Agency and Judgment in the Study of Corruption: A Systematic Review from Psychology[*]

Agencia y juicio en el estudio de la corrupción: revisión sistemática desde la psicología

JULIÁN CAMILO SARMIENTO-LÓPEZ[a]
Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, Colombia
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9279-6664

MARIO FERNANDO GUTIÉRREZ-ROMERO
Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, Colombia
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3452-8658

FELIPE ANDRÉS BERNAL-SANDOVAL
Universidad de Cundinamarca, Fusagasugá, Colombia
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3772-0015

Correspondence author: Julián Camilo Sarmiento-López.
juliancsarmiento@javeriana.edu.co

ABSTRACT

This article presents a systematic review of the psychological literature on corruption. Models, methodologies, processes, and factors involved in the study and understanding of moral judgment and agency in corruption scenarios were identified. Based on the analysis of 61 studies (conducted from 2013 to 2024) using the PRISMA methodology and bibliometric tools, four thematic focuses were identified: bribery in experimental settings, the psychological impact of perceived corruption, individual predictors of corrupt intention, and culture, values, and institutional legitimacy. The findings show that corrupt decisions are not explained by rational calculation. This cognitive phenomenon links the interaction of moral emotions (shame), relational closeness between people, the perception of contextual elements (perceived risk, institutional legitimacy), and cultural and personal beliefs. The study concludes that the psychology of moral development does not present a unified model. This heterogeneity raises the question of integrating cognitive, affective, normative, and interdisciplinary dimensions to explain corruption.

Keywords
Moral judgment; moral agency; corruption; moral psychology; ethical decision-making.

RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta una revisión sistemática de la literatura psicológica sobre la corrupción. Se encontraron modelos, metodologías, procesos y factores implicados en el estudio y comprensión del juicio y la agencia moral en escenarios de corrupción. A partir del análisis de 61 estudios (2013–2024) mediante metodología PRISMA y las herramientas bibliométricas se identificaron cuatro focos temáticos: sobornos en contextos experimentales, impacto psicológico de la corrupción percibida, predictores individuales de intención corrupta, valores culturales y confianza institucional. Los hallazgos muestran que las decisiones

corruptas no se explican por cálculo racional. Este fenómeno cognitivo vincula la interacción de emociones morales (vergüenza), la cercanía relacional entre las personas, la percepción de elementos contextuales (riesgo percibido, legitimidad institucional) y las creencias culturales y personales. Se concluye que la psicología del desarrollo moral no presenta un modelo unificado. Esta heterogeneidad dirige la pregunta por integrar dimensiones cognitivas, afectivas, normativas e interdisciplinares para explicar la corrupción.

Palabras clave
juicio moral; agencia moral; corrupción; psicología moral; toma de decisiones éticas.

Introduction

Corruption is a complex phenomenon that has drawn the attention of various scientific disciplines seeking to understand and explain it, thereby enabling the development of preventive measures against such behaviors. Its complexity lies in its social, economic, psychological, and moral dimensions. Corruption, understood as the improper management of public or private resources by individuals who are not their rightful owners, often involves the disproportionate use of power or social or political position for personal gain (Transparency International, 2009). This definition highlights the interrelationship between social and moral norms, cultural values, the concept of justice, and the psychological processes manifested in individuals' judgment and agency in such contexts. Studying corruption from a psychological perspective is significant because it disrupts the norms that regulate interactions between individuals and institutions, directly undermining the perceived sense of justice that contributes to the public's well-being (Ramos & Moriconi, 2018).

The impact of this phenomenon is such that, in Colombia alone, losses of public funds exceeded 21 trillion Colombian pesos between 2016 and 2022 (Transparencia por Colombia, 2024). Nevertheless, despite its broad consequences for the macroeconomy and society at large, corruption remains an uncontrollable issue. Some public policies, promoted by international organizations (Podobnik et al., 2015; Transparency International, 2025), have

introduced measures aimed at curbing and preventing corrupt practices within state bureaucracies. Noteworthy among these are: adequate salaries (defined as wages that can meet employees' needs and support their personal life plans), oversight of resources through inventories and digital tools that enhance monitoring capabilities, analysis of responsibilities assigned to different positions, standardized and systematic selection processes that ensure fulfillment of requirements, and institutional actions designed to strengthen organizations in identifying and addressing such behaviors (Onwujekwe et al., 2023).

While this policy approach reflects institutional interest in controlling the phenomenon, it often overlooks the role of the individual and their psychological dynamics as expressed through moral judgment and agency. Therefore, the aim of this article is to conduct a systematic review of the psychological literature on corruption, to identify and analyze the main models, processes, and cognitive, affective, and contextual factors involved in moral judgment and agency, as a foundation for understanding and addressing the issue.

Normative and Macroeconomic Review of Corruption

Corruption has been examined from various disciplinary perspectives, each contributing specific insights toward its understanding. From a normative and ethical standpoint, it is conceptualized as a phenomenon that undermines equity in the distribution of goods, resources, freedoms, and rights (Pereira-Rodríguez, 2023). This transgression occurs through the improper and intentional use of power, status, or administration of resources over which one holds agency but not ownership (Sandel, 2020). In this sense, individual interests distort fair redistribution based on principles of equity. From the perspective of political philosophy, Rawls (1971/2010) argues that corruption affects distributive justice by allowing personal contingencies and

individual merits—factors that should ideally be neutralized—to influence decision-making in social and economic spheres. This perpetuates inequality by consolidating structural advantages for certain groups, widening the gap with disadvantaged populations and generating distrust in institutional systems.

Walzer (1993) expands this vision through the concept of "complex equality," arguing that resources should remain within their respective spheres of meaning. Corruption disrupts this balance by allowing a resource intended for one domain (e.g., the economy) to influence another (such as access to fundamental rights), distorting the distribution system and enabling monopolies of power. Acts like bribery exemplify this transgression by allowing economic capital to determine access to benefits in domains where it should not be a criterion. Sandel (2020, 2021), in turn, emphasizes that justice requires attention to communal values and cultural meanings in redistribution. Corruption upsets this balance by enabling powerful groups to impose their interests, restricting equitable access to rights and resources. Such coercion not only harms direct victims but also normalizes corruption within certain sectors, reinforcing structural inequalities.

As demonstrated, from a philosophical and ethical perspective, corruption is seen as a phenomenon that prioritizes individual interests over collective well-being. Although grounded in strategic rationality aimed at maximizing personal gain, its widespread occurrence erodes social trust, necessitating external controls and sanctions. These normative approaches have informed empirical studies within social sciences. In economics, research has focused on motivations behind corrupt acts, highlighting two main settings: the public and private sectors. In the latter, individuals manipulate resources for personal benefit, indicating that corruption is governed by a cost-benefit logic (Zhang et al., 2023).

From the standpoint of public policy, efforts have focused on preventive strategies grounded in institutional oversight and normative regulation. Implemented measures include transparency in resource management, digitalization of administrative processes, and sanctions proportional to the severity of the corrupt act. However, the effectiveness of these strategies depends on implementation and public perception of institutional legitimacy (Dincer & Gillanders, 2021). When sanctions are weak or inconsistently applied, corruption persists, revealing that the problem lies not only in procedural structure but also in individual motivation and psychological factors. Through transparency in the management of resources, the digitalization of administrative processes, and the implementation of proportional sanctions, public policy contributes to the control of corruption through preventive strategies based on normative regulation and institutional strengthening, seeking to reduce opportunities for corruption and strengthen trust in institutions (Ceschel et al., 2022; Onwujekwe et al., 2023).

The success of these measures depends on rigorous enforcement and perceived institutional legitimacy. When sanctions are weak or unevenly enforced, corruption continues to thrive, showing that psychological factors also influence corrupt decision-making (Julián & Bonavia, 2022). Having analyzed the phenomenon from normative and macroeconomic perspectives, it becomes essential to examine psychology's role in understanding corruption. This level of analysis enables exploration of cognitive, emotional, and social processes that influence corrupt decisions, offering a critical perspective for designing more effective prevention strategies. While normative and economic approaches have greatly contributed, questions remain regarding the psychological mechanisms underlying corrupt behavior.

Psychological Models of Moral Development and Their Relation to Corruption

Psychological models of moral development have sought to explain both the processes of moral change and the nature of morality itself. In doing so, they integrate normative

and empirical debates to identify the factors influencing moral evaluation (Haidt & Joseph, 2022; Helwig, 2022; Turiel, 2024). These models have also consolidated developmental paradigms describing qualitative changes in moral development over time. From philosophy, three key elements have been adopted to understand moral judgment and agency: (i) reasonability, understood as the cognitive capacity to internalize norms and assign meaning to them, thus generating a sense of obligation to comply; (ii) rational decision-making, based on the human tendency to maximize benefits at individual, group, or collective levels; and (iii) empathy, as a socio-cognitive process enabling individuals to understand others' needs and perspectives (Hoffman, 2000; Sarmiento-López & Yáñez-Canal, 2019, 2025). When any of these elements are impaired, moral judgment and agency may become distorted, leading to immoral behavior. The interaction between rationality and emotionality in moral decision-making has also been a central topic in psychology, although the two have traditionally been treated as separate processes in many explanatory models.

In psychological terms, morality has been addressed through two main dimensions: moral judgment and moral agency (Schokkaert & Tarroux, 2021). The former refers to the reasoning processes individuals engage in when facing moral dilemmas, aiming to understand and explain the principles and arguments upon which decisions are based, as well as the variables involved (Turiel, 2022a). In psychology, moral judgment is defined as the process by which individuals determine the rightness or wrongness of actions based on norms, values, and ethical principles.

Piaget (1932) pioneered the study of moral judgment, distinguishing between heteronomous morality—where rules are seen as absolute and imposed by authority—and autonomous morality —where individuals understand rules as flexible and guided by their own intentions and their sense of fariness. Turiel (2022b) expanded on this by showing how children and adolescents differentiate between moral and conventional transgressions, indicating that moral judgment is

not based solely on internalized social norms but also on evaluations of harm, justice, and rights. From a cultural psychology perspective, Shweder et al. (1997) proposed that moral judgments are structured around three types of ethics: the ethics of autonomy (focused on individual well-being), the ethics of community (focused on loyalty and group obligations), and the ethics of divinity (based on purity and tradition). In the context of corruption, studies such as the one conducted by Gino & Ariely (2012) have shown that moral judgment is influenced by cognitive biases, including the rationalization of dishonest behavior, which allows individuals to engage in corruption without experiencing guilt. These findings suggest that moral judgment is a dynamic and contextual process shaped by cognitive development, cultural frameworks, and motivational factors.

On the other hand, moral agency analyzes how individuals act in such situations and refers to the capacity to act autonomously and responsibly according to moral principles, beyond mere moral judgment. From social learning theory, Bandura (1999) posits that moral agency is regulated through self-evaluation and internal controls but can be weakened by moral disengagement processes that justify corrupt acts by minimizing their impact (Kominis & Dudau, 2018). Thus, moral agency explains not only why some individuals resist corruption, but also how others normalize or justify it, highlighting its relevance in the psychological study of corruption.

Based on this distinction, research has examined multiple aspects of moral behavior, including lying in children (Hartshorne & May, 1928; Piaget, 1932), fairness in justice (Kohlberg, 1976), socio-moral domain differentiation (Smetana & Yoo, 2023; Turiel, 2024; Yáñez-Canal, 2019), and the relationship between morality and exclusion (Yáñez-Canal et al., 2017). Other studies address retribution and harm (Posada & Wainryb, 2008), civil rights and liberties (Helwig, 2022), and distributive justice across groups (Gutiérrez-Romero et al., 2024; Sarmiento-López & Yáñez-Canal, 2019, 2025). This diversity reflects both intra-theoretical needs—such as paradigm-specific

methodological concerns—and extra-theoretical interests tied to social issues (Vasco, 1989).

Rather than treating morality as a static set of values, psychology has aimed to identify the cognitive, affective, and social mechanisms shaping moral phenomena. Accordingly, several approaches have emerged: (i) moral emotions theory, which views emotions as innate regulators of moral behavior (Haidt & Joseph, 2022); (ii) the role of culture in constructing and mediating morality (Shweder et al., 1997); (iii) the importance of socio-moral domains and the coordination of information in moral judgment (Turiel, 2022b; Smetana & Yoo, 2023); and (iv) the study of distributional biases based on gender and social affiliation (Bauhr & Charron, 2020). Ibarra-Barajas et al. (2025) found that ingroup favoritism, inequity aversion, and social proximity influence distributive decisions among adolescents and youth, highlighting the role of insecurity and relational closeness in shaping fairness judgments.

Despite these advances, and recognizing corruption as a socio-moral phenomenon, research has largely focused on the influence of environment, culture, and structures in corrupt decision-making. However, such approaches—often grounded in Bandura's model (1999)—have prioritized external behavioral control while neglecting the psychic processes underlying corruption. This theoretical and empirical gap presents an opportunity to consolidate, through a systematic review, the psychological factors that explain corruption from a psychological perspective. To address this gap, the study proposes the following objectives: (i) to identify the theoretical and methodological approaches used in psychology to study corruption; (ii) to analyze the role of moral judgment and moral agency in corrupt decision-making; and (iii) to examine the cognitive, affective, and contextual factors that influence participation in corrupt acts, based on empirical evidence.

Method

The design of this study corresponds to a bibliometric analysis, consisting of a systematic review of original primary studies derived from research on corruption and moral development. There are various methods available to conduct such reviews. This article is based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement, which provides relevant items for systematic reviews using mixed methods (Page et al., 2022). Accordingly, a documentary search was carried out across the following databases: Dialnet, Scopus, Web of Science, Scielo, ERIC, and PubMed.

The search procedure involved combining descriptors using the following search algorithms: "Moral AND corrupción AND psicología," "Desarrollo moral AND corrupción AND psicología," "Psicología AND corrupción," "Bribing AND Psychology," "Psychology AND corruption," and "Psychology AND lobbying." The search window covered the years 2013 to 2024. A total of 278 documents were identified across the databases, of which 242 were selected for review. The exclusion criteria applied were: (i) studies that were meta-analyses or meta-syntheses, (ii) studies that were not empirical in nature, and (iii) studies published in languages other than Spanish or English. Following this procedure, a total of 61 documents ($n = 61$) were consolidated and organized into a matrix for subsequent analysis. Figure 1 presents the flow diagram of the process conducted.
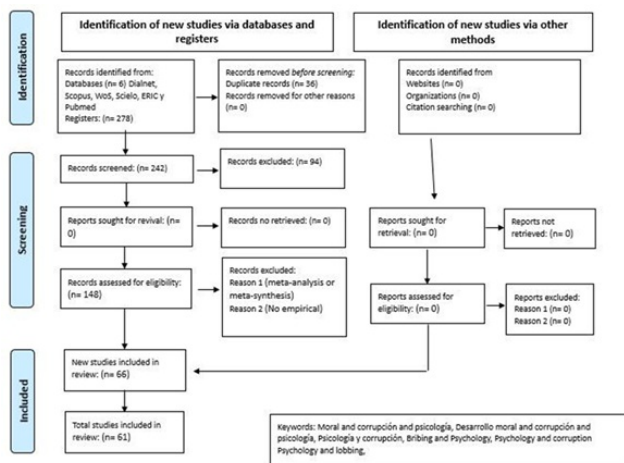
Figure 1.
PRISMA *flow diagram.*

Figure 2.
Publications by year.

A multidimensional analysis was conducted using VOSviewer 1.6.20, a software that employs natural language processing techniques to create co-occurrence networks of terms. As a result, a map was generated using the VOS (Visualization of Similarities) mapping technique (van Eck & Waltman, 2007).

Results

A total of 61 studies were included, with the highest concentration occurring over the past five years: six documents in 2020, nine in 2021, nine in 2022, seven in 2023, and six in 2024 (Figure 2).
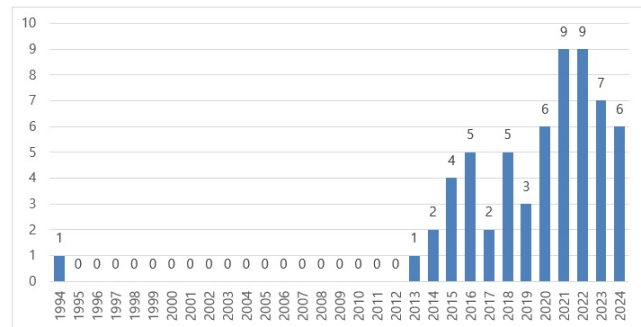
To analyze the types of structures, the abstracts of each study were processed using VOSviewer. A total of 1,677 terms were identified, of which 215 met the threshold of at least three occurrences. A relevance score was calculated for these terms. Based on this score, the top 60% most relevant terms were selected, including: flourishing ($n = 3.49$), prosocial behavior ($n = 3.49$), ethical judgments ($n = 2.05$), propensity for moral emotions ($n = 1.93$), HIV ($n = 1.83$), moral emotion ($n = 1.71$), propensity ($n = 1.69$), guilt ($n = 1.59$), and individualism ($n = 1.59$). The terms with the highest number of occurrences can be observed in the heat map (Figure 3), where the most prominent terms are: perception of corruption ($n = 30$), intention of corruption ($n = 24$), bribery ($n = 16$), experiment ($n = 14$), context ($n = 14$), depression ($n = 13$), to bribe ($n = 12$), partner ($n = 9$), player ($n = 9$), mental health ($n = 9$), truth ($n = 9$), corrupt collaboration ($n = 8$), resident ($n = 8$), good luck ($n = 8$), and prevalence ($n = 8$).
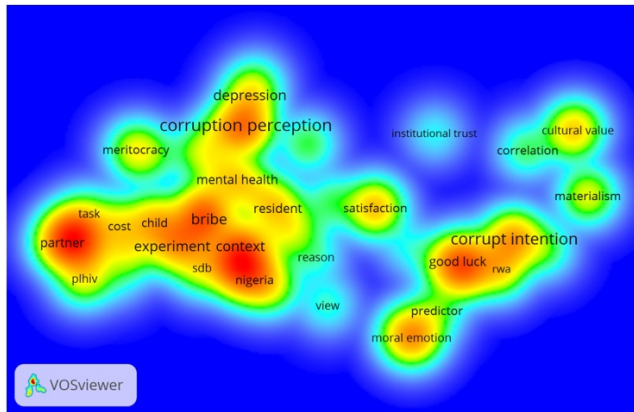
Figure 3
Heat map of terms with the highest number of occurrences.

The analysis of the heat map generated with VOSviewer allows the identification of predominant thematic focuses in the psychological literature on corruption. The terms with the highest density of occurrence such as: "corruption perception," "corrupt intention," "bribe," "partner," "experiment context," and "moral emotion" cluster in specific areas of the map, facilitating their semantic interpretation and connection to analytical categories.

In the central-left area of the map, a high concentration of terms such as "experiment context," "bribe," "task," and "partner" indicates a strong presence of studies with experimental or quasi-experimental designs. These studies often use games or simulations to examine bribery and decision-making in controlled settings, incorporating variables such as cost, age group ("child"), and participant relationships. Within this cluster, the relevance of relational proximity or significance—whether through kinship, emotional closeness, or observed behavior by a trusted individual—emerges as a key factor. In these scenarios, the decision and agency involved in corruption promote both the offering and acceptance of bribes. This finding highlights the rational character of corruption—the risk-benefit analysis and the influence of someone perceived as sympathetic or trustworthy. This thematic cluster may be

identified as the axis of *bribery in experimental settings*.

In the upper section of the map, the terms "corruption perception," "depression," "mental health," "resident," and "meritocracy" reflect studies focused on the psychosocial consequences of perceived corruption. This line of inquiry seeks to establish links between a corrupt sociopolitical context and the deterioration of mental health, emotional distress, or demoralization among citizens. Within this cluster, institutional capacity to identify and address corruption is a central concern. Perceptions of institutional corruption lead to the internalization of such practices as legitimate and necessary mechanisms for accessing rights and freedoms, illustrating how conventional agency may transform into a value that overrides the pursuit of justice or other public virtues. Regarding moral judgment, the features and perceived strengths or weaknesses of institutions become justifications for decision-making. In other words, the perceived reasonability of rules, their generalizability to others, and the sense of obligatory compliance are evident. Thus, this group can be interpreted as the axis of *psychological impact of perceived corruption*.

The right area of the map, where terms such as "corrupt intention," "good luck," "moral emotion," "predictor," "satisfaction," and "RWA (Right-Wing Authoritarianism)" stand out, encompasses research focused on individual dispositions associated with corrupt intent, approached through cognitive-emotional evaluation. This cluster highlights that decisions to engage in or avoid corrupt acts pass through an initial emotional assessment that culminates in judgment or agency. In these cognitive-emotional evaluations, factors such as chance or perceived success due to luck, ideological orientation, and moral emotions—particularly guilt and shame—influence the propensity to engage in corrupt behavior. This topic is especially relevant when linked with the *bribery in experimental settings* cluster, as it reveals that judgment and agency are not disconnected from emotion as cognitive appraisals. On the contrary,

decisions and judgments consider the probability of success or failure and their consequences. Thus, the decision-making process moves away from the purely economic model of a detached individual and becomes a matter of intentional reasoning. This can be referred to as the *individual predictors of corrupt intention* axis.

Finally, in the far-right area of the map, terms such as "institutional trust," "cultural value," "correlation," and "materialism" cluster together, representing a body of research focused on how cultural values, materialism, and institutional trust influence the justification, tolerance, or prevalence of corruption. This cluster may be interpreted as the *culture, values, and institutional legitimacy* axis, which directly connects with the *psychological impact of perceived corruption* cluster, by linking institutional trust (both social and political) as a predictor of moral judgment and decision-making regarding corruption. In this way, a greater perception of corruption, a weak institutional capacity to detect and combat it, and the pursuit of material well-being indicate how contextual elements intervene in moral development and contribute to the phenomenon of moral disengagement (Abraham et al., 2022; Takacs-Haynes & Rašković, 2021).

Taken as a whole, the heat map reveals four clearly distinguishable thematic focus in recent literature: (i) experimental studies on bribery in simulated contexts, (ii) psychological effects of perceived corruption, (iii) dispositional and emotional factors that predict corrupt intention, and (iv) the influence of cultural and institutional values on the acceptance or rejection of corrupt practices. This thematic distribution highlights a field in consolidation that integrates both micro and macro psychological approaches to address a complex and multifactorial phenomenon.

To examine the semantic structure of the reviewed literature, a co-occurrence map of key terms was generated (Figure 4). It visually represents the networks detected in the analyzed abstracts. Unlike the heat map, which highlights the most frequently occurring terms, this visualization reveals how concepts are grouped into interconnected thematic clusters, reflecting

patterns of association and conceptual proximity among variables, approaches, and analytical categories. The visualization was created using VOSviewer, which applies similarity mapping techniques to organize terms into five color-differentiated clusters. These clusters offer a valuable interpretive structure for categorizing the main lines of psychological research on corruption and for identifying gaps or tensions among theoretical approaches.
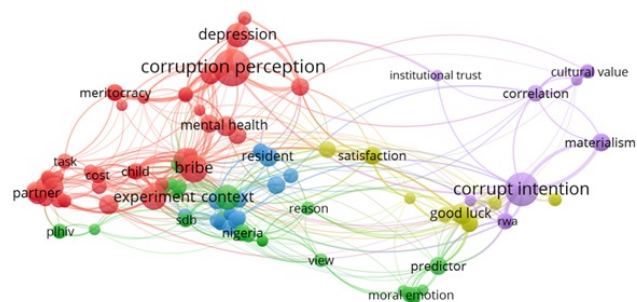

Figure 4.
Co-occurrence map of terms.

The co-occurrence map of terms reveals the semantic structure of the analyzed corpus based on the co-occurrence of terms in the abstracts of the included studies. VOSviewer software identified five color-differentiated clusters, allowing for the categorization of the main lines of research on the psychology of corruption. The red cluster—*corruption perception and psychosocial consequences*—is the largest and most densely populated on the map, representing studies focused on how corruption is perceived and its effects on psychological well-being, mental health, and trust in social justice norms such as meritocracy. These studies explore both subjective dimensions (e.g., individual perceptions of the phenomenon) and social aspects (e.g., the impact on vulnerable groups).

The green cluster, *experimental designs and situational context*, centers on the use of experimental methodologies to analyze corruption, particularly in specific or controlled contexts. This includes analyses of the role of environment, moral emotions, the cost of transgression, and the influence of social bias.

The blue cluster, *characters and institutional mediations*, although more dispersed, reflects studies that examine the perceptions and reasoning of specific social actors (such as residents or citizens) regarding their trust in institutions, subjective experiences, and levels of satisfaction with their sociopolitical context.

The yellow cluster, *dispositional and attitudinal predictors*, encompasses studies focused on individual psychological variables that influence the propensity to engage in corrupt behavior. These include justificatory beliefs (such as chance or luck), authoritarian attitudes, and emotional regulation in moral dilemmas. Finally, the purple cluster, *culture, values, and institutional legitimacy*, refers to studies that explore how cultural values, institutional trust, and ideological orientations (e.g., materialism) affect corrupt intention. This line of research links macrosocial factors with individual dispositions.

The articulation between the heat map and the co-occurrence map of terms not only identifies the most frequent topics in the psychological literature on corruption, but also reveals how these are organized into conceptual structures aligned with the theoretical frameworks presented in the introduction. The heat map offers a quantitative view of empirical focal points—such as corruption perception, corrupt intention, or bribery experiments—while the cluster map shows how these concepts are integrated into thematic networks that reflect different dimensions of moral judgment and agency.

This relationship is not incidental: The five identified clusters—psychosocial perception, situational experimentation, institutional mediations, dispositional predictors, and cultural values—correspond directly to the categories outlined in the theoretical discussion at the beginning of this manuscript. Thus, the results of the review support the notion that corruption cannot be understood solely through normative or economic frameworks, but rather demands a psychological perspective that integrates cognitive, affective, contextual, and cultural processes in moral decision-making, as illustrated by the connection between the red and purple clusters and their elements: "corruption perception," "meritocracy," "corruption intention," and "materialism."

It is at this intersection that the central role of cognitive-emotional evaluation in practical reasoning becomes evident: the fusion of moral judgment and agency, specifically in the context of corruption, where perception and intentionality are permeated by reason and motivation as constitutive elements. Regarding the role of culture, "meritocracy" emerges as one of the foundational principles or values supporting moral judgment, while the "materialist" perspective represents a powerful cultural valuation that drives action. Regarding institutional trust, it stands out as an element of intersection between the two clusters; in other words, it performs as a contextual condition influencing both judgment and agency. As demonstrated, the maps not only visualize research trends but also empirically validate the relevance of addressing corruption through the dual lens of moral agency and moral judgment, as proposed in the theoretical framework.

Discussion

This review offers an original contribution to the field of psychology by systematizing, from an explicitly moral and political perspective, the main lines of research that address corruption as a psychological phenomenon. Unlike other reviews centered on individual variables or deviant behaviors, this study proposes an integrative approach connecting moral judgment and agency with contextual, institutional, and cultural factors, thereby moving beyond reductionist views. Moreover, the combined use of bibliometric analysis (heat map and semantic clusters) and theoretical categorization enable the construction of a critical cartography of the field, identifying both consolidated cores and theoretically fragmented or emerging areas.

This systematic review of psychological literature on corruption allowed for the identification and analysis of the main

models, processes, and cognitive, affective, and contextual factors involved in moral judgment and agency, serving as a foundation for deeper understanding and intervention. The review revealed a growing body of research examining corruption from various psychological perspectives, with notable emphasis on psychosocial and contextual approaches, where environmental and social settings are prioritized as explanatory factors. In such cases, psychological components are often relegated to a secondary role due to the prominence of external variables and moral relativism.

Behavioral theories—particularly Bandura's (1999) cognitive dissonance perspective—emerge as the most frequently cited psychological framework. This approach focuses on agency by explaining behavioral triggers and conceptualizes morality as the internalization of socially dependent rules, thus sidelining ethical-normative reflection (see Figure 5). Consequently, consistency between judgment and agency is often weak, as agency is treated as a functional response that need not rely on universal ethical principles. The decision to engage in corrupt acts is explained through risk-benefit evaluations and individual or socio-cultural beliefs, which act as moral principles or social-conventional rules that influence behavior. Additionally, the imitation of corrupt actions is frequently interpreted as a behavior normalized by group dynamics, among other contributing factors (Abraham et al., 2020; Abraham et al., 2022; Podobnik et al., 2015; Zhang, 2022).

Rationalist theories that emphasize judgment as the central axis understand corruption as a result of the interaction between ethical and cultural norms, integrated into the processes of decision-making and justification. Informational assumptions, contextual variables, and especially the moral emotion of shame emerged as central components.

With respect to informational assumptions, the closeness of individuals offering or suggesting the corrupt act leads to a trust bias, increasing the likelihood of participation. A similar pattern appears in the perception of institutional

legitimacy and cultural attitudes toward breaches of trust and social integrity through corruption as a means of achieving high-level personal gain (Hatibovic et al., 2023; Moradi et al., 2018; Tan, et al., 2016; Tu et al., 2020). Regarding contextual elements, scenarios played a key role in shaping perception. Specifically, when situations implied a risk of being observed, evaluated, or reported, individuals were less likely to engage in corrupt behavior. Justifications were not grounded in ethical norms but rather in perceived risks.

Finally, the moral emotion of shame emerged as the main inhibitory factor in decisions involving corrupt scenarios. For participants, imagining themselves engaging in a corrupt act —being socially judged, violating social integrity, or losing their role and image within the group —was central. Within this framework, shame functions as a key mediator in evaluating both the opportunity and the context for issuing moral judgments and justifying potential involvement in corruption.
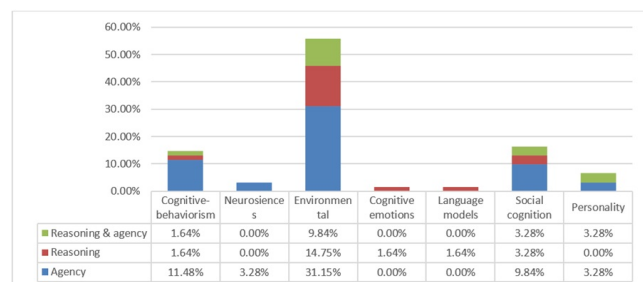

Figure 5.
Theories and research interests.

A second key element highlighted in the bibliometric analysis is the systematization of the field into thematic cores, providing an updated cartography of the most relevant dimensions for understanding the phenomenon. This cartography reveals a fourfold analytical articulation: at the individual level (risk-benefit analysis and closeness of the person offering or benefiting from the corrupt act), at the institutional-cultural level (trust, values, meritocracy, perceived strength or weakness of

institutions, and the hierarchical status of the person offering the corrupt act), moral emotions such as shame and empathy as inhibitors of corruption, and tolerance towards corruption as an individual decision-making phenomenon that defines the subject's agency (as a result of analyzing the previous three elements and a precursor to action) (see Figure 6).

This structure allows the identification of general factors associated with lower tolerance towards corruption when: (i) the profit is perceived as high and the risk as low, (ii) the corrupt act involves multiple individuals, (iii) participants are closely connected, (iv) institutions are perceived as weak in detecting and addressing corruption, (v) there is a low perceived probability of being identified as perpetrators, (vi) there is emotional disengagement from the institution that will be harmed, and (vii) no direct victim is recognized. At this point, it becomes clear that corrupt judgment and agency are guided by cognitive-emotional evaluations.

In terms of moral judgment, this appraisal enables individuals to recognize victims, assess the impact of their actions, estimate risk, and consider institutional characteristics, allowing for a rational decision influenced by self-interest and the tendency to detach from the victim. Regarding agency, the ability to detach oneself from the subject or object because it is not perceived as equal and there is an emotional distance towards it, combined with a perception of low risk, facilitates immoral action. Here, whether judgment precedes agency or vice versa becomes irrelevant; however, the finding that shame and empathy are central to both opens new questions in psychological research.

Moreover, judgment and agency do not operate in a linear or transparent manner. As discussed earlier, individual attributions, beliefs, and values are assumptions that influence and are influenced by cognitive-emotional appraisals guiding decision-making. Informational assumptions (Turiel, 2024) are thus transversal to this process, whether heuristic or algorithmic. When the assumption operates heuristically, decision-making is brief, increasing

the likelihood of agency (Hu et al., 2021; Sai & Zhu, 2024); the opposite occurs when the process is extended, and reflection is possible (Kahneman, 2024). As observed, time becomes a key variable in structuring the judgment-agency or agency-judgment dyad.
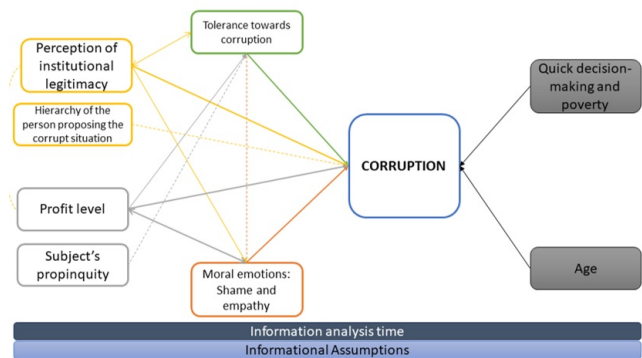

Figure 6.
Relational cognitive model of corruption.

Up to this point, the main psychological perspectives addressing the phenomenon of corruption have been identified. This framework provides a foundation for expanding several key discussions relevant to this article: first, the identification of theoretical and methodological approaches used in psychology to study corruption; second, the analysis of the role of moral judgment and agency; and third, the examination of the cognitive, affective, and contextual factors that influence participation in corrupt acts.

Regarding theoretical and methodological approaches, the results reveal a preference for correlational studies (see Figure 7), primarily using corruption perception surveys such as the Corruption Perception Index (CPI). These studies employ diverse and heterogeneous psychological models but often lack clear conceptualizations of morality and ethics, instead relying on definitions from international agencies that frame corruption in bureaucratic and technical-operational terms, rather than from an ethical perspective consistent with psychological theory. In this regard, correlations suggest that perceptions of corruption are directly

linked to corrupt agencies in health, public institutions, and bureaucracy (Ferrari & Salustri, 2020; Ma et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2017; Reyes-Jaquez & Koenig, 2024; Witvliet et al., 2013), as observed in the cluster "*psychological impact of perceived corruption*" and in the co-occurrence map "*corruption perception and psychosocial consequences*".

Experimental methodologies, which account for 41% of the studies, emphasize variable control and simulate corrupt decisions through laboratory tasks, focusing on moral agency. Psychological models in this group highlight cognitive dissonance, environmental influences, and rule internalization. While effective for isolating cognitive and affective variables, these strategies tend to prioritize situational control over the development of ethical and moral understanding, limiting a more robust articulation of practical reasoning. As for qualitative studies, they were scarce, representing only 8% of the sample. These focused on using tools such as interviews to capture participants' descriptions and identification of key elements influencing decisions or moral judgments in corruption scenarios. Their ecological and descriptive approach allowed for contextual richness but lacked explanatory depth regarding the phenomenon.
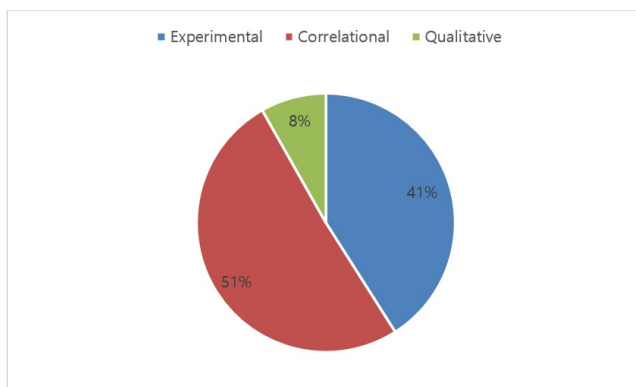

Figure 7.
Typology of studies on corruption.

Few studies explicitly define morality, limiting the integration of empirical findings with broader

ethical and ethical-political frameworks on justice, fairness, or responsibility. As a result, foundational concepts like distributive justice and individual responsibility—central to authors such as Rawls (1971/2010), Sandel (2021), and Walzer (1993)—are rarely addressed. Consequently, ethics and morality are often framed in relativistic terms, hindering the development of principled and robust positions within moral psychology.

Relativistic and culturalist models—such as cognitive dissonance—facilitate experimental designs but tend to decouple morality from its normative core. They reduce it to conventional or prudential rules, defined individually and shaped by situational needs and impulses (Nucci & Ilten-Gee, 2021; Turiel, 2024). This perspective limits both ethical generalizability and interpretive scope, as seen in the cluster and relational map labeled *culture, values, and institutional legitimacy*. For instance, Niu et al. (2023) examine *guanxi*, a Chinese cultural value where closeness and trust in relatives justify corrupt actions. Even when considered inappropriate, *guanxi*—as a social obligation—carries greater evaluative weight than abstract ethical norms, reinforcing corrupt judgment and agency.

Within this relativistic framework, Zandi et al. (2024) show that among Iranian public officials, beliefs in transcendent consequences foster moral orientations grounded in religious piety and fear of divine oversight. Similarly, Cai et al. (2024) demonstrate that power increases corrupt behavior among individuals with individualistic orientations but not among collectivists, where the effect is reduced or even reversed. These findings challenge the notion of power as a universal driver of corruption and emphasize the role of cultural constructs in shaping moral identity and group belonging. Across these studies, cultural and religious belief systems serve as evaluative frameworks that assign value, motivate action, and shape moral judgment—even when definitions of corruption vary. Thus, active faith and sociocultural norms help sustain ethical reasoning aligned with context-specific values (Khadem & Hemayatkhah, 2022).

Having addressed the influence of culture, institutions, and social perception, we now turn to the role of moral judgment and agency in corrupt decision-making. Two main approaches emerge: Some studies clearly differentiate between reasoning and action, while others treat morality as an integrated construct linking cognition and behavior. As noted earlier, most studies do not define morality or ethics explicitly, limiting conceptual clarity and theoretical coherence. From the moment that ethics is framed as practical reason, variables such as guilt, dissonance, justification, and moral satisfaction become relevant.

However, the connection between these operative variables and broader theories of moral judgment or agency remains underdeveloped (Balafoutas et al., 2021; Gaygisiz & Lajunen, 2022; Manara et al., 2023). This gap weakens the explanatory power of many studies in accounting for ethical deliberation and the enactment—or inhibition—of norm-guided agency. It also reveals a persistent theoretical tension between two perspectives: one that views morality as emerging from judgment (a rationalist view), and another that locates it in action (an agential view).

Rationalist frameworks, such as those proposed by Kohlberg (1976) and Helwig (2022), portray the ethical-political subject as guided by moral reasoning but often detached from motivational dynamics. In contrast, cognitive-behavioral approaches identify potential triggers of agency while neglecting the ethical foundations of decision-making. To overcome this gap, moral developmental psychology has proposed integrative models—such as that of Haidt & Joseph (2022)—in which moral judgment operates either as a precursor or as a post hoc justification for action. In these accounts, moral emotions and empathy serve as mediators between reason and behavior, understood as an appraisal process shaped by normative intuitions. These intuitions are informed by ethical traditions articulated by Rawls (1971/2010), Sandel (2020, 2021), Walzer (1993), and Nussbaum (2007), who emphasize the role of institutions as sociocultural artifacts that legitimize and transmit moral values. These concerns are reflected in the *bribery in experimental settings* cluster and the co-occurrence map labeled *experimental designs and situational context*.

The third analytical focus turns to the cognitive, affective, and contextual factors that shape corrupt behavior in real-world settings. Semantic and co-occurrence analyses revealed a wide range of variables—individual (e.g., authoritarianism, locus of control, beliefs about luck, moral emotions), relational (e.g., group pressure, implicit norms), and institutional (e.g., trust, meritocracy, cultural values)—that interact in decision-making, as shown in the cluster *individual predictors of corrupt intention* and the co-occurrence maps *characters and institutional mediations* and *dispositional and attitudinal predictors*. However, the tendency to analyze these factors in isolation fragments the understanding of how they dynamically interact in real contexts. Notably, few studies explore corrupt agency from a situated perspective, where structural conditions—such as inequality, impunity, or institutional weakness—directly shape individuals' moral possibilities.

The results of this review not only systematize existing knowledge but also identify gaps, tensions, and opportunities for integration. By linking findings to the initial conceptual framework—which understands corruption as the intersection of social norms, institutional structures, and moral psychology—this study supports a multidimensional understanding of corruption grounded in moral development and aimed at translating normative foundations into empirical contexts.

As a concluding remark, the findings reveal the diversity of approaches that have addressed corruption from psychology. These are characterized by heterogeneous conceptions of morality and ethics, and a persistent lack of explicit definitions. This gap underscores the need for psychological research to reengage in interdisciplinary dialogue and critical reflection with ethics and philosophy as essential conceptual tools.

Regarding psychological explanations, the review did not identify a unified theoretical model. Instead, various frameworks highlight essential components of the phenomenon, including: (i) individual risk-benefit evaluations, (ii) shame as a moral emotion that inhibits corruption, (iii) the role of personal beliefs (social-conventional, religious, cultural, or prudential), (iv) the relevance of relational closeness and hierarchical status of the person proposing the act, (v) perceptions of institutions and their legitimacy, (vi) the conceptualization of corruption as agency or judgment depending on theoretical stance, (vii) the influence of informational assumptions and the information analysis time in decision-making, and (viii) emotional detachment in judgment and agency, often treated as intervening rather than integrative cognitive-evaluative processes.

Taken together, this review affirms that psychological research on corruption has made important progress in identifying individual and contextual variables involved in corrupt decisions. However, it still falls short in explicitly conceptualizing moral judgment and agency. Within this landscape, moral developmental psychology holds a unique opportunity to investigate corruption both as a moral phenomenon and as a process shaped throughout the life course.

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Notes