratar denúncias, como investigação e atribuição de sanções a delatores e delatados.

### Practical implications

Corruption practices in organization occur in consonance with other behavioral deviations. In the case examined, such deviations remained with no formal or systematic treatment, informally discussed, and perpetuated by the silence of the administration. Public sector organizations can create mechanisms to reduce these conditions that help to spread such behaviors.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Many are the approaches to 'corruption', especially due to the lack of a consensus on its definition. Brei (1996), for example, emphasizes that this term may include a wide variety of acts, such as forgery, bribery, exaction, among others. In this sense, definitions of corruption vary according to the theoretical perspective that supports them as, for instance, legal, economic, and political theories.

There is, however, a certain association between corruption and public sector: although starting from different assumptions, a common trait to corruption theories is considering it as the overlap of private interests over public concerns to obtain advantages (Filgueiras, 2004). Nonetheless, such definitions would be limited due to the fact they do not consider certain shared values present in the public sphere. Given that, Filgueiras (2009) proposes that corruption is analyzed from the antinomy between moral rules and social practice: corruption would then be related to the "constitution of informal rules that institutionalize certain practices, perceived as morally degrading but routinely tolerated" (Filgueiras, 2009, p. 387; translated by the author).

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In this perspective, other corruptive situations that do not perfectly conform to the economic dimension of advantage or benefit would occur, or even some not related to the legal-normative distinction that would restrict the practice of corruption to illegal acts or mere legal issues. This means that analyzing corruption would include the understanding of normative aspects that base it. Thus, corruption can be understood as everything that is considered a breach of the normative orientation (Filgueiras, 2009). Such orientation is built based on certain judgments about the behavior of actors and organizations.

We propose, therefore, to analyze corruption practices from theoretical contributions on deviant workplace behaviors. According to several authors (Anand, Ashforth & Joshi, 2005; Pinto, Leana & Pfl, 2008; Robinson & Bennett, 1995), there is some superposition between the ideas of corruption and deviant behavior: corruption would be the misuse of a given position or authority in the organization for personal or even organizational gain, in which the “misuse” is related to a deviation from rules understood as appropriate. Ergo, the main objective of this article is to investigate the possible associations between deviant workplace behaviors and the corrupt practices in the public sector. To do so, we use narrative data of public servants of a Brazilian state government, analyzing their perceptions and experiences on corruption practices observed by them in the organization. From that, some common occurrences are addressed, as well as the forms of treatment of those events.

## 2 DEVIANT BEHAVIORS IN ORGANIZATIONS

In organizational studies, the literature about behavior in organizations has emphasized, until the beginning of the 1990s, constructs on positive attitudes and conducts at work, such as the notions of commitment and satisfaction. From the mid-1990s, however, more studies on negative organizational behaviors have emerged (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Although they have characteristics in common, there is a great variety of negative behaviors such as: misconduct, anti-social, dysfunctional, counterproductive, unethical, uncivil, and aggressive behavior at work and in organizations (Appelbaum, Iaconi & Matousek, 2007). A common denominator to such concepts is the idea of divergence between norms and the individual’s conduct.

For the purposes of this study, the term ‘deviant workplace behavior’ (Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Warren, 2003) is used to indicate actions of individuals or groups within the organization that represent a voluntary violation of any norm taken as reference. Internally, such individuals may violate policies, guidelines, customs, or regulations of that organization. Also, there is a possibility of deviation from broader reference norms, such as social values and principles considered appropriate (Warren, 2003). This is a rather general definition, which may encompass both negative as positive deviations. Negative deviations are those that may result in damage to the organization, its members, or both. Behavior deviations in public sector organizations and the consequent misuse of public resources and overall inefficiency also generate harm to the beneficiaries of its services.

Less researched, the positive deviance is the intentional conduct that honorably departs from the norms of the reference group (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). Such positive deviant behaviors include innovative conducts, disobedience to dysfunctional rules, or even criticism against incapable superiors (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2007). In this case, acts committed with good intentions are emphasized, regardless of their results. However, it should be noted that a ‘honorably intent’ is evaluated regarding other conducts typically expected from the group; hence, interpretations of the act may not be consensual.

Anyway, a rapprochement between deviant behaviors and corrupt practices is possible since both refer to a breakage with a normative orientation. This, however, would not be a static breakage: corruption would be both a status as a process that takes places from dynamics of interaction between individuals, groups, and organizations (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008). A plurality of approaches to this phenomenon arise from this, involving variables such a type of violation, extent of the damage, and the profile of those involved (Pinto *et al.*, 2008).

To support the analysis on the nature of deviant behaviors, two analytical models are highlighted: that of Robinson and Bennett (1995), which classifies deviant conduct regarding the act severity and its direction, and that of Pinto *et al.* (2008), which differentiate types of deviant conducts from two dimensions: the main beneficiary of the practice and the kind of connection established between the members of the organization.

The typology of Robinson and Bennett (1995) consists of four types of deviant behavior, a result of the combination of two analytical dimensions: minor vs serious, regarding act severity, and organizational vs interpersonal, referring to the “target” of the behavior. Thus, ‘property diversion’ would be a behavior of higher severity with damages to the organization. In this first category, there would be conducts such as the intentional damage to organizational resources, the appropriation of the organization’s assets, and the acceptance of bribery. These acts resemble the description of several crimes against the Public Administration, like strictu sensu corruption, administrative improbity, embezzlement, and misuse of public goods.

The second category of deviant behaviors is named production deviation, that is, actions that bring prejudice to the organization but with minor severity. Waste of resources in performing a given task, intentional and unjustified reduction of work, or non-compliance with the workday would be in this category (Robinson & Bennett, 1995).

Political deviation, the third category, would be the minor-severity behavior against the members of an organization, putting them in personal or political disadvantage. Behaviors in this category include favoritism, spreading of gossip or rumors about coworkers, and the non-beneficial competition between groups or individuals in the organization (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2007; Robinson & Bennett, 1995).

Finally, the fourth category is called personal aggression. It consists of severe negative behaviors (aggressive or hostile) against members of the own organization, including verbal abuse, and moral and sexual harassment (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2007; Robinson & Bennett, 1995).

As for the typology of Pinto *et al.* (2008), it firstly established a distinction between the beneficiary of the deviant behaviors, whether the individual (or small group) or the organization itself. The benefits mentioned by these authors are primarily pecuniary, including misappropriation, bribery, and tips, though they do not discard immaterial or symbolic advantages. The second dimension concerns the possibility of collusion or conspiracy between the organization members. Pinto *et al.* (2008) argue that the practice of corruption aiming at organizational benefits is possible when there is a collusion, especially among the members of the high echelon.

From these dimensions, Pinto *et al.* (2008) suggest two types of organizational corruption. The first of them is the organization of corrupt individuals, defined as a bottom-up phenomenon in which prevails the pursuit of advantages for individuals through deviant acts (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008). The second type, in turn, is the corrupt organization, understood as a top-down phenomenon in which a group of the organization, usually the dominant coalition, organizational summit or senior public administrators, promote actions regarded as corrupt, directly or through their subordinates, aiming at obtaining benefits for the organization (Pinto *et al.*, 2008).

### 3 METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted from interviews with public servants of two departments of a Brazilian state government, with a semi-structured guide. Given the focus on perceptions about corruption, we opted for this kind of interview since it allows certain freedom to the participants in their responses, even with a previously defined set of questions.

The questions in the guide addressed four topics: a) the servant's concept of corruption; b) perceptions on deviant practices (if it is something disseminated or localized in the organization, if they heard of any cases, if they have ever reported some corrupt practice or deviation); c) approaches to the event (how the information is spread within the organization, how the servants are treated, if are there any channels or flows to be known and followed); and d) possibility of change (if some process, structure, practice, or attitude could be improved or implemented). The main questions were complemented by other ones raised at the time of interview according to the interviewee responses.

Public servants from the areas of health, public security, and education were selected, with more than three years of professional experience and occupying technical positions in the departments of strategic planning/organizational development of their respective organization. We opted for this profile due to their distinguished professional insertion, closer to the summit of the organization. Considering that their attributions include drawing and validating the planning for the whole organization, in addition to monitoring the compliance with sectoral goals and assisting the leadership in decision-making, these professionals have a comprehensive overview of the organizational operation. A priori, no distinction was made between permanent and non-permanent servants since both perform the same activities in their respective sectors.

Public servants were invited by email, in which they were told the purpose and theme of the research. If they agreed to participate, the consent form was forwarded. Of the six invitations sent, three were accepted: two in the area of public security and one in the health field. At the time of the interviews, the respondents exercised strategic advisory positions (linked to the leaderships of the organizations), bearing four to nine years of professional experience.

The interviews, with an average duration of 30 minutes, were carried out and recorded in February 2016. Even with the voluntary participation, there was discomfort among the participants, especially in verbalizing specific episodes on deviant behaviors. Periods of silence were common over the reports, as well as the decrease tone of voice (even with the interviews being carried out in reserved places, only with the presence of the researcher and the interviewee) and a very careful formulation of responses. Considering the criticality of the theme and to preserve the identity of the participants, the reference to them is made only through their area – health or public security (1 and 2) when excerpts from their statements are cited.

For data treatment, the reports were first individually analyzed based on the reference of the topics previously defined by the interview guide. From them, categories were established, such as the conception of corruption, corruption cases, disclosure of information of deviant practices etc., to compile and organize significant excerpts of the interviews. Then, we worked with this set of data, associating ideas and similar excerpts with such categories, from which the narrative moments exposed in the next section were selected.

For the systematization of the findings, excerpts of the reports were posteriorly grouped in the four themes subsequently exposed, referring to practices regarded as deviant and that have an influence on the identification, treatment, and perpetuation of corruption within organizations.

## 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the study results by gathering the servants' accounts and then analyzes how such reports imply in an overlap of certain deviant behaviors at work and what is understood as corruption. It also points the mechanisms used to know and approach such conducts.

### 4.1 Deviant behaviors as corrupt practices

Initially, when questioned about what would constitute corruption, respondents pointed out behaviors typified as crimes, i.e., pre-defined actions to which the legal system provides penalties if any. In this respect, not only conducts that would be defined as corruption in a strictly legal sense were mentioned, but also other crimes committed against the Public Administration.

I guess there are modalities, perhaps diverting public money, I think it is more connected to that; taking advantage of a certain position too; basically, it's taking advantages of something (servant of the health area; translated by the author).

[...] any practice for the diversion of funds, misuse of public resources for their own benefit. Especially this part dedicated to the public resources, I think this is the most serious in the public service because, I think, there are others (servant of the area of public security 2; translated by the author).

After that, however, the interviewees listed other conducts that, although not necessarily illegal, could be construed as corrupt from the idea of obtaining an undue advantage:

I understand the corruption is an inappropriate, improper, illegal behavior, sometimes is not even illegal but immoral, in the sense that you are, somehow, taking advantage of something. I guess that when someone takes some illegal or immoral attitude to take advantage of something, this is corruption (servant of the area of public security 2; translated by the author).

I would define corruption as a kind of deviation, isn't it, a deviation of conduct at work, oh, it is so difficult to define it... It would be a deviation, and everything that is not within the legal conduct in an organization. [...] Several acts of the servant himself, even behaviors, from the time he arrives to the way he performs a given task... The ability that sometimes the servants have, of analyzing the other regardless of their own behavior. So, trying to take advantage, sometimes, of the other's service... The problem is to remember all of them, but this is the main aspect (servant of the area of public security 1; translated by the author).

It is noteworthy that the obtainment of advantages does not always imply in financial benefits. Less visible forms of it, such as the intentional and unjustified reduction of working hours or the quality of products to be delivered (such as reports, projects, attendance to the public etc.) would also be considered unethical:

I think this is more serious in the public sector because you are dealing with the resources of the population, not of one or two people: if you are in a family company and stole something, you will have all the penalties, you are harming someone. In the case of the public sector, you're harming an entire population (servant of the area of public security 2; translated by the author).

It would be fully disseminated, in all the spheres and all powers, in the Executive, Legislative, and Judiciary, I think it's endemic in Brazil [...] In the society, the corruption of the public sector is very damaging for being in all spheres, in all scopes (servant of the health area; translated by the author).

You'll see a lot of this in the public service, people who are there just for cosmetic purposes and who are somehow taking advantage of what the citizens expect of them as public servants (servant of the area of public security 1; translated by the author).

Bearing this in mind, there seems to be an association between deviant workplace behaviors and the breach of a certain sense of morality that should permeate the public sector, i.e., the need for the administrative action to follow general ethical principles of good faith, honesty, and service to the public interest, in addition to its compliance with the law. This is, thus, the understanding of deviation in its negative aspect.

Furthermore, the description given by the respondents brings the occurrence of deviant behaviors closer to the concept of an organization of corrupt individuals, in which individual deviant acts are frequent and disseminated throughout the organization, mainly aiming at the obtainment of personal benefits (Pinto *et al.*, 2008).

#### 4.2 Pacts of silence and censorship

The interviewees revealed the existence of an organizational environment in which, to maintain the cohesion of sector units or the image of certain individuals or groups, the default positioning of the organization is to deny or to ignore the occurrence of adverse conducts and practices within the organizational reality. Such positioning starts from an understanding of corruption actions as something private, in a way that interventions from superiors or responsible bodies for dealing with the phenomenon are regarded as potentially intrusive or even offensive to the authority of the servants leading the team or sector where the corruption occurred, such as coordinators, superintendents, and supervisors:

There is a tendency that it will get better, but I don't see it, I cannot realize that today it is treated properly, I don't. This is not handled openly, it is not spoken, which is kind of wanting to sugar coat things, for now. [...] I have never seen in any moment, in these four years in the institution, an attempt to deal with it, at any time (servant of the area of public security 2; translated by the author).

[...] it would be interesting because we always have a lot of courses, seminar, lectures focused on management, much is focused on technique, but not a thing on this subject. [...] I have never participated, haven't seen it happening... It is interesting you say it like that, really. It is not a much-discussed subject, at least not in the places where I worked. It never was (servant of the health area; translated by the author).

An important unfolding of this silence is the absence of clarity concerning guidelines about behaviors and attitudes expected from the servant. Though general rules about the ethical conduct of public servants really do exist, there is rarely detail on management practices or activities to be performed. Thus, opportunities for the manifestations of deviant or dysfunctional behaviors are created since there is no explicit prohibition of their practice.

Guidance regarding corruption, no. Regarding what would this deviant behavior of the servant be. Since I started working for the state I've never received any guidance, and anyway, there is a big difficulty in receiving orientations on how you will perform your activities. Often you get into a sector because of some selection process thinking that you will perform a given activity but many times you end up doing something else, there is no proper orientations on what you are going to do. [...] The boss frequently does not know what he wants from the servant, which also makes difficult to determine a concept of what is corruption or a conduct deviation of the servant. [...] Is there any guideline, any procedure, anything you should adopt? No, you never know when to make that decision, you never know how to do it, and people know it doesn't exist, the servants know this does not exist, so many times they use it for the thing not to go forward (servant of the area of public security 1; translated by the author).

The excerpts above indicate that the practice of deviant conducts is favored by an environment where there are no well-disseminated internal rules neither for behaviors nor for working methods. Such conditions constitute an implicit authorization or a breach to be exploited, despite the possible negative consequences for the organizations, its members, or the beneficiaries of the public service.

### 4.3 The “pawn radio”

Even though the “official” position of the organization is the certain ‘silence’ when it comes to corruption, this does not mean that information about it does not circulate internally. On the contrary, the servants acknowledge an unofficial and officious mechanism for disseminating information: the ‘pawn radio’. Such name comes from the combination of an ancient system of information, the radio, and one of the main places of origin of gossip and organizational rumors: the operating base, where the largest number of employers is, which are in this case denominated “pawns” (Cardoso, 1995):

I’ve heard only talk, nothing that I ever saw or came close. But people talking “this happened, that happened to so-and-so, so-and-so did that”, then yes, it is pawn radio all the time. You hear about it. [...] People say things, but nobody comes to it openly, it’s just a buzz... If there is something more serious you see it in the papers. Then the comments... Sometimes, if there is some punishment, you see it in the [Official] Diary (servant of the health area; translated by the author).

As I see it, it is the pawn radio. This is not formalized, nobody discloses nothing, usually, it is swept under the rug, really not to show it [...] This is not formally commented in the organization. It is the pawn radio that announces. By the top managers, the leadership, I’ve never seen any kind of comment (servant of the area of public security 2; translated by the author).

The “scheduling” of the “pawn radio” is frequent but diverse, and the issues are raised in a disorderly way. In addition, the ‘pawn radio’ is not restricted to specific sectors, spreading throughout the entire organizational structure. It materializes in corridor conversations, which happen on the ‘coffee break’, and even in meetings outside the office hours and the work environment.

As reported by the interviewees, even though the subject is regarded with caution since there is a possibility of the information being false or distorted, the rumors were of often true. Regarding corrupt practices, some types are more common:

[...] exchange of favors in contracts, personal favor exchange, personal advantages in contracts, exchange of favors even like “*oh, no, I’ll give you a police assistance here, I’ll cover you*”, free lunches in restaurants, use of official vehicles and equipment for personal purposes, diversion of seized goods, sale of driver’s licenses – unfortunately we still hear of it despite the whole effort of the management for this not to happen [...] These minor practices we hear in the ‘pawn radio’ but for larger things we may not have access, there are no commentaries on this sense; but the small practices – small but not less wrong – are the ones we most hear about (servant of the area of public security 2; translated by the author).

I have heard in health about cases of urgency and emergency... Favoritism in selling systems to the health unit. Sometimes there is a company that dominates this kind of technology, a term of partnership, cartel formation, something like that. The partner entity diverting funds in the form of consulting, these things (servant of the health area; translated by the author).

Given this, two observations are made. Firstly, the ‘pawn radio’ provides an interesting counterpoint to the standard positioning of the organization in neutralizing and silencing the practice of deviant conducts, making the occurrence of these acts more visible, albeit unsystematic. Secondly, the frailty of the evidence of deviant behaviors fosters an also informal and unsystematic treatment.

### 4.4 Persecution, retaliation, and differentiation mechanisms

Despite having reported or experienced episodes of deviant conduct, the interviewees stated never have made any denounce, either by the absence of more concrete proof or for fear of any exposure:

Not formally, because I don’t have how to prove all these things we sometimes acknowledge. These are situations that sometimes you really do not have how to follow up. [...] But informally, yes; Even this issue of servant allocation. I have already seen and reported cases of servant allocation just because, just “*I want to put the servant there and that’s it*”. It’s not because the unit needs. So, this kind of practice I have reported, I have even reported suspicious situations, of seeing people outside office hours, descending on the sly by the elevator with documentation of the institution, taking it away to do whoever-knows-what. Informally, I have reported [...]

In this case of the documents, it was examined, an investigation was conducted to confirm what had actually been taken, and what was not in the right of the person to take returned to the institution. So, I was satisfied with this result (servant of the area of public security 2; translated by the author).

It is not something you can formalize in a complaint, it is always very fragile. It's like I told you, the guys are not going to go into details. Sometimes it is so close, it is a person who works in the same sector, so it is difficult. [...] The staff sometimes send it to the ombudsman office, to the press... (servant of the health area; translated by the authors).

Respondents' narratives suggest that the likelihood of deviant behaviors being identified and discussed depends to a large extent on the willingness of those responsible for the investigations, such as bosses, team coordinators, among others, and on the relationship of (dis)trust between them and those involved, either regarding the informed or the denounced. This leads to a very different approach to similar behaviors and to the absence of criteria on the choice for this or that course of action:

If it is very close, people are not comfortable talking because sometimes it is a friend of someone, an acquaintance of another, so it's not easy to talk about it, no (servant of the health area; translated by the authors).

Even serious facts that take place in the organization, rather than taking it to internal affairs, following an administrative process, what I most see – and that is real – is that they move the person away, figure a way to retire the person, to change the sector, but not in a way that this is a punishment for the person to evolve, is more like “*I'm going to get you out of the picture for people to forget it and then, if possible, we will bring you [back]*”. If I think this serve as a lesson, an improvement, the creation of a procedure, is that what you are asking? No, it doesn't (servant of the area of public security 1; translated by the authors).

In this respect, to notify the occurrence of deviant behaviors may result in problems, which are, to a large extent, the result of the unpreparedness of the organizations. This context can lead to the non-accountability of individuals whose behavior is deviant, or even the non-protection or harm to those who inform such actions, thus reinforcing the silence aforementioned. According to the reports, the fear of servants in getting involved in such situations is related to the unpredictability regarding the approach to deviant behavior situations:

[The person] must evaluate whether there will be any retaliation or not. Imagine you are in a sector and you're seeing that there is something going on. Will you tell your boss? You don't know if he isn't friends with this person... It is complex. Because if it is too close to you, involving these people you work with, it's hard. [...] You have no protection, you may suffer retaliation in various ways, the risk you have in saying something, reporting; you can be much harmed (servant of the health area; translated by the authors).

On this point, it should be also noted the very superficial mention of formal control mechanisms, both internal and external. Bodies such as the General Controllorship and the sectoral audits, which are internal controlling and monitoring units, were not even cited. The Court of Auditors, the Public Prosecution Service and the Ombudsman Office, in turn, were mentioned by one of the interviewees as examples of a more specific action, for cases of more serious deviations or bigger rebound. Other channels, such as the Internal Affairs and Human Resources departments, were mentioned with some suspicion as if these mechanisms could not be seen as effective alternatives for the denouncement of deviant behaviors.

[...] I think this could be a way, a place the person could go knowing that he/she would have some support, will not be exposed, a place to listen to the servant. The problem is that this unit really must be independent not to expose the servant (servant of the health area; translated by the authors).

If I had a concrete situation, I would. I would report, even knowing of past and present cases in which the person did this kind of accusation, reporting this kind of behavior, and was encroached and persecuted, was damaged in some way. Even knowing that this could happen I would do my report, I would formalize a denounce, but only if I really had how to prove it (servant of the area of public security 2; translated by the authors).

The speeches of the respondents imply some suspicion regarding transparency, neutrality, and guarantee of secrecy in the investigation of deviant behaviors.

Such a vision is quite significant considering the progress of control institutions in Brazil with, for example, administrative reforms and extension of functions (Filgueiras & Aranha, 2011; Oliveira Júnior, Costa & Mendes, 2016). Perhaps the past episodes of very different treatment for similar conducts, through informal ways, and the lack of clear internal guidelines contribute to extending this perception that there is no safe way to deal with this issue through the formal controlling bodies. One of the respondents came to the point of mentioning lack of maturity in the performance of supervisory bodies.

Similarly, the excerpt below suggests that people who report on corrupt practices in the organizations, rather than regarded as servants who are concerned with the work progress, process, and methods, are seen as “troublemakers”, meddling with something that they should not. Given such perspective, they must, as well as the deviants, be silenced:

I witnessed a fact that really happened. A servant reported a situation that she even had proof and was discharged from the institution, as if to say, “*you don’t mess with that*”, “*don’t meddle with what you have no right to mess, so bye-bye*”. [...] Unfortunately, people deal with right and wrong according to what goes on in their heads. Especially those people who are in the institution for many years; this is what I feel, that those who are in the institution for many years tend to kind of protect the institution, so nobody should mess with that, nobody should say what is wrong, it’s “*I did nothing wrong*” rather than discussing the problem, which is what I have seen lately. [...] Only talking about the problems that we will solve it. Thus, at the time this problem happened, those who were ahead of the affairs; it is not that they did not want to solve it because the person who was wrong, who caused the situation, this person was punished; but the person who reported was also punished, even before the one who had practiced the illegal act. It was a thinking like “*don’t you meddle with my bee box or you’ll be bitten*” (servant of the area of public security 2; translated by the author).

To keep the silence about deviant practices, several mechanisms are used, which seem to vary depending on the type of functional binding of the servant. For non-stable servant, such as occupants of commissioned positions, wide recruitment jobs, special contractors, among others, the threat of dismissal from the public sector tends to predominate. On the other hand, stable servants such as those who joined the public service by a contest and permanent and tenured workers, there is a peculiarity: the boss or hierarchical superior cannot dispose of the servants’ functional binding, being thus unable to fire them, except in the cases provided for by the law. Given that, maneuvers for disqualification of the worker or the work have been reported:

[The person] might lose a job, a position... She is going to do a job without much relevance. [...] You be relegated to minor works, other jobs, other sector, things like that. You won’t be able to leave the place you are at... For example, you are in a very bad place, the person put you in there and there is where you are going to be... Several ways to make your life more difficult. This is very common (servant of the health area; translated by the author).

Another element to be highlighted is that fact that, in the public sector, bosses or public administrators are not, in some cases, indicated due to their technical qualifications, experience, or preparation to perform the activities but for bonds of friendship or political relations. Because of this, there may be weaknesses in the relationship between these public administrators and their teams, either due to the lack of trust, or by the own conduct of the boss, due to abuse of power or of the links that keep them in that position:

[...] people who are affiliated to a party can generate suspicion, “*oh, so-and-so is from that party, he/she won’t be able to stay in this leadership position*”. Sometimes it is a good person, technically. The issue of affection, of partisan binding. It doesn’t have to be an issue of denounce, it doesn’t have to be something more serious for this to occur. Sometimes just the fact of a friendship, or because of a fight; if the person is given to those things he/she retaliates (servant of the health area; translated by the author).

From this, it is possible to establish a connection between such behaviors and the literature that comes to clientelism, patronage, favoritism, among other related phenomena, as characteristic of the Brazilian bureaucracy. Several studies (Ottmann, 2006; Raupp, & Pinho, 2012; Oliveira, Oliveira & Santos, 2011; Oliveira J nior *et al.*, 2016) addressed how these phenomena impact the process of channeling demands, setting priorities, and distributing material and immaterial resources, activities which may conflict with the expected sense of morality or impartiality in the provision of public services and in the treatment to its servants.

Given what was discussed, it can be said that the material collected through interviews offers important considerations on deviant behaviors regarded as corrupt, extrapolating the normative-legal meaning of such acts. In this sense, even minor deviations, categorized as such by Robinson and Bennett (1995), would be aggravated by the fact they occurred in the public sector. Such deviations are established and perpetuated in an organizational context of silence and denial of corrupt practices, especially from sectors and groups of the high echelon of administration.

The aim is to ensure that the reality of the institutional life does not come to public, whether by rejecting the existence of corrupt practices, whether by giving them inappropriate or inconsistent treatment. Such results are consistent with observations of Filgueiras and Aranha (2011), relating discretion and the absence of universal rules and procedures to the perpetuation of corruption as a practice in the Public Administration.



In this sense, it is also possible to perceive similarities with moral harassment at work if the disqualification of the activities and the person occur in a repetitive, persistent, and continuous fashion. According to Martiningo Filho and Siqueira (2008), the lack of clarity regarding demands and expectations, ways to face conflict and ambiguities, and support from the senior management – which abdicates the responsibility and do not intervene in deviant situations, such as described in this study – are factors for the prevalence of moral harassment at work. There could be, thus, important articulations between corrupt practices and their effects in certain aspects of the work like motivation, stress, and satisfaction. The climate of fear and silence opens possibilities for marginalization, isolation, and even terminating the functional bond of those who decide to talk about deviant behaviors.

One of the interviewees mentioned that these behaviors are rooted in the organizational culture, indicating a tacit acceptance of such practices as undesirable but inevitable in the everyday life of the organization. We observed, then, a dubious positioning by the servant: on the one hand, he/she recognizes that such behaviors offend certain expectations that permeated the public sphere; on the other hand, he/she tries not to be involved or not to create animosities when facing corrupt acts, opening space for such practices to be tolerated or considered tolerable (Filgueiras, 2009).

The data collected also clarifies certain tactics of rationalization and socialization on corruption (Anand *et al.*, 2005), understood as the processes by which the individuals produce the meaning of their actions so not to perceive them as incorrect, illegal, or immoral. Thus, the attitude of the servants would be influenced by several factors, such as institutional precedents, routines, pressure from groups and superiors, and emotional or affective dilemmas that could lead to the acceptance and perpetuation of corrupt practices. Some of the tactics mentioned by Anand *et al.* (2005) are: denial of responsibility – “I had no choice”, “everybody does it”, and “I have nothing to do with it”; denial of damage – “no one was harmed”, “there are worse than me”; and appeal to loyalties – to the group, the boss, or the organization itself. The view that corruption is a generalized phenomenon, for example, could be considered a denial of responsibility. Thus, rationalization and socialization tactics could be employed so that deviant behaviors are seen as normal.

## 5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Results presented in this study reveal some aspects of the dynamics between corruption, perception on corruption, and deviant behaviors, in addition to pointing some path for further investigation of behavioral organizational patterns associated with corruption. Therefore, they can contribute to the reflection and expansion of research on negative behaviors as part of the organizational practices (the ‘dark side’ of the organizations), training of public agents for the execution of their functions, and perceptions about the performance of inspection and control bodies.

The interviews suggest that corruption would not be solely assigned to the specific act of a given public servant but to a diffuse network of behaviors and attitudes, often legal ones, that interact to ensure the continuity of certain practices perceived as unethical. Moreover, with differentiated treatment among servants and unpredictability as to the application of penalties for some actions.

Identifying some of the mechanisms through which deviant behaviors and corrupt practices are interrelated and overlapped pointed out the need to deepen the research on informal organizational networks for a better understanding of the underlying codes of silence about the organizational routine; loyalty and complicity dynamics that lead to differentiated treatment of servants and their tasks; the internalization, rationalization, and replication of actions regarded as corrupt; and the association between deviant behaviors and the performance of formal reporting channels.

Considering the limitations of this study and the relative scarcity of research on corruption in the public sector, especially beyond its legal-normative aspect, it is pertinent to conduct additional research, which may contribute to a better understanding about the theme and its implications to public organizations.

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