Justifications of taking a bribe and corrupt behavior in a laboratory task

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INTRODUCTION

- People are more likely to behave dishonestly when such behavior is easier to justify.
- We used a laboratory task modeling the decision to take a bribe[1] to examine three factors that may influence justifiability of bribe-taking.
- Accepting high bribes may lead people to justify taking any bribes later. (*Study 1*)
- Perceived reward unequality may lead people to justify its compensation by taking bribes. (*Study 2*)
- Bribe-taking may be easier to justify when its negative consequences are uncertain. (*Study 3*)

METHODS

General procedure

In an online task modeling the decision to take a bribe, participants sorted objects running on a computer screen according to their color by pressing one of three keys, each of which was randomly associated each trial with a single color and shape. If a key response led to an assignment to a wrong color, a charity lost 200 points out of the initially allotted 2000 (corresponding to ~9 USD). The loss simulated the negative societal effects of not performing given work according to the given rule. Participants got a fixed reward of 3 points for each sorted object, which represented the salary given to a worker for performing their job. On some trials, participants were offered a "bribe" varying in size from 30 to 180 points for sorting the object according to shape instead of color (Figure 1). Each participant went through 200 trials of the task.

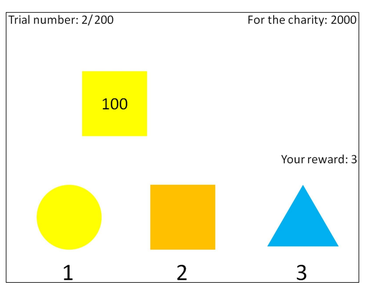

Figure 1. An illustration of a computer screen seen by a participant.

Participants

Around 300 participants finished each study. They were recruited from a laboratory subject pool, which is predominantly Czech, and mostly consists of university students and women.

Design

Study 1: In the control group, bribes varied from 30 to 180 in all 200 trials. In the low-high group, bribes varied from 30 to 90 in the first 100 trials and from 120 to 180 in the remaining 100 trials. In the high-low group, the order was reversed.

Study 2: All participants received 5 points per sorted object. However, they were told that the reward of all participants fell within a range of possible values, which was either 1-5 points, 2-8 points, or 5-20 points. Participants also filled the moral foundations questionnaire[2] with additional items related to equity and proportionality[3] and we asked them about their perception of the reward.

Study 3: Depending on the condition, incorect sorting of the object led the charity to lose 200 points with certainty, 400 points with a 50% probability, or 2000 points with a 10% probability.

SELECTED RESULTS

Study 1

Neither the high-low group nor the low-high group differed in their overall rate of bribe-taking from the control group. The difference between high and low bribes did not differ between high-low and control groups. However, the difference between high and low bribes was somewhat smaller for the low-high group than for the control group, even though the effect was not significant, $p = .080$. That is, while participants were more likely to take high bribes than low bribes in the control group, $t(106.6) = 4.37$, $p < .001$, $b = 0.071$, 95% CI [0.039, 0.103], the effect of the bribe group was smaller and not significant in the low-high group, $t(87.4) = 1.24$, $p = .217$, $b = 0.022$, 95% CI [-0.013, 0.056] (Figure 2).

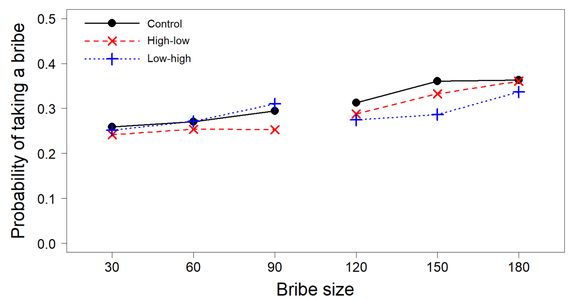

Figure 2. The predicted probability of taking a bribe based on a condition and bribe size in Study 1.

Study 2

There was no effect of condition on bribe-taking. Proportionality was significantly associated with the probability of taking a bribe with participants ascribing higher importance to proportionality being more likely to take bribes, $t(283.3) = 2.82$, $p = .005$, $b = 0.237$, 95% CI [0.072, 0.402]. Participants who were led to believe that others' reward is higher viewed their reward more negatively, $r_S = -.14$, 95% CI [-.26, -.01], $p = .020$. Participants who viewed the reward more negatively took a higher proportion of bribes, $r_S = -.14$, 95% CI [-.24, -.02], $p = .020$.

Study 3

There was no effect of condition.

SUMMARY

- Bribe-taking might be influenced by the order of the sizes of offered bribes.
- People who perceived their fixed reward more negatively took more bribes. However, the manipulation of perceived reward inequality did not significantly affect bribe-taking.
- Uncertainty of negative consequences of corrupt behavior had no effect on bribe-taking.
- The studies point to the limits of purely psychological measures of curbing corruption.

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