An exploratory study of street-level police corruption in Ghana: Why does it exist?'

Abstract

A culture of corruption within an institution, such as the police, could be indicative of a failure from various directions. The Ghanaian public often views the police service as the most corrupt of all their institutions. This paper aims to explore the issue of street-level police corruption and why it exists from the perspective of police officers, delving into their understandings, critiques, and explanations of this phenomenon. Based on qualitative interviews with Ghanaian police officers, this article reveals two factors that characterise street-level police corruption in Ghana. First, corrupt practices may be instigated by members of the public (e.g., through bribes) without any pressure from the police themselves. Second, police officers adopt various neutralisation techniques to rationalise their involvement in corruption. This article examines how police officers interviewed for this study normalised corruption to gain a better understanding of the prevalent nature of police corruption in Ghana.

Keywords: Police, police corruption, bribery [money], public, personal gain.

Introduction

Police corruption involves the illegal use of professional power for personal gain and may involve an officer or officers working in a coordinated effort (Sherman 1978). It can encompass a wide variety of behaviour, including the dishonest facilitation of payments made to the police to perform their duties, improper or unethical behaviour, such as bribery, violence, extortion, destruction of evidence, racism and favouritism, excessive authoritarian policing, and nepotism (Douvlis and South 2003, Gerber and Mandelson 2008). Research on police corruption cites many different causes, including the structure of the police force, societal culture, pessimistic views of police officers' moral attributes, as well as the situational context and working environment of the police (Sherman 1978; Kelling and Moore 1988; Porter and Warrender 2009; Douvlis and South 2003; Rawlinson 2012; Punch 2013). Additionally, police corruption can be influenced by societal politics, as well as the culture and norms of the people (Treisman 2000; Domoro and Agil 2012). Benson (1981), for instance, argued that officers' engagement in corruption can be linked to 'organisational incentives'. In other words, an organisation may create an environment that generates or fosters integrity rather than tolerance for police corruption, and vice-versa.

Studies suggest that in developing societies, such as Ghana, corruption permeates the ranks of the police and that such practices are sufficiently widespread to have obtained the status of normalcy, thereby making the police institutionally corrupt (Faull 2007; Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative 2007; Tankebe 2008a, Idowu 2010; Foltz and Opoku-Agyeman 2015). The Ghana Center for Democratic Development (2000) contends that reasons for police corruption (e.g., street-level corrupt practices) include a blend of factors, such as underpaid police officers and ineffective anti-corruption measures. Beek (2017) and Nix *et al*. (2019) further contend that police officers, particularly those at the street level in developing societies, tend to decide how they will invoke the law followed by an arrest or punitive action. The demeanour of street-level police officers (also considered as street-level bureaucrats, (Lipsky 1980)) when evoking the law appears to be consequential. Hence, acting seriously and making inferences about the offence committed provides the opportunity for officers and members of the public to drift in and out of corrupt practices to avoid implementing procedural justice (see Tyler 1989).

In recent years, there has been an effort to enforce road regulations in Ghana. For instance, the usage of seat belts was made compulsory in the year 2004 under the Act of Parliament (Act 683) and a Legislative Instrument (L.I.

2180, 2012). The law was enacted upon the recognition of limiting fatalities by the Ghana government via the Ministry of Roads and Transport (Okyere *et al*., 2021). However, most traffic violators attempt to circumvent such action by offering police officers money (i.e., bribes) to avoid the full enforcement of the law. Commercial drivers are frequently stopped for police checks (see also Beek 2017). On one hand, there seems to be an attempt to ameliorate the encounter with the police by offering bribes to avoid procedural justice. On the other hand, challenges of the court, such as the backlog of cases or the bureaucratic process involved may influence or promote avoidance (Lipsky 1980). Beek suggests that these drivers anticipate that they must offer money to the police for favourable decisions, such as the offence being overlooked. Police officers benefit financially by accepting such bribes as well as avoiding the paperwork involved in having to process cases with the appropriate office. Additionally, most Ghanaian citizens prefer to avoid the time, energy, and financial costs of court proceedings, with the view that ''*they just waste your time*'' (2017:10).

It could be argued that these instances seem to provide the police with a greater opportunity to fully exercise street-level bureaucratic practices over road safety violators. Most commercial drivers seem to be well-situated in instances of street-level bureaucratic practices which subsequently promote street-level public-police corrupt practices (Lipsky 1980; Newburn 2015). This present study aims to explore street-level police corruption and why it exists from the perspective of police officers. The study addresses the following questions based on primary data gained through qualitative interviews with Ghanaian police officers: 1. How do police officers explain (police) corruption in the context of Ghana; 2. What are the reasons for police corruption? Two factors that characterise street-level police corruption in Ghana are identified. First, corrupt practices may be instigated by members of the public (e.g., through bribes) without any pressure from the police themselves. Second, police officers adopt various neutralisation techniques to rationalise their involvement in corruption.

Police Corruption and Techniques of Neutralisation

The key theoretical framework employed in this analysis is techniques of neutralisation. This relates to a theory developed by Sykes and Matza (1957) and later developed by Cohen (2001) in the analysis of various forms of denial. This theory is discussed in depth throughout the article and developed in a way that captures the social foundations and conditions underpinning police corruption in Ghana. In a society where there is a perception of widespread corruption, the processes involved in initiating or demanding bribes usually arrives at equilibrium, in that the two parties involved in the transaction employ the "*I-let-you-corrupt-me and-you-let-me-corrupt-you*" syndrome (Hankiss 2002: 248). The above notion relies on Becker's (1968) study regarding economic influences on crime. Several factors appear to influence police misconduct (such as corruption), including cultural beliefs, personalised gain, the desire to personalise policing, environmental factors, cultural neutralisation from peers within the police, and occupational set-up. As such, it can be argued that ill-gotten gifts or money, either initiated by the police or citizens, could be a means of improving or simply enacting certain cultural, personal, or collective conditions. These cultural norms may become important motivational factors influencing some police officers to engage in corruption. In many sub-Saharan countries, such practices have become normalised to the extent that it becomes a routine, taken-for-granted part of everyday life. Yet, in this way, the various problems associated with corruption are ignored, making it incredibly difficult to break the cycle of corruption.

Sykes and Matza (1957) identify the following five techniques of neutralisation that served to release juvenile delinquents from the moral binds of the law. The techniques include: 1) denial of responsibility; 2) denial of injury: 3) denial of the victim; 4) condemnation of the condemners; and lastly, 5) an appeal to a higher loyalty. Each of these five techniques, it is argued, enables individuals or a group to engage in an immoral activity by replacing the immorality of the act with these other moral frameworks, thereby neutralising the deviant act. Since Sykes and Matza developed the techniques of neutralisation, the theory has been applied to many different forms of deviant behaviours, including corruption. For instance, Strutton, Vitell and Pelton (1994) applied the theory to establish the possible elucidation of shoplifting. Piquero, Tibbetts and Blankenship (2005) also extended the theory to examine the role of neutralisation in white-collar crimes. In policing research, it has been used to examine how some police officers justify deviant behaviour (see Gottschalk 2012). Yet, Matza and Sykes (1957) also highlight that it is important to grasp how neutralisation techniques could be drawn from dominant morality and law.

Additionally, according to Anand *et al.*, (2004), another form of rationalisation often used by people to engage in corrupt practices is social weighing. In this context, the actors involved in the corrupt practices assume two practices that moderate or neutralise the negative effect of the corrupt behaviour, this often occurs in two ways, by condemnation of the condemners and by selective social comparison, which is analogous to denial of injury (see also Syke and Matza 1957). When individuals are challenged about a negative effect of their conduct, comparison with others seems to support or sustain their behaviour against the risk (Anand *et al*. 2004). In this context, police corruption experiences are likely influenced by normative social practices in Ghana, for instance, widely practised gift-giving and the prominence of the extended family and the motivation to identify others or institutions that are more corrupt. Nonetheless, by appealing to such fundamental norms to neutralise corrupt behaviour, these neutralisations can become full-blown forms of denial, which could have the effect of normalising police corruption by denying its harmful implications. This suggests that when a harmful activity is captured by spirals of denial, these tend to hide its moral implications and it becomes legitimised and normalised through denial. By adopting the techniques of neutralisation theory, this article positions the theory in a non-western context. This gives a foundational framework from which to bring local meanings to the understanding and the existence of police corruption in Ghana.

Policing and police corruption in Ghana

Professional policing in Ghana (formerly the Gold Coast) has a colonial legacy. Formerly under the colonial leadership of the British, Captain George Maclean introduced a professional police force in the Gold Coast in 1831 (Gocking 1997; Tankebe 2008b). Initially employing just 129 officers, known then as the Gold Coast Corps and later as the Royal Corps, their duty was to patrol trade routes. Mawby (2008) suggests that the system of colonial professional policing was developed primarily for protecting (in this case British) colonial officials and merchants, as well as controlling the conquered natives. Independence for Ghana began in 1951, and one of the key policies set out for independence by the first post-colonial Prime Minister, Dr Kwame Nkrumah, was the Africanisation of the police force so that the public would be able to relate to the Ghanaian police. Professional changes required included ensuring that positions already occupied by the British within the police force were occupied by Ghanaians. Mr E. T. Madjitey was the first Ghanaian appointed as the Head of the Ghanaian police

(1957) – an appointment that suggests a significant step in symbolising that the Ghanaian police was now intended to focus on the expectations and the needs of the people of Ghana.

After the attainment of independence (1957), Ghana adopted a new constitution in 1960. This moved Ghana from a parliamentary system with a prime minister, to a republic with a president (Cyr 2001). However, in 1964, a new referendum initiated one-party rule in Ghana (Aning 2006), and this further changed the course of policing. The new 1969 Constitution established the Ghana Police Council, which also brought the police into the folds of service for the public (Aning 2006). Police legislation, which is still valid today, was then passed in the 1969 Constitution. The Police Service Act covered the functions of the Ghanaian police, structures and conditions for the administration of the police, and police misconduct (Quantson 2006; CHRI 2007). The nation's political upheaval, as well as the constant involvement of the police in politics, rendered the Ghanaian police in a state of paralysis, for instance, there seems to be political interference in policing Ghana which appears to demotivate professionals and ethical policing practices on the basis that political interference links to benefits (Aning 2006; Yeboah-Assiamah et al., 2014; Beek 2016; Omole, 2020). The 1992 Constitution also made provisions for the creation of a police service, setting out the procedure for appointing the inspector general of police (IGP) and it also provided the basis for the instigation of a Police Council (CHRI 2007; Aning 2015).

Policing in Ghana is typified by both high- and low-profile instances of corruption, illegitimate arrest and detention, excessive use of police power and an inability of the police to follow up on complaints (Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), 2007). One of the most noticeable public-police corruption experiences in Ghana occurs at the street level, mostly with junior-ranking officers. CHRI (2007: 28) found that "[*Within the] junior ranks of the police, bribes are used to turn a blind eye or to grease the proper and efficient functioning of the police*." CHRI suggested that, in their quest for effective management and implementation of traffic regulations, there is actually a high probability that the will police engage in street-level corrupt practices (2007). According to Kumssa (2015), corruption is a common practice in most developing societies (such as Ghana) between traffic police officers (the MTTU in Ghana) and taxi or commercial drivers at most checkpoints. Bayley and Perito (2011) state that police checkpoints for commercial vehicles, where money is required to avoid harassment and/or delays, are common along highways in the developing world. For instance, drivers in general, but especially commercial drivers, typically offer money to the police to counter the full enforcement of the law. On this basis, Addo (2012) posits that commercial drivers who offer bribes to police officers to abstain from being arrested after being caught infringing on road traffic regulations should largely be blamed for public-police corrupt practices.

However, it could be argued that a more nuanced perspective is needed. On the basis that street-level police officers' use of discretion would seem to suggest under-enforcement of the law, street-level Ghanaian police officers have a particular approach to underenforcing the law. Focusing on practices often considered police corruption, ''*handing over money can be understood as part of an interplay between various police practices, and its meaning emerges from this situational interplay*'' (Beek 2017: 2). There seems to be an expectation that in receiving the incentive, the police will accommodate commercial drivers' interests. Both parties, in this case, seem caught in a net of street-level bureaucrats seeking to promote personal interest (Lipsky 1980). Furthermore, social

relations in Ghana tend to operate on the notion ''*we are all human beings*'' in Twi: '*yen nyinaa yeye nipa*' (Beek 2017: 7). This seems to influence street-level police corruption on the pillars of a benevolent society.

Methods

Research design

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) state that qualitative research interviews aid in deciphering a phenomenon from the subjects' perspective. This research method lends itself well to this study because it provides a framework for understanding participants' thought processes and feelings. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were used to elicit a detailed exploration of police participants' perceptions and experiences of corruption. The data was collected in Accra and Kumasi. Accra is the capital city of Ghana, situated within the Greater Accra region on the south coast. Kumasi is the capital city of the Ashanti region, found in the midlands of Ghana. Both are the most populous cities in Ghana and, arguably, are representative of the country's diverse urban population and culture. Based on the Ghana 2021 Population and Housing Census (PHC), Ghana had a population of 30,792,608. In terms of population size and density, the Greater Accra region and the Ashanti region each have populations of around 5.4 million (Ghana Statistical Services, 2021). In other words, one-third of Ghana's population lives in either the Greater Accra or Ashanti regions. Hence, it can be argued that some police officers are more likely to be positioned in the Greater Accra or Ashanti regions compared to other regions, and therefore people are more likely to encounter the police in these regions for various reasons. This makes these locations ideal for this study.

Sample

A total of 15 Ghanaian police officers were interviewed for this study. Permission was sought from the Ghana Police Headquarters in Accra. A copy of the approval letter and the consent form were issued to the Regional Police Headquarters in both Accra and Kumasi to facilitate access to participants. Reaching out to the target population (i.e., those who may have indulged in or witnessed police corruption) may be problematic given that corrupt practices may attract punishment and may also be associated with some degree of stigma. As such, a linear snowball sampling technique was adopted, whereby participants nominate others as potential data sources. Also known as a 'chain referral technique' (Parker *et al*., 2019), this approach maximises prospective subjects' willingness to participate in the study. Against the background that it would have been challenging or impossible to directly identify research participants to engage with the subject knowledge of this article. Having had individuals who participated in the research, these individuals knew other people who were willing to participate in the research. Suggesting that developing rapport and trust was an important aspect of the research as participants had to agree or were willing to introduce other members of their group (subculture). In other words, the approach provided the opportunity for well-situated participants to provide information on police corruption. The study also relied on data from retired police officers. on the assumption that they might talk more freely given that they are no longer bound by an obligation to their employer. Nonetheless, access to retired police entailed challenges since most are inclined to settle away from the cities once retired. Hence, gaining access to them would be economically challenging and problematic as travel to these areas would have stretched the limited resources. In the end, it was possible to access two retired police officers in Accra during the course of the fieldwork.

Data collection

Once access was granted, a face-to-face interview process was conducted with police officers in their offices, each lasting anywhere between 30 and 60 minutes. A total of 15 interviews were conducted, consisting of 13 active and 2 retired police officers (4 females and 11 males) with varying lengths of service. Table 1 below presents a summary of the participants' characteristics.

Participant	Gender	Age	Length of service	Division of service	Location of service	Active or retired
1	Female	61 and over	24 years	Administrative officer	Accra	Retired
2	Male	61 and over	31 years	Criminal Investigations Department (CID)	Accra	Retired
3	Female	51 - 60	17 years	Criminal Investigations Department (CID)	Accra	Active
4	Female	21 - 30	5 years	Motor Transport Traffic Unit (MTTU)	Accra	Active
5	Male	41 - 50	15 years	Motor Transport Traffic Unit (MTTU)	Accra	Active
6	Male	51 - 60	20 years	Criminal Investigations Department (CID)	Accra	Active
7	Male	31 – 40	12 years	Highway Patrol Unit	Accra	Active
8	Male	41 - 50	14 years	Community Police Unit	Accra	Active
9	Male	41 - 50	15 years	Community Police Unit	Accra	Active
10	Male	41 – 50	11 years	Administrative officers	Kumasi	Active
11	Male	41 - 50	14 years	Administrative officers	Kumasi	Active
12	Male	41 - 50	16 years	Criminal Investigations Unit	Kumasi	Active
13	Male	41 - 50	14 years	Motor Transport Traffic Unit (MTTU)	Kumasi	Active
14	Female	31 - 40	11 years	Motor Transport Traffic Unit (MTTU)	Kumasi	Active
15	Male	41 - 50	13 years	Motor Transport Traffic Unit (MTTU)	Accra	Active

Table 1: Brief description of 15 police participants

Interviews were generally recorded, although handwritten notes were taken in instances where participants were not comfortable with having their voices recorded. This study conforms to the University of Hertfordshire's (2021) ethics and integrity policy on studies involving the use of human participants. Each participant was presented with a copy of the access letter given from the office of the IGP to the office of the police regional commander for the Greater Accra and the Ashanti region. This approach enabled each regional commander to grant access via police district commanders and, subsequently, to the individual police officers. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and details about participation. These details were provided during the introductory phase before conducting the interview and, for confirmatory purposes, where appropriate, a copy of the access letter from the IGP's office was presented to each police participant.

Instrument

A semi-structured interview format was developed with open-ended questions concerning police and police corruption, as well as the demographics of participants (including age, gender, levels of experience, and years of occupational or professional experience). Areas considered include an explanation for their interest in policing as a career, preservation of police authority, police resources, and understanding of police misconduct (police

corruption) as well as approaches to tackling police corruption. The open-ended nature of the questions invited participants to express their views without limitation, which lead to answers that provided more insight and context, which aided in developing the arguments presented in this study. The questions were given to participants beforehand so that they could prepare their answers. It was anticipated that some if not all, respondents would dispel public views concerning corruption and the Ghana police. As such, it was important to explore the topic through open-ended questions that enabled the interviewer to gently broach such issues. Examples of the questions asked include: So, can you talk me through how you came to be a police officer? Will you explain briefly how you were trained? How does the police influence authority in society? Is police corruption related to a particular division? How would you explain (police) corruption? Can you give any examples?

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is applied in this study, as described by Braun and Clarke (2012: 57), "*thematic analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set.*" This approach provides the opportunity to make sense of a collective experience and shared meanings of social phenomena. After the recordings were transcribed, any ideas and thoughts that developed as the interviews proceeded were noted. Interview data was indexed according to recurring themes and, finally, analysis was undertaken using NVivo 10. The software provided a framework for the analysis and a means to organise and store the data (see Welsh 2002). Nonetheless, the author maintained the primary role of developing and providing the coding and conceptual analysis based on the data obtained. The emerging themes aided in capturing significant aspects of the data concerning the objectives of this research (see Braun and Clarke 2006). Northcutt and McCoy (2004) state that qualitative data management involves rigorous analysis and a logical means by where the data is assigned meaning. Hence, the themes were categorised under contextual factors, the objective of which was to strengthen the findings. For confirmatory purposes, based on the themes developed from the data, the views of each respondent in the sample were compared vis-à-vis each theme and the topic. To make a more distinctive comparison and contrast among the individuals in the sample, the data was categorised under two objective points: first, the views of the active police officers and, second, the views of the retired police officers.

Results

In addition to participants' perspectives on police corruption, based on the techniques of neutralisation, the four main themes developed from respondents include appeal to higher loyalties, condemning the condemners, denial of responsibility, and social weighting. In this context, participants could employ specific examples to justify their engagement in corrupt practices, and these are explored in more detail throughout the remainder of this article.

Officers' understandings of (police) corruption

Participants associated police corruption with *bribery* and *tips*, as well as street-level public police contact, mostly with commercial drivers. For instance, an active, male police officer in Kumasi (participant 12) stated, '*these are bribery between the police and drivers, and rich people are also corrupting the police*'. Other factors linked to police corruption were extortion, payment to overlook an offence or demand for payment for a service that the police are already paid to do. As the retired, male police officer in Accra stated:

…corruption is where a case is being investigated by you and then you demand money or demand something from the person to enable you to assist him/her, which is not the best. Sometimes you are investigating a case, and you know perfectly well that he has committed an offence and you demand that he gives you some money for you to assist him to either drop the case or something like that (Participant 2).

Another participant in Accra also stated that:

…when they say the police are corrupt, it comes to where police take money from people, be it complainants coming to the station, be it a driver committing an offence where he/she is supposed to be charged or arrested and arraigned before the court... I would say bribery… (Participant 4).

Appeal to higher loyalties

Participants often referred to the need to manage and cope with a range of competing demands, including their duty to their family and friends, as well as to other personal interests, such as properties/houses and retirement packages. Such explanations may be classified as an appeal to higher loyalties. For instance, a male active police officer in Accra said, "*life after you retire from the force, for example, you need a house for you and your family, salary may not be enough to achieve that*" (Participant 5). Participants also referenced the belief that corruption is widespread, and therefore police corruption is embedded within the wider system rather than being confined to the Ghanaian police service. The presence of corruption within the police service was reflective of systemic corruption already practised within society. For instance, a male active police officer, also in Accra, stated:

You know, corruption can come from anywhere. When you are in the police it can come from anywhere. If you are a family man at home, you will be thinking about your children's fees, your house rent money, your transport, and with what you are earning, if you pay your house rent, basically it is all gone. So, you will be thinking of how to support yourself and your family till the end of that month, the first week of the month your money is gone, what can you do? (Participant 6).

In addition, participants referred to economic challenges in the context of the perception of being underpaid in their role as police officers. For instance, the retired male police participant in Accra stated:

An *increase in fuel, there is no price tag, and everything sells at whatever price everywhere… This is not a defence [for] corruption but if you look at the system at the moment, let's say if a policeman has to pay school fees of 20,000.00 Ghana cedis for your child at his first entrance to a secondary school, what will you also do at your field?* (Participant 2)

Condemning the condemners

Other respondents acknowledged that some of the divisions within the Ghana police often work in the public view, particularly the Motor Traffic and Transport Unit (MTTU), and therefore the conduct of such officers has an influence on public views towards the police service. However, participants were critical of public views about

police corruption. This seems to be the narrative of a male active police officer in Kumasi: "*It is because the MTTU and Investigators work directly with the public and people say the police is corrupt. But it is the public! They bribe the police because they are afraid to go to court. No officer will take money out of your pocket if you don't give it to him*" (Participant 13). Another respondent, a male police officer in Kumasi, said: "*I agree that the police is corrupt, but it is the society that corrupts the police and is a general issue. It's the public that corrupts the police, no officer will force or ask you to bribe him, it is the public, that's why they need mass education*" (Participant 12). According to these accounts, it is a consequence of the reluctance of those breaking the law to account for their offending behaviour or to receive procedural justice, that any such offences (such as road safety violations) go unnoticed. A respondent in Accra stated, "*When you arrest somebody, you want to put the person before the court. If the person feels that the punishment, he will receive from the court would be greater, he may be 'pushing out something small' to free himself. That is what we normally see…*" (Participant 7). Moreover, respondents' perceptions of police corruption were described as a consequence of civilian ignorance or lack of understanding regarding policing procedures: "*People are totally ignorant about police procedures. Normally, it is those people who touted that the police is corrupt…*" (Participant 10).

Denial of responsibility

This justification strategy can be seen in some of the views provided that seem to consider police corruption as an enhancement technique for the undervalued nature of police work. As the retired police officer in Accra seems to suggest:

> *…but, when you talk about corruption, you only talk about one side of it, you have to talk about the pay people take. Whether it is enough or not. Corruption is in every part of the society and is too bad. Now the police salary, it was recently they manage[d] to put them on certain scales, but even that, is it much? (*Participant 9).

A female police officer in Kumasi stated that "*good pay and accommodation (comfortable home) will not allow one [police officer] to be corrupt. But now accommodation is a big issue. You will find an officer in one room, a single room. This I believe is a source of corruption*" (Participant 14). The perception of police corruption seems set against the notion that civilians understand the unsustainable nature of a police officer's income, leaving the police susceptible to such external influences.

> *The police used to be on low salaries if you look at the basic commodities in our country is high and if the police are earning too low, people know that and they take that as an advantage to corrupt the police, and the police have no option [but to] fall for it…* (Participant 11).

Where the reasons for police corruption were mentioned, it was in the public's interest to expedite the response or personalised policing was stated as a concern: "*bribery, in fact, sometimes is not the police who even ask, and sometimes [it is the] complainant [who will] come and make a complaint to you to take action quickly [and] you will see the complainant will be happy and tip you*" (Participant 1).

Social weighting

In terms of social weighting, participants' responses often seem to indicate a denial of injury (see Sykes and Matza 1957). On the basis that corrupt behaviour could make the actors feel bad, hence are motivated to find, or identify other people or institutions who are more corrupt, subsequently demonstrating the less effect of their corrupt behaviour. Thereby identifying evidence or other institutional corrupt practices that align with their thought process. They frequently did so by downplaying police officers' engagement in corruption based on selective comparisons to other public institutions considered or believed to be equally or more corrupt. For instance: *"If you are to talk of the most corrupt institutions in Ghana, I would not say the police is the worst offender. There are institutions that are more corrupt than the police"* (Participant 15). In this context, some participants justified any personal gain from engaging in police corruption, as expressed below by an active female police officer in Accra: *"Corruption is across the board but not related to a particular division. It is everywhere, even in the ECG [Electric Company of Ghana], hospitals, etc... everybody eats from where he/she works, and officers eat from where they work too!"* (Participant 3). Additionally, police corruption was also perceived as a product of systemic corruption, widely practised by the public. As such, contextual social factors aided the development of police corrupt practices. *"It is in the system which obviously involves the public and the police service, everybody"* (Participant 8).

Strengths and limitations

In terms of strengths, besides the cost of travelling between Accra and Kumasi, the interviews conducted were inexpensive with inferences of the location, accessing respondents, time and cost. Knowledge shared by participants was significant on why police corruption exists. Due to the sensitive nature of the data gathered, some participants preferred not to have a voice recording made of the interview, hence the data had to be handwritten. The snowball technique provided the opportunity for well-situated participants to provide direct information on police corruption and also linked or introduced the author to other key participants to share their experiences and perceptions of police corruption. Yin (2009) states that there are some challenges concerning qualitative research approaches within the field of the social sciences. For instance, it is perceived to lack rigour, differential views, and generalisability. Nonetheless, it has excelled in aiding an understanding of complex social phenomena and can also be used to add strength to previous studies or knowledge. The data are gathered from a small number of groups or organisations via in-depth interviews, participant observation and longitudinal studies (Gable 1994; Yin 2009). It is worth noting the extent to which participants might have felt uncomfortable in terms of their involvement in corrupt practices and might not be entirely honest or justified their actions for the sake of saving face. Hence, generalisability and representativeness are not some of the key objectives in my study. On the contrary, it is more about revealing meanings and detailed processes, as well as understanding perceptions of street-level police corruption. There were a few limitations of the sampling technique. For instance, limited or little control over the sampling method. This is because the data gained was largely determined by previous participants' influence in persuading others to participate in the snowball technique. Additionally, an introduction to another potential source of data may have been influenced by an existing relationship, such as friends or work colleagues.

Discussion

This study focused on (active and retired) Ghanaian police officers' understanding of street-level police corruption and their rationalisations as to why it exists. Police corruption was primarily characterised in terms of bribery, which supports previous research on police corruption (see Sherman 1978; Newburn and Webb 1999; Tankebe 2010; Hope 2015). This study found many examples of how participants justified police engagement in such practices, and these were analysed according to the categories of condemnation of the condemners, appealing to higher loyalties, denial of responsibility and social weighting.

The delivery of police services appears to be influenced by a public willingness to offer payments to the police. Such corrupt practices are offered with the aim of 'greasing the palms' (Leak 1999; Sharma 2002) of the recipient (the police). This approach often appears to be deployed when members of the public report an issue to the police, and in doing so, they offer some form of gift to the officer. Giving a tip to the police appears to be considered a strategic technique adopted to either accelerate or modify police proceedings. Furthermore, police corruption was also related to situations where police take advantage of a situation to solicit or extort money in exchange for overlooking offence[s] (Sayed and Bruce 1998; Prenzler and Ronken 2001). Such assistance in this context seems to imply a promise of a particular action or omission, such as avoidance of procedural justice - corruption yielding injustice (Jackson *et al*. 2014, Hope 2015).

Nonetheless, studies seem to suggest that there are pragmatic advantages relating to police corrupt practices. For instance, in terms of appealing to higher loyalties, in some African countries such as Ghana, Nigeria and Uganda, research suggests that stamping out police corruption is a difficult challenge when faced with low police remuneration (Charley and M'Cormack 2011; Kenya National Commission on Human Rights 2014). For instance, an officer may be the only well-educated member of his or her family (including the extended family) with a 'good job', hence the rest of the family expects or depend on the officer for all kinds of emotional and monetary support. This was a pertinent theme in the data collected, where the need to manage and cope with a range of competing demands superseded the ethics and values of the police institution. This seemed consistent with prior studies, for instance, Garba and Mamman (2014), suggesting that these dependencies sometimes cause public officers to dread retirement and low police remuneration inevitably influences corruption. The pursuit of such interests can be referred to as 'complex sustainability' (Andvig and Fjeldstad 2008). This burden of sustainability included factors such as the continual increase in fuel costs, and paying for school fees coupled with the irregular increase of commodity prices added some level of economic pressure on police participants. Such determinants were present in participants' accounts and were used as an explanation for the existence of corruption (Punch 2000). Additionally, De Sardan (1999), Muir (1979) and Reckwitz (2002) argue that, in most African societies, the practices of corruption have been extended to every aspect of social life. Andvig (2008) also suggest that due to the economic challenges in sub-Saharan Africa more generally, there is an expectation that corruption is rife. Corruption in this regard may have one main characteristic, promoting economic gain on the part of the officers (Heckelman and Powell 2008), as previously mentioned, an enhancement technique for undervalued police work. This suggests that, far from being a selfish act, anybody in their shoes would have done the same – especially when it came to supporting loved ones. In this sense, corrupt practices could be considered an active strategy for sustainable management. Based on the responses, corruption appears to assume the status of assisting individuals

in coping with living costs, effectively supplementing their salary. Hence, engaging in police corrupt practices may be portrayed as a "normal" activity for any reasonable police officer acting in good faith to fulfil their responsibilities.

Concerning the denial of responsibility, the findings also suggest that police officers' sense of morality amidst police corruption could be mitigated by creating a neutral background for corrupt practice. This in turn earns the credit of sustainability (Sykes and Matza 1957; Cohen 2001). Participants indicated that public ignorance or inability to understand the role and responsibilities of the police plays a part in perpetuating police corruption. Civilians would rather bribe the police to avoid or escape the complexities of the justice system. This view seems to be supported by Beek (2017) who argued that if police officers in West Africa were to enforce the law diligently, they would overburden the courts. In other words, preventing the court to be overburdened seems a justification for the police to engage in corruption. Hence, most people prefer to avoid the time, energy, and cost of going to court, "*they just waste your time*." (*ibid* 2017:10). The Motor Traffic and Transport Unit (MTTU) and the Criminal Investigations Division (CID) tend to be the departments with which civilians have the most contact when dealing with the criminal justice system in Ghana. Boateng (2012) posits that, within the context of Ghana, the MTTU operates largely in public view and, therefore, the street-level policing practices influence public views about corruption in the police service more generally. Police corrupt practices were directly linked to the reluctance of those breaking the law to receive procedural justice, therefore offering bribes so that any offences go unnoticed and to avoid or escape the complexities of the justice system.

Being hard-hit by insufficient accommodation coupled with what participants viewed as a low salary placed a substantial burden on officers, leading them to explore opportunities for corruption to alleviate support and/or improve their living standards. Housing issues seemed to have a direct impact on the quality of life for participants, meaning that working as a police officer may not be economically worthwhile without engaging in corruption. The concept of denial of responsibility was a kind of rationalisation that served as a psychological defense technique to excuse the police for any perceived wrongdoing (Sykes and Matza 1957; Anand *et al.* 2004; Gannett and Rector 2015). For instance, responses suggest that depending on the situational context, denial of police corruption could take the form of an enhancement technique for the undervalued nature of police work (Transparency International 2011). Good living standards may dilute incentives to engage in corruption (Andvig, and Fjeldstad 2008; Tankebe 2010). In other words, the perception of an inadequate accommodation system contributed to a higher risk of participants engaging in corrupt practices. The findings indicate that knowledge of police corruption was acknowledged and prevalent among the officers, however, the effect or the knowledge is somehow downplayed or ignored. Denial of responsibility in this case, as Cohen (2001) suggests, could be measured through various types, this includes literal denial (simply denying that the event happened); interpretative denial (where knowledge of an event is admitted but not in the way the public perceived it to be); and implication denial (where the information about an event is admitted, but its implications are downplayed or its intentions denied).

In this study, one of the factors that abet the rationalization of corrupt practices is the concept of social weighting (a selective social comparison). Selective social comparison emerged as a form of rationalisation serving as a

psychological defense technique to excuse the police for any perceived wrongdoing (Sykes and Matza 1957; Anand *et al*. 2004; Gannett and Rector 2015). Against the background that the results suggest, participants downplayed their engagement in corruption to justify or overlook the negative impact of police corruption (Hooker 2009). This is evident in participants' accounts where selective comparisons to other institutions were believed to be equally or more corrupt (denial of injury). Thereby, being able to subdue, morally neutralise and justify police involvement as well as the effects of corrupt practices. This could be against the backdrop of it being socially practised or justly acceptable (Gannett and Rector 2015). Neutralisation enabled respondents to assume the shield of denial of injury. Within neutralisation theory, the denial of injury strategy enables delinquents to persuade themselves that nobody is truly hurt by their actions and that their activities are therefore acceptable (Sykes and Matza 1957; Matsueda 1982). It is worth noting that when corrupt practices become habitual and tend to be socially practised, they gain an aspect of social momentum (see Ashforth and Anand 2003). Respondents' engagement in corruption could be considered a product of the "system" in which it seems to be embedded, which also refers to wider social norms or cultural practices (Tänzler 2007), suggesting, police corruption as a product of wider systemic corrupt practices. Notions of wider social or systemic practices of corruption served as an insulator for officers' deviant behaviours. This, in turn, provided the framework or "system" within which participants could blame the contextual environment for promoting police corrupt practices.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this article was to explore police officers' views about police corruption and explore factors that contribute to this phenomenon. The analysis has demonstrated that police corruption can take many forms, including bribery, extortion, demand for payment for police services, and the willingness of an offender to initiate a bribe when caught in a traffic violation (i.e. street-level police corruption). Participants overwhelmingly perceived the giving of a tip to the police as a form of allurement to the officer(s) to promote a favourable response. It also related to the inclination to overlook a violation in exchange for a tip. Such actions were a form of social stratification given that it is dependent on those who can afford to bribe/pay the police, jeopardising the possibility of procedural fairness.

In exploring police participants' critique of police corruption, several core sub-themes emerged relating to how participants responded to police corruption practices. These include social weighting, condemning the condemners, and the appeal to higher loyalties. The sub-themes can be understood through the lens of the techniques of neutralisation theory. Significantly, there was the admission that police engaged in various forms of corruption. The analysis presented reveals that, although the police may be viewed as corrupt, the existence of police corruption was multidirectional: corruption experiences were understood to be instigated both by members of the public, mostly without any form of expectations or demand from the police. In this sense, the police could perhaps be viewed as victims of public corruption since payments made to the police may negatively impact the legitimate use of police authority to exercise procedural justice. Participants adopted various means of neutralisation techniques that had been adopted to justify engaging in corruption. This highlights the complexities of police corrupt practices in Ghana and the need for further research in this area.

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