

Greased palm psychology: Collectivism and bribery

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Bribery is condemned in most cultures; but it is more common in some countries than in others. Is poverty, political instability, or lax regulation to blame? A new study published in an upcoming issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, suggests a surprising contributor: Collectivism—a culture that downplays individual self-determination and stresses interdependence and shared responsibility.

“Collectivism may promote bribery by diffusing responsibility,” says Professor Nina Mazar, who conducted the study with Professor Pankaj Aggarwal, also at the University of Toronto’s Joseph L. Rotman School of Management. Collectivism may allow individuals to sidestep their personal morality and do business in ways they know to be wrong.

To test this hypothesis, the authors conducted both a cross-national study and a lab experiment.

The cross-national study looked at 21 of the world’s most economically influential countries for correlations between collectivism and bribery in international business. Collectivism was rated using an established international survey of some 17,000 corporate managers, who rated the “degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty, and cohesiveness in their organizations or families” in their countries. Another instrument tallied national rates of bribery by asking executives how often firms from various foreign countries offered illicit incentives when doing business in the executives’ countries. The researchers factored in the

nations' wealth as well as the extent to which they valued prosocial and ethical considerations.

The findings: The poorer and more collectivist a country, the more likely it was to turn to bribery. Controlling for wealth and also for moral standards, collectivism still correlated “fairly strongly” with the willingness to offer payments under the table.

To test causal relationships, not just correlations, the researchers conducted a laboratory experiment. In it, 140 business students were divided into two groups and primed with either an individualist or collectivist mindset using well-established manipulations.

Then participants were asked to assume the role of a sales agent competing against two other firms for a contract with an international buyer, and a commission. Would they bribe the buyer? Having answered that question, they rated the degree of responsibility they felt for their actions, their desire for the contract, inappropriateness of the bribe, likelihood the competitors would bribe or that a bribe would win the contract. Finally, participants were tested for mood and arousal.

As expected, the collectivists felt less personally accountable and more prone to grease the buyer's palm. Collectivist mindset affected neither mood, moral judgment, assessment of a bribe's effectiveness, motivation, nor any other factor.

Even when the choice to bribe or not was directly assessed — in a second experiment with 47 participants—the collectivist group felt less personal responsibility.

The study suggests that the motivations for corrupt business practices may be viewed too narrowly. Bribery is “not just about the economic costs or benefits, says Mazar. “Soft factors' like cultural values might be

quite important.” If we can understand them, “we may be able to design more effective and efficient measures of prevention.”

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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