

RESEARCH ARTICLE

When street-level implementation meets systemic corruption

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Abstract

To better understand street-level bureaucracy in developing countries, this study focuses on street-level implementation as embedded within systemic corruption, which is well-documented in the developing world. Analysis focuses on a large city in Guanajuato, which exhibits among the highest corruption rates in Mexico. To allow for a broad perspective, the analysis applies a sequential exploratory mixed-method research design and draws on in-depth interviews with varied stakeholders ($N = 17$) and a representative survey of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) ($N = 594$). Findings indicate that organizational corruption (ORG-C) and street-level corruption (SL-C) are two distinct, yet related phenomena. Additionally, SLBs' perceptions about the level of corruption both among superiors and among colleagues are associated with their tolerance towards inappropriate street-level interactions with citizens. By shifting attention to street-level implementation as embedded within a corrupt environment, this study provides new theoretical and practical insights about street-level implementation in developing countries and about the unique challenges of fighting systemic corruption. **Policy impact statement:** Common anticorruption policies often reflect an assumption that higher-level ORG-C and SL-C are separate, isolated phenomena, thus overlooking the implications of systemic corruption environments for street-level implementation in general, and for SL-C in particular. By uncovering that the willingness for street-level divergence among SLBs is influenced by their perception of corruption established by municipal administration as well as by colleagues, this study emphasizes that fighting corruption should account for the interrelationships between corruption at different organizational levels.

KEYWORDS

corruption, developing countries, local government, street-level bureaucrats

1 | INTRODUCTION

Following the acknowledgement that the implementation actions of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) exert immediate, major implications for their clients in particular and for the public in general (Lipsky, 1980), extensive scholarly attention has been devoted to what influences SLBs' actions and their willingness to implement

policy, as well as to how SLBs exercise their discretion during direct delivery interactions (Gofen et al., 2019). Current street-level research, although rich and extensive, predominantly focuses on the developed world. Therefore, the influence of characteristics that are more prevalent in developing countries is underexplored. One such prominent feature is bureaucratic corruption that serves as an umbrella term to denote varied behaviors within which bureaucrats

abuse their entrusted power for private gain at the expense of public interests (Svensson, 2005). Bureaucratic corruption, also labeled organizational corruption (ORG-C), is not only widespread in developing countries, but also socially and politically accepted, and often referred to as systemic corruption (Marquette & Peiffer, 2018, 2019; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006; Persson et al., 2019). In line with the motivation of this special issue, our study focuses on street-level implementation as embedded in systemic corruption, which is a well-documented feature of the developing world (Doig et al., 2007; Fernando & Bandara, 2020; Khan, 2006; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006). Furthermore, street-level implementation plays a key role in equity, equality, and justice for the public at large (Brodkin, 2003), which may be significantly challenged by well-known, multiple, negative effects of corruption, including exacerbating the difference between rich and poor (Gupta et al., 2002; Uslander, 2008), creating obstacles to governmental reforms (Hellman et al., 2003; Khator et al., 1992; Lewis & Hendrawan, 2020), and causing considerable human welfare losses in the long run (Kaufmann et al., 2005).

This study draws on two distinct, well-established lines of research, that is, street-level scholarship and corruption literature, in which street-level implementation as embedded in systemic corruption is understudied. Specifically, street-level scholarship overlooks the influence of corruption as well as corruption exercised by SLBs, although providing ample evidence for the tendency of SLBs to diverge from formal instructed policy (Brodkin, 2003; Gofen, 2014; La Forgia et al., 2015; Lipsky, 1980; May & Winter, 2009). Indeed, street-level divergence is rarely identified as corruption (Gofen, 2014). Corruption literature provides ample evidence for SLBs' corrupt acts, which are identified as a distinct, bottom-level type of ORG-C and titled street-level corruption (SL-C) or service corruption (Bussell, 2015; Jancsics, 2019a; Jávó & Jancsics, 2016). Nevertheless, the influence of systemic corruption on street-level implementation in general and on street-level divergence in particular is understudied. Moreover, SL-C is often portrayed as isolated or operating independent of corruption exercised at higher hierarchical levels of the organization (Jávó & Jancsics, 2016).

To better understand street-level implementation as embedded within systemic corruption, this study focuses on one of the largest local governments within the state of Guanajuato, which, at the time of the study, was among the six states with the highest Corruption Incidence Rate (CIR) in Mexico (ENCIG-INEGI, 2019). In an attempt to allow for a broad perspective, the analysis employs an exploratory sequential mixed-method approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The first, qualitative, draws on 17 in-depth interviews with individuals who have extensive knowledge about municipality affairs. Next, a representative survey was conducted among SLBs employed in the different administrative units within the municipal government. Drawing on insights from the qualitative analysis, the survey was designed to investigate the perceptions of SLBs regarding the spread of corruption in the organization both among high-level administrators and among SLBs' colleagues. The survey also asked questions related to SLBs' perception about, and willingness to collaborate with, inappropriate requests initiated by a policy-client.

Two main findings emerged. First, both the qualitative and the quantitative analyses identified ORG-C and SL-C as two distinct phenomena, which echoes common distinctions drawn between ORG-C exercised at higher hierarchical levels and SL-C exercised during direct-delivery interactions between SLBs and citizens. Specifically, ORG-C at higher levels entails, for example, funds misappropriation and conflict of interest (Jancsics & Jávó, 2012; Jávó & Jancsics, 2016), whereas SL-C mainly involves bribes or extortion (Asthana, 2012; Nieuwbeerta et al., 2003). Current literature often regards ORG-C and SL-C as two distinct phenomena, in this study, these two corruption phenomena emerged as associated.

Indeed, corruption studies tend to approach corruption exercised by SLBs as a distinct, bottom-level type of ORG-C operating independent of other types of ORG-C at higher hierarchical levels (Bussell, 2015; Jancsics, 2019a; Jávó & Jancsics, 2016). Second, the survey results uncover that a SLB's perception of higher corruption levels both among supervisors and colleagues are associated with street-level divergence offered by a client, and specifically with a higher willingness to collaborate with the inappropriate interaction, in a lower tendency to perceive the inappropriate interaction as being corrupt, in a higher propensity to justify the inappropriate interaction, and in a lower level of willingness to report the interaction. This tendency echoes previous street-level studies which document that informal routines of more experienced colleagues foster more tolerance to rule-infringements among SLBs (Oberfeld, 2010) and that SLBs' willingness to bend the rules is higher if their managers are perceived as endorsing rule-bending (May & Winter, 2009).

Three main contributions emerge from allowing a more nuanced understanding of street-level implementation as embedded within a systemic corruption environment. First, shifting attention to the limitation inherent to generalizing from street-level research in developed and developing countries (see also, Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006). Indeed, focusing on developed countries' corruption during street-level implementation and extrapolating findings to the developing country context might lead to misleading premises such as corruption at the street-level being the result of poor oversight or a phenomenon that can be dealt with through intra-organizational mechanisms (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006; Nieuwbeerta et al., 2003). Second, our findings emphasize the need for more conceptual and analytical accuracy in distinguishing SL-C and ORG-C and recognizing how they are interrelated. Current corruption literature does acknowledge the differences between the two, that is, ORG-C is exercised on behalf of the organization and to pursue organizational goals (Lange, 2008) so that the primary beneficiary of the corrupt acts is the *organization itself* (Jancsics, 2019a). In contrast, SL-C is exercised between, and benefits, two involved individuals—the SLB and a *client* (Jancsics, 2019a). ORG-C therefore denotes an institutional or *collective* corruption, whereas SL-C resides at the individual level (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Lu, 2000). Nonetheless, our study suggests that ORG-C serves as the context for street-level implementation and SL-C. Finally, on a practical level, anti-corruption policies should begin to account for the overlooked interrelationships between corruption at different organizational levels.

The article proceeds as follows. First, to substantiate that street-level implementation as embedded within systemic corruption is neglected, both street-level scholarship and corruption research are reviewed. Next, the research approach is specified and findings elaborate on organizational and SL-C as well as on their influence on street-level divergence. Concluding remarks briefly discuss theoretical and practical implications.

2 | STREET-LEVEL IMPLEMENTATION FROM A CORRUPTION PERSPECTIVE: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As presented in the motivation for this special issue, street-level scholarship tends to focus on developed countries (but see, Gofen & Lotta, 2021). Consequently, the influence of features that are prominent mainly in developing countries and less characteristic of developed countries are by and large overlooked. One prominent example is bureaucratic corruption, also referred to as ORG-C, which refers to varied behaviors within which bureaucrats abuse their entrusted power for private gain at the expense of public interests (Svensson, 2005). The term systemic corruption was introduced in order to convey how widespread bureaucratic corruption is, as well as to underscore its social and political acceptance in developing countries (Marquette & Peiffer, 2018, 2019; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006; Persson et al., 2019). Focusing on street-level implementation in systemic corruption contexts shifts attention to two distinct, yet related aspects, that is, *corruption exercised by SLBs* and *corruption as an organizational characteristic*.

Corruption exercised by SLBs is overlooked in street-level scholarship, despite being well-documented in corruption research, especially in developing countries, and titled SL-C or service corruption (Bussell, 2015; Jancsics, 2019a; Jávör & Jancsics, 2016). Notably, street-level scholarship provides ample evidence for street-level divergence, which entails street-level actions inconsistent with policy, however corruption is rarely identified as a pattern of street-level divergence (Gofen, 2014). Moreover, the same two features inherent to street-level implementation that street-level research identifies as key facilitators to street-level divergence are considered in corruption research to provide a convenient opportunity for SL-C. Specifically, SLBs' structural discretionary power and their direct interaction with the public (Brodkin, 2003; Lipsky, 1980, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Sandfort, 2000) provide a convenient opportunity for SLBs to act corruptly by putting a citizen under pressure that consists of "withholding a service to which the citizen is legally entitled, reporting an offense which the citizen did not commit, or reporting an offense that is commonly committed but generally not reported" (Nieuwebeerta et al., 2003, p. 140).

Specifically, street-level studies provide accumulated evidence indicating that policy divergence is an integral part of street-level implementation as SLBs often do not comply with formal policy directives (Brodkin, 2003; Gofen, 2014; Lipsky, 1980, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Møller & Stensöta, 2019). Indeed, "it is now

well accepted that the actions at the frontline of policy do sometimes, if not often, differ from the intentions of higher ups" (May & Winter, 2009, p. 453). Street-level divergence is multifaceted and complex as reflected in its varied and multiple patterns (Gofen, 2014). Moreover, street-level divergence is neither simple nor straightforward as reflected in its dual portrayal, on one hand as inevitable in policy implementation, and as a deliberate, rational choice of the SLB on the other. As inevitable in implementation, street-level divergence is entwined with ambiguity and vagueness of policies (Brodkin, 2003; Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Sandfort, 2000), and with the well-established notion that "policy as written often fails to teach implementers what they need to know to do policy" (Hill, 2006, p. 265). Inevitability of street-level divergence is also ascribed to the influence of SLBs' personal perceptions, emotions, attitudes, experiences, and values (Keiser, 2010; Whitford, 2002), and to the influence of SLBs' colleagues and other actors in their policy network (Keiser, 2010; Lotta & Marques, 2020; Loyens, 2019; Raaphorst & Loyens, 2020; Wood & Vedlitz, 2007).

Studies that refer to street-level divergence as a deliberate, rational choice further complicate its dual portrayal by ascribing positive, negative, and mixed framings to the noncompliant act of the SLB. More positive framings relate SLBs' noncompliance to the general question of "what it means to act responsibly, ethically, and with integrity as a public servant" (O'Leary, 2010, p. 8), and ascribe it to ethical concerns (Kaptein & van Reenen, 2001; Loyens & Maesschalck, 2010) as well as to professional considerations (Hupe & Hill, 2007; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). Others suggest mixed frames, including "responsible subversion" (Hutchinson, 1990) and "positive deviance" (Carey & Foster, 2011), and at times also give it negative framings including "shirking" or "sabotage" (Brehm & Gates, 1997; Pierre & Peters, 2017). Notably, the specific pattern of street-level divergence titled "shirking" aims to maximize leisure and minimize workload (Brehm & Gates, 1997; Pierre & Peters, 2017), reflecting self-motivation and pursuing private gain at the expense of public interests, yet not identified at all with corruption. In a similar manner, "gaming" is a street-level divergence whereby SLBs use their discretion to skew measurable work activity that allows meeting or exceeding performance targets (Terman & Yang, 2016). Gaming is not regarded as corruption, even when it entails cheating, such as by the reporting of fictionalized data, and/or when driven by self-interests, such as career advancement.

Well-documented in corruption studies, SL-C entails corrupt actions exercised during direct-delivery interactions between SLBs and citizens, defined as "corruption by a public official who carries out routine activities at a lower level of the public administration" (Nieuwebeerta et al., 2003, p. 140). SL-C is mainly identified as market-corruption that involves an exchange, usually of a monetary form, such as of bribes or extortion (Nieuwebeerta et al., 2003) and considered to follow a rational cost benefit calculation (Jancsics, 2019a). SL-C is often portrayed as initiated by the SLB, as less harmful than corruption at higher levels of the bureaucracy, and as occurring when higher-level public officials have lost their grip on their lower-level subordinates (Nieuwebeerta et al., 2003; Rose-Ackerman, 1999;

Treisman, 2007). Nevertheless, it is now well-accepted that citizens may also initiate corrupt street-level interactions (Banuri & Eckel, 2012; Meza & Zizumbo-Colunga, 2020; Zizumbo Colunga & Meza, 2021). Furthermore, systemic corruption is seen as an institution that frames citizens' actions (Gong & Xiao, 2017), which acknowledges that the corrupt interaction is not exclusively initiated by public officials (Gupta, 2005; Meza & Pérez-Chiqués, 2020) and thus shifts from the common notion of citizens as merely being the victims of corruption. Rather, citizens may play a key role in corrupt interactions when corruption becomes an integral part of the "rules of the game" (Marquette & Peiffer, 2018).

The second aspect is *corruption as an organizational characteristic* that may influence street-level implementation actions of SLBs. Review of the literature suggests that the implications of a systematic corruption environment for street-level implementation is overlooked in street-level scholarship and underexplored within corruption research, despite the understanding that organizational environments have been observed to be fertile ground for corruption, where corruption can become normalized, establishing its own logic and becoming institutionalized or embedded in organization routines and behaviors (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). This gap is also reflected in the current tendency of corruption studies to approach corruption exercised by SLBs as a distinct, bottom-level type of ORG-C (Bussell, 2015), that is often portrayed as isolated or operating independent of other types of ORG-C (Jávor & Jancsics, 2016). Moreover, corruption research considers SL-C to represent a specific case of ORG-C despite identifying substantive differences. SL-C is exercised and benefits two involved individuals—the SLB and a client (Jancsics, 2019a), whereas ORG-C is exercised on behalf of the organization and to pursue organizational goals (Lange, 2008) so that the primary beneficiary of the corrupt acts is the organization itself (Jancsics, 2019a). ORG-C therefore denotes an institutional or collective corruption, whereas SL-C resides at the individual level (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Lu, 2000).

Emerging from the review of the literature is the need to better understand street-level implementation in a systemic corruption context as well as developing a broader perspective on the dynamics between corruption exercised at different organizational levels.

3 | RESEARCH APPROACH

To explore the interstice between street-level implementation and environments of systemic corruption, this study utilizes an exploratory-sequential-mixed-methods approach, initiated with a qualitative approach to the data collected followed by an analysis to later inform the quantitative approach of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The research focuses on an important local government within the state of Guanajuato in Mexico. Mexico is a three-tier level federalist country with more than 2.4 thousand municipalities. While municipal policy agendas have expanded during the last 30 years, their main policy competences are established in the constitution

(art. 115) around issues such as sewage, transit roads and park maintenance, garbage collection, public safety, urban equipment, and citizen participation (Meza, 2021). According to the CIR published by the National Statistics Office in Mexico (INEGI for its acronym in Spanish) in the National Survey on Quality and Governmental Impact (NSQGI) (ENCUP for its acronym in Spanish), Guanajuato is among the six states with the highest CIR in the country (see Figure 1). The CIR for Guanajuato state is 34,593, much higher than the country average which is set to be 26,147.¹

Data collection was carried out from January 2019 to March 2020. First, to better understand street-level implementation as embedded within municipal governments operating in environments of systemic corruption, a total of 17 interviews were conducted. Twelve were open-ended interviews with informants who had extensive experience and knowledge about corruption in the municipal government. The interviewees included former municipal employees and officials, investigative journalists, and individuals involved in transparency and anti-corruption efforts. Interviews were open-ended and addressed the topic of corruption directly and in detail (see Appendix A). Interview questions addressed the interviewees' experiences with the municipal government. The questions were intended to gain insight into the prevailing styles of corruption, organizing logic, main practices, municipal functions that are most affected by corruption, actors who benefited from corruption, and changes in corruption patterns throughout time. The interviews lasted between one to three hours, and follow-up interviews were conducted with three of the interviewees.

Additionally, five semi-structured interviews were conducted with current municipal employees. These interviews lasted from 45 min to an hour and took place in the municipal offices. Given the conditions of the interviews, the highly sensitive topic, and the heightened vulnerability of interviewees, the questions were structured differently, but flexibility was maintained by allowing for follow-up questions to interviewees' answers. The interviews centered on employees' experiences working in the municipality. Questions asked interviewees about how they were hired, how the work environment is affected in election years, their biggest challenges at work in their divisions and in the municipal administration, and, if the topic of corruption did not come up in the course of their answers, a general question regarding their opinion on corruption in public administration was also asked (see Appendix B). All interviewees had experience or were familiar with street-level work in municipal government affairs.

The selection of interviewees drew on snowball sampling, where individuals are identified and recommended by other interviewees. This sampling method is recommended for the research of highly sensitive, hidden, and dangerous research topics, such as corruption (Jávor & Jancsics, 2016). To control for the possible bias that arises

¹The Corruption Incidence Rate is calculated by the National Office of Statistics by dividing the total number of government transactions where corruption was experienced by the population over 18 years old in urban areas with more than 100 thousand inhabitants, who had contacted a public official, then multiplied by 100 thousand inhabitants.

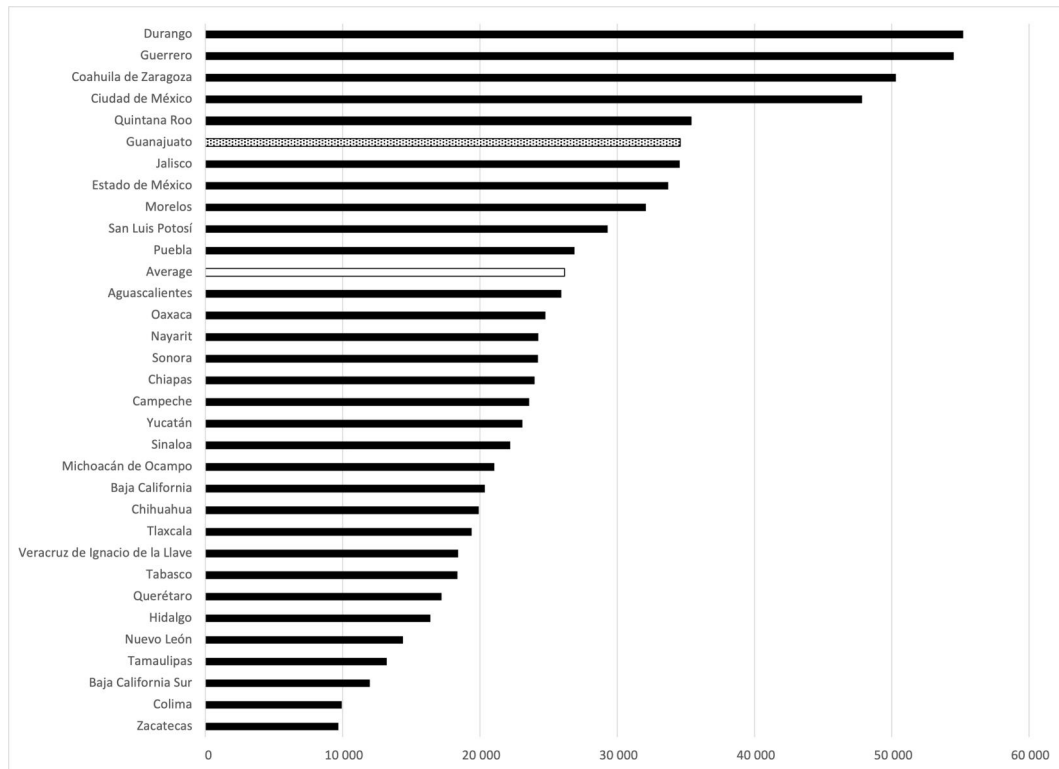


FIGURE 1 Corruption Incidence Rate for Mexican states in 2019. Source: ENCUP 2019 (National Survey on Quality and Governmental Impact—NSQGI)³

from interviewing people who are connected to each other (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981), we reviewed newspaper articles, and other official documents, such as municipal audits, to garner additional evidence about the patterns that were emerging from the interviews.

The interviews were not recorded because of safety concerns, but extensive notes were taken during the interviews by one or two of the co-authors. These handwritten notes were typed in a word-processing program and were qualitatively coded and analyzed following an inductive approach (Emerson et al., 1995). Several rounds of open coding yielded initial concepts and themes, which were discussed among the co-authors, and that established the parameters for focused coding to distinguish and help characterize the relationship between wider ORG-C and street-level implementation in a context of systemic corruption. Analysis of the interviews emphasized the need to examine the ways SLBs perceive different types of corruption and the influence of these perceptions on street-level divergence, notably, divergence in which SLBs are asked by a client to collaborate with policy noncompliance.

Informed by the qualitative findings, a survey was applied to a representative sample of SLB officials in the corresponding local government ($N = 594$). SLBs were sampled according to the many different street-level organizations, including police (35%), transit officers (17%), welfare case workers (19%), municipal supervisors (14%), healthcare workers (3%), and other front-line clerks in administrative offices (12%).

The survey took place in March 2019, and the sample achieved a confidence level of 95% with a 5% margin of error (Meza &

Zizumbo, 2019). The questionnaire was designed to explore SLBs' perception about three main aspects: corruption within the organization, corruption during direct-delivery interactions, and about a client proposal that asked them to collaborate with noncompliance, that is, implementation action that contradicts current policy instructions. Two reasons guided the decision to ask about respondent's willingness to diverge from explicit formal policy instructions. One is the limitations in asking directly about willingness to act corruptibly (Olsen et al., 2019). Notably though, there is an understanding within the corruption literature that such inappropriate interactions may be a slippery slope for corruption (Arellano-Gault & Castillo Salas, 2019; Ashforth & Anand, 2003). In addition, street-level studies often draw on SLBs' intentions not to comply with policy directives and willingness to diverge as an indicator for actual divergent behavior (Tummers et al., 2009). See Tables 1 and 2 for survey questions specification.

3.1 | Mitigation and limitations

To mitigate possible sources of bias and social desirability effects during the survey answers, a computer-assisted auto-reporting technique was used for the survey application. To answer the survey, the interviewees were placed by themselves in a private space in front of a tablet. Help was provided on demand only. While not generalizable to all municipal public servants in the country, the survey results are representative of SLB workers in the local government studied.

TABLE 1 ORG-C and SL-C questions and responses in the survey

Dimension	Question	Response
Organizational corruption (ORG-C)	The processes at my job ... change depending on the boss. Q-104	Five-point Likert scale
	At work, unwritten rules are the most important. Q-120	
	Here, loyalty to bosses offers opportunities for improvement. Q-123	
	There is public information that is not published deliberately. Q-91	
	Do you agree? Here, "he who does not cheat, does not get ahead." Q-125	
Street-level corruption (SL-C)	Think of municipal officials, how many of them do you think are involved in corruption? Q-137	1 "Not agree at all" and 5 "Completely agree"
	The way things are, sometimes PAYING a bribe is warranted. Q-138	
	The way things are, sometimes it is justified to ASK for a bribe. Q-139	

TABLE 2 Situation and attitudes towards an inappropriate interaction

Street-level situation	Public official: "Sorry, you do not have the complete documentation. I'm going to have to deny the permit" Client: "Please official, give me the permit anyway"	
	How likely are you to do this favor?	1 "Surely would not" 4 "Neutral" 7 "Yes, I surely would"
Attitude towards inappropriate interaction	How corrupt do you think this favor is?	1 "Totally innocent" 4 "Neutral" 7 "Fully corrupt"
	How much is this favor justified?	1 "Totally not justified" 4 "Neutral" 7 "Yes, fully justified"
	To what extent do you think you would report it?	1 "Surely would not report" 4 "Neutral" 7 "Yes, I surely would report"

3.2 | Data

Some of the corruption questions in the survey are the same or similar to questions used in other surveys by the National Statistics Office in Mexico (INEGI). Survey questions about corruption that directly apply to public employees are highly complicated and frequently perceived by respondents as dangerous revelations. A way to circumvent these complications is to ask using indirect questions about the topic, such as with context-based phrases that allude to corruption or corrupt practices without explicitly talking about them. Some of the questions took this form, however these questions have been piloted before and previously applied in other research projects produced in Mexico's local governments (see Meza & Pérez-Chiqués, 2020; Meza & Zizumbo-Colunga, 2020).

A priori assortment of questions to assess perception of both ORG-C and SL-C is also shown in Table 1. According to definitions in previous sections, questions to assess perception of ORG-C are related to corruption that takes place within the organization at large, whereas questions to assess perception of SL-C are related to corruption that takes place during direct interactions with citizens, also referred to in the literature as market corruption or service corruption (Bussell, 2015; Jancsics, 2019a).

The inappropriate street-level interaction that was included in the survey aimed to examine how SLBs react to an SLB-citizen interaction during which the citizen asks the SLB for a favor that reflects collaboration with noncompliance (see Table 2). Reaction to the interaction was assessed with regard to four aspects: willingness to collaborate and allow the favor, perception of the inappropriate

request as being corrupt, the (un)justification of the favor in question, and finally, willingness to report the situation.

3.3 | Analysis

First, a principal component analysis (PCA) was performed to understand the data's structure and to examine to what extent this set of questions was empirically capturing two different phenomena. Two factor variables, ORG-C and SL-C, are predicted from the PCA analysis, which are then used as the independent variables in further analysis. Second, a set of demographic characteristics is used to characterize the profile of SLBs, including income level, education level, age, sex, subjective assessment of one's own knowledge of law, and whether SLBs were hired as permanent employees (0) or as a trust appointment (1). Note that in Mexico, the official name of this employee is "personal de confianza," that is, trusted or close staff. Legally, these positions do not allow membership in a union and therefore these employees can be fired easily (Dussauge-Laguna, 2005).

Next, a difference of means *t*-test was used to gauge the statistical difference between SLBs who perceive high and low corruption levels and a dichotomous variable of perceived ORG-C and perceived SL-C was produced as follows: For each ORG-C or SL-C = *G*, a value of one is assigned if $G > \text{or} =$ to the mean of ORG-C or SL-C, and a value of 0 is assigned if $G <$ the mean of ORG-C or SL-C. The analysis offers the statistical mean difference test on each demographic characteristic to compare those whose perception of ORG-C or SL-C is above or equal to the mean to those whose

perception is below the mean. Finally, an order logit regression model is used to investigate the associated relation between ORG-C and SL-C with regard to each of the four variables of the SLB's attitude: (1) willingness to allow the favor and collaborate with the inappropriate interaction, (2) perception of the inappropriate request as being corrupt, (3) (un)justification of the favor in question, and (4) willingness to report the situation. The regression model is:

$$A2SLC_4 = b_1ORC + b_2SLC + \lambda + \varepsilon$$

The order logit was run separately for each of the four attitude variables mentioned above. The coefficients of interest are b_1 and b_2 , which hold the magnitude and direction of the association between ORG-C and SL-C variables against each of the four dependent variables. A vector of control variables (λ) was included to control for observed covariates that the literature identifies as key possible sources of bias, including income level (McAllister, 2000; Stevens, 2001); education level (Hauk & Saez-Marti, 2002; Truex, 2010); age (Jaber-López et al., 2014); and sex, female = 1 (Fišar et al., 2016). Two additional variables, *knowledge of law* and *bureaucracy type* are included too. Knowledge of law controls for SLBs that perceive themselves as having better knowledge of the administrative regulations with which they are required to comply in their daily work. Bureaucracy type is a dichotomic variable that controls for two different regimes of hiring, that is, SLBs who are hired as permanent employees ("empleados de base") (0), and (1) for SLBs who are hired on the basis of trust (see Table 3 for descriptive statistics).

The sample includes 35% of female SLBs, all of whom at least attended high school, with an average age of 38, and an average monthly income of 5 to 15 thousand pesos (208–625 US Dollars). Average self-reported knowledge of local government law is 3.6, based on a scale of 1 ("don't know it at all") to 5 ("know it very well"). Finally, 43% of the respondents were hired into "trust" positions, which allows firing employees more easily after party transitions.

4 | FINDINGS: STREET-LEVEL IMPLEMENTATION IN SYSTEMIC CORRUPTION

Two general findings emerged. First, both the qualitative and the quantitative analyses identified ORG-C and SL-C as two distinct, yet related phenomena. Second, the survey results uncover that a SLB's perception of higher corruption levels both among supervisors and colleagues is associated with the SLB's tolerance towards street-level divergence.

4.1 | Organizational corruption and street-level corruption: distinct, yet related phenomena

Findings of both the qualitative and the quantitative analyses echo the common distinction between SL-C and other types of ORG-C in

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics of respondents' characteristics

Variable	Mean	SD	Max	Min	N
Female	0.3552189	0.4789829	1	0	594
Age	38.02055	10.42162	73	20	584
Education	5.577441	1.250253	8	1	594
Income	3.582492	0.888808	8	1	594
Legal knowledge	3.619529	0.8415972	5	1	594
Bureaucracy type	0.4377104	0.496523	1	0	594

the literature (e.g., Bozeman et al., 2018; Jancsics, 2019a). This distinction emerged mainly as twofold. First, whether corruption involves citizens or not. Second, visibility and transparency of corruption to the public. Because SL-C emerged as more visible and transparent to the public whereas ORG-C often remains hidden, changes in corruption during street-level interactions were presented as more noticeable. Moreover, judgments regarding overall corruption levels were based first and foremost on SL-C, not only among citizens, but also among public employees.

In contrast, ORG-C emerged as mostly happening at higher hierarchical levels of the municipality and as involving the manipulation of bidding processes or the illegal adjudication of municipal contracts and concessions. Moreover, ORG-C was described not only as much more difficult to detect, but also as sometimes appearing legitimate and legal, as described by saying that "*everything is ironed out on paper.*" Informants spoke about extensive simulation of processes, as expressed by a former municipal employee, "corruption is so well carried out that it is almost impossible to detect."

Twofold insight emerged regarding the interrelations between street-level and ORG-C. First, they serve as two complementary components of a broader, systemic phenomenon of corruption; and second, ORG-C serves as the context for street-level implementation.

Although ORG-C and SL-C emerged as distinguishable, analysis of the qualitative data in this study indicates that, in a context of systemic corruption, corruption at different organizational levels relates, and, specifically street-level implementation and corruption often *responds to* corruption exercised at higher organizational levels. According to expert interviewees, a decrease in SLB corruption is not necessarily indicative of a decrease in overall corruption but can rather be signaling a change in the corruption style of the municipal administration and occurs through the roles assigned by the political administration to corruption exercised by SLBs.

Different municipal administrations employ SLB corruption differently, and SLB corruption does not primarily benefit the SLB and citizen involved but is used to benefit the party in power or the municipal administration by mobilizing electoral support or bringing money to the party coffers. For example, expert interviewees stated that although two recent municipal administrations were perceived as differently corrupt, they argued that the overall corruption had not decreased in the municipality. Rather, the two administrations had styles of corruption that differently incorporated or relied on

SLBs and SLB implementation (“they steal differently”). One municipal administration involved all levels of employees and used more blatantly corrupt strategies (“bags of money show up”), employed SLB corruption extensively in SLB implementation (e.g., extortion of citizens), and thus affected citizens more directly and visibly. Corrupt networks involving SLBs operated under a blatant style of corruption described by a former municipal employee as “flat, frank, shameless.”²

The other municipal administration mentioned by interviewees ran a very sophisticated and highly organized operations that did not involve SLB implementation.³ Rather than employing SLBs and SLB implementation in the corrupt schemes, the municipal administration relied on higher-level ORG-C and on managerial and executive employees and functions (e.g., manipulating contracting processes). Under this style of corruption, SLBs and other lower-level municipal employees may not know about the corrupt origin and design of some municipal decisions and practices—practices that ultimately result in the use of public authority and resources for electoral and private gain of party elites. SLB implementation was not systematically used by the municipal administration to extract money from citizens, thus affecting citizens less visibly.

To conclude, the qualitative analysis calls for further examining dynamics between street-level and ORG-C, as well as the influence of perceived corruption on street-level implementation interactions and implementation.

4.2 | Implications of perceived organizational and street-level corruption for street-level implementation

Informed by the qualitative findings, the survey examined whether and to what extent ORG-C and street-level corruption are perceived specifically by SLBs as two distinct phenomena. PCA analysis revealed two factors, whereby factor1 represents ORG-C, which is exercised within the organization, and factor2 represents SL-C, which takes place during direct-delivery interactions with clients (see Table 4 for factor loadings, which confirm that all variables were loaded to reach the minimum criteria of 0.40 at each factor (Stevens, 2001)), surpassed the eigenvalue of 1, which together account for an unrotated cumulative variance of 0.46 (see specification in Appendix C). Notably, the question that asks whether respondent agrees that “Here, he who does not cheat, does not get ahead” (Q_125) reached the minimum in both factors. This variable is highly relevant for both factors, which is an important condition to consider in further statistical analysis.

The relationship between the two types of corruption is demonstrated in Table 5, which presents the correlation matrix of eight selected variables that measure SLBs' perception of corruption (Meza & Zizumbo, 2019). A Bartlett test indicates to reject the null hypothesis, that is, that the variables are not intercorrelated ($X^2 = 695.70$, $p = 0.000$). A Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure for sampling adequacy is 0.677 (above the conventional threshold of 0.50, Constantin, 2014).

To use perception of ORG-C (factor1) and perception of SL-C (factor2) as independent variables, the two factors were converted into predicted score variables. Factor 1 and 2 means are around zero ($-1.20e-09$ and $-2.97e-09$, respectively) with a standard deviation of 1 for each. Factor1's minimum is -2.567 and maximum is 2.896 , while factor2's minimum is -0.931 and maximum is 6.432 .

4.3 | Organizational corruption influences street-level corruption: A quantitative analysis

How are perceived ORG-C and perceived SL-C associated with attitudes towards inappropriate interactions with citizens? Interestingly, in general, SLBs demonstrate negative attitudes towards corrupt interaction with a client. Specifically, SLBs are not willing to collaborate with a corrupt interaction, nor to justify this interaction, perceive the interaction as corrupt, and are even willing to report it (see Figure 2).

Nevertheless, when considering perceived ORG-C and perceived SL-C, the results change, as the order-logit analysis shows that a higher level of perceived ORG-C and a higher level of perceived SL-C are each linked with tolerant attitudes towards interactions which allow noncompliant behavior (see Table 6). Specifically, a higher level of perceived ORG-C is associated with greater willingness to collaborate with corrupt interaction (0.349 , $p < 0.01$), with a lower perception of the interaction as corrupt (-0.164 , $p < 0.1$), with a higher justification of the interaction as legitimate (0.367 , $p < 0.001$), and with less willingness to report the interaction (-0.227 , $p < 0.05$). Similarly, experiencing a higher level of perceived SL-C is associated with a greater willingness to collaborate (0.261 , $p < 0.05$), with a lower perception of the interaction as corrupt (-0.0849), with a higher justification of the interaction (0.187 , $p < 0.05$), and with less willingness to report the interaction (-0.299 , $p < 0.01$). Both results are robust after controlling for each other, and the λ vector of control variables.

The relationship with the control variables is partially consistent with the literature. Higher income level is associated with less willingness to collaborate in a corrupt interaction (Treisman, 2007). As in Hauk and Saez-Marti (2002) and Truex (2010), a higher education level is associated with a greater perception of the situation as corrupt, and a lower level of justification of the interaction as legitimate. Also, those who report having higher levels of legal knowledge are more willing to report the interaction. While females are known to be less willing to conform to corrupt practices (Fišar et al., 2016), the results suggest that they are less willing to report the corrupt

²For example, newspaper articles featured SLBs involved in vote-buying (June 22, 2012; March 26, 2015), involved with organized crime and trafficking of hydrocarbons (May 11, 2014; July 7, 2017; July 11, 2018), and in the extortion of citizens (December 17, 2020; August 8, 2019). Additionally, high level involvement in vote buying (May 26, 2015) and hydrocarbon trafficking (July 7, 2018), were also featured.

³For example, newspaper articles featured high level organizational corruption in contracting (February 23, 2020; August 13, 2021; August 28, 2020).

TABLE 4 Factor loadings (varimax rotation)

Question	Variable	Factor1	Factor2	Uniqueness
The processes at my job ... change depending on the boss	Q_104	0.6682	0.1096	0.5415
At work, unwritten rules are the most important	Q_120	0.6404	-0.0681	0.5852
Here, loyalty to bosses offers opportunities for improvement	Q_123	0.6243	0.0239	0.6097
There is public information that is not published deliberately	Q_91	0.5137	0.1541	0.7124
Do you agree? Here, "he who does not cheat, does not get ahead"	Q_125	0.4464	0.436	0.6106
Thinking of municipal officials, how many of them do you think are involved in corruption?	Q_137	0.4041	0.3526	0.7124
The way things are, sometimes PAYING a bribe is warranted	Q_138	0.1007	0.8826	0.2109
The way things are, sometimes it is justified to ASK for a bribe	Q_139	-0.0363	0.8584	0.2618

	Q_137	Q_125	Q_139	Q_138	Q_91	Q_104	Q_120	Q_123
Q_137	1.0000							
Q_125	0.2637	1.0000						
Q_139	0.1225	0.2294	1.0000					
Q_138	0.2694	0.3153	0.6366	1.0000				
Q_91	0.2344	0.1631	0.0940	0.1677	1.0000			
Q_104	0.2182	0.2365	0.0913	0.1766	0.2447	1.0000		
Q_120	0.0681	0.1874	0.0427	0.0809	0.1727	0.2382	1.0000	
Q_123	0.1441	0.2066	0.0967	0.1030	0.1265	0.2582	0.2648	1.0000

TABLE 5 Correlation matrix of eight selected variables

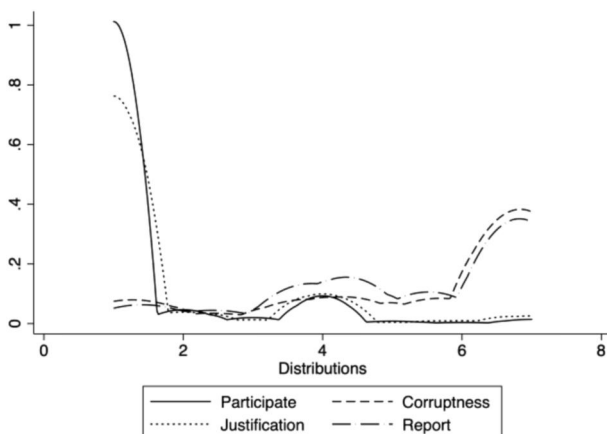


FIGURE 2 Distribution of responses of attitudes towards the inappropriate interaction

interaction. Finally, bureaucrats hired into “trust” positions tend to perceive the interaction as less corrupt, to justify the interaction as legitimate, and to be more likely to collaborate with the inappropriate interaction.

5 | DISCUSSION

This study shifts attention to environments of systemic corruption, in which SL implementation and SLBs' corruption cannot be studied nor understood independently from wider organizational patterns that may dictate whether and how SLBs are employed in corrupt schemes and SL implementation systematically used for ends not aligned with the public interest. The patterns emerged in the qualitative results suggest that service provision and interactions with citizens are influenced by overall ORG-C, and that this occurs through the roles

TABLE 6 Order logit main regression outcomes

Variables	Participation	Corruptness	Justifiable	Report
Organizational corruption ORG-C	0.349***	-0.164*	0.367***	-0.227**
	(-0.132)	(-0.0853)	(-0.11)	(-0.0894)
Street-level corruption SL-C	0.261**	-0.0849	0.187**	-0.299***
	(-0.103)	(-0.0816)	(-0.0921)	(-0.0867)
Income	-0.313*	0.0525	-0.138	0.138
	(-0.179)	(-0.0978)	(-0.16)	(-0.102)
Education	-0.199	0.162**	-0.213**	0.102
	(-0.128)	(-0.0734)	(-0.109)	(-0.0766)
Age	-0.0037	0.0107	-0.00381	0.00497
	(-0.0125)	(-0.00846)	(-0.0115)	(-0.0079)
Female	-0.126	0.14	0.214	-0.315**
	(-0.283)	(-0.172)	(-0.234)	(-0.16)
Law knowledge	-0.212	-0.0607	-0.12	0.259***
	(-0.148)	(-0.112)	(-0.131)	(-0.0962)
Bureaucracy type	0.803***	-0.405**	0.441*	-0.0969
	(-0.286)	(-0.176)	(-0.242)	(-0.185)
Pseudo r2	0.0668	0.0165	0.0419	0.0278
Observations	584	584	584	584

Note: Order logit cuts available in Appendix D. Robust standard errors in parentheses *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

assigned by the political administration to corruption exercised by SLBs. Different patterns of political administrations' use of SL-C—such as extracting resources from clients or giving clients public goods in exchange for political support—can differently influence street-level services and SLBs' interactions with citizens thus should be further explored. The qualitative results led us to question what effect does this environment have on SL implementation and corruption, on SLBs' ability to recognize corrupt acts, propensity to engage in corrupt acts, and willingness to whistle-blow. While corruption studies often adopt either a macro or micro approach, this study adopted a mezzo-level approach, which allows a better understanding of the relationships among corruption at different organizational levels.

In addition, although street-level divergence has been studied extensively, the influence of systemic and ORG-C on SL corruption and implementation has been neglected in the SL literature, particularly, because it has relied on research in developed countries. Expanding the scope of SL literature to the developing country context leads us to question the relationships observed in other contexts.

6 | CONCLUSION

Shifting the focus to the interstice of systemic corruption and street-level implementation as mediated by ORG-C allows a better understanding of street-level implementation in the developing world and contributes both to corruption research and to street-level scholarship.

With regard to corruption research, the current predominant approach of anticorruption policies in the developing world is to fall into line with the conventional notion in the developed world to consider corruption as an exception which represents infringement of integrity norms rather than a social institution. This well-established convention overlooks the fundamentally different pervasive or systemic nature of corruption in developing countries (Marquette & Peiffer, 2018; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006; Nieto, 2020). Uncovering that tolerance to inappropriate interaction is related to one's perception of systemic corruption highlights the need to shift more attention to the interactions among SL-C, ORG-C, and systemic corruption.

With regard to street-level scholarship, as mentioned above, noncompliant actions of SLBs that exemplify corruption are underexplored, despite the well-established notion that SLBs' implementation actions often diverge from formal policy directives (Brodkin, 2003; Gofen, 2014; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; O'Leary, 2010), and despite recent evidence of possible SLBs' discrimination of clients based on socio-demographic characteristics (Harrits, 2019; Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2019). Moreover, it is now well-accepted that divergence and (non)compliance of SLBs is influenced not only by formalities but also by varied informal organizational routines (Brehm & Gates, 1997; May & Winter, 2009; Meier & O'Toole, 2006; Ricucci, 2005; Whitford, 2002), such as norms of more experienced colleagues (Oberfield, 2010). Nonetheless, the possibility exists that SLBs work within corrupt environments and their influence is underexplored. Revealing that

perceived corruption influences the ways through which SLBs exercise discretion indicates a need to divert more attention to the dynamic between corruption and street-level implementation, because although corruption is associated with the developing world, it is well-documented within developed countries as well (Di Mascio & Piattoni, 2020; Jancsics, 2019b; Liu & Mikesell, 2014; Parrado et al., 2018).

In terms of practical conclusions, the findings of this study suggest a few insights to the well-documented anti-corruption policy strategies that are widely implemented to cope with many of the existing types of corrupt misbehaviors (Jancsics, 2019a; Taylor, 2018). An overwhelming majority of these policies are designed to deal with what is known as venal corruption (Bozeman et al., 2018), within which SL-C is something that contributes on a small scale. In line with Mashali (2012), we find that SL-C is deeply intertwined with broader organizational and systemic corruption. In environments where corruption is widespread, SL-C could be seen, partly, as a reliable indicator of deeper forms of corruption for two reasons. First, greater SL-C occurs when SLBs maintain tolerant attitudes towards practices of corruption but, more importantly, tolerant attitudes towards these practices are associated with SLBs' experience, or subjective perception of, ORG-C. Second, SLBs' perception of higher levels of SL-C is also associated with more tolerant attitudes towards corrupt practices, therefore a vicious cycle operates. Our findings also reveal the futility of anti-corruption policies when these are dealing exclusively with SL-C and/or venal forms of corruption (see also, Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006). As stated before, when a pervasive cycle of corruption operates in an organization as in the one studied here, no anti-corruption policy will succeed in its goal because it is targeting the tip of an iceberg that, once removed, a new tip emerges. These anti-corruption policies are often based on instruments (e.g., corruption indexes) that measure corruption in a very limited way. Our approach highlights the need for policy instruments that do not negate the complexity of corruption from the outset (see also, Pérez-Chiqués & Meza, 2021).

Further research can continue specifying different configurations between ORG-C and the use of SLBs and of SLB implementation in municipal corruption. Further research can also deepen insights regarding SLBs' knowledge or lack of knowledge and perspectives regarding their participation in ORG-C (for e.g., do they willingly participate, and if so, what is their rationale? Do they feel forced to participate, and if so, why do they comply?) Lastly, there is a need for further study on the politicization of SLBs and of SLB implementation.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data of the survey will be available upon request.

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