

# Culture and Corruption: Plagiarism, Wasta and Bribery In the MENA Region

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**Abstract:** Individuals in different cultures may have diverse understandings of right and wrong, based on different worldviews. While the west predominantly shares a guilt-innocence culture, the east largely conforms to the shame-honor culture, and Africa (and parts of South America and Asia) is linked to the fear-power culture. Thus, justice, ethics, right and wrong, and corruption may be perceived differently in each culture. With data collected in a focus group with 11 participants from Lebanon, Egypt, and Algeria, the purpose of this study was to shed light on the role of culture in allowing and normalizing corruption in the MENA region. We found that in shame-honor cultures keeping relationships is the honorable and therefore the right thing to do. Therefore, culture may contribute to normalizing corruption when the value of keeping a relationship is considered above other values. While in guilt-innocence cultures values are predominantly determined by rules, in shame-honor cultures values are determined by relationships. Therefore, in shame-honor cultures, individuals tend to accept plagiarism, wasta, and bribery as long as it keeps the relationships. The paper ends with recommendations for research and practice.

**Keywords:** corruption, culture, plagiarism, wasta, bribery, MENA, ethics, shame-honor, guilt-innocence

## I. INTRODUCTION

Corruption has long existed throughout history. It is a very common problem of multiple cultures. Although some countries have had the ability to reduce it, corruption remained high across the world (Uslaner, 2017, p. 5). "This evil phenomenon is found in all countries – big and small, rich and poor – but it is in the developing world that its effects are most destructive" (Annan, 2004, p. 5). Multiple definitions have been given to the term corruption. Probably the most common of all was that of the World Bank (2020) defined as "the abuse of public office for private gain" (para. 1). Yet, this should not mean that corruption happens only at this level; corruption can exist at private levels too be it through hiring, favoritism, cheating, monopoly, bribery etc. Uslaner (2017) argues that "corruption stems from inequality and reinforces it" (p. 6). He explains that inequality leads to mistrust, mistrust to corruption and the latter to more inequality, an unfortunate never-ending cycle.

Efforts have been made by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2003 when December 9 was announced 'International Anti-Corruption Day' (UCLG, 2017). The aim was to raise awareness and help reduce incidences of corruption across the world and it still is. The cost of corruption can be enormous as it erodes democratic freedoms, rule of law, and trust in any system (Transparency, n.d., para. 1). When money meant for improvements are stolen, opportunities for a better sustainable life fade away. Every year loads of dollars are lost for corruption; "the annual costs of international corruption amount to a staggering \$3.6 trillion in the form of bribes and stolen money" (Johnson, 2018, para. 1). In developing countries, corruption stifles global economic integration (Bryant and Javalgi, 2016)

But besides the humungous cost of corruption, individuals from different cultures struggle to agree on what is corruption and how to fight it. This may be partially due to the use of culturally defined understandings of right and wrong, based on different worldviews (Lichtenwalter, 2014). While the west predominantly shares a guilt-innocence culture, the east largely conforms to the shame-honor culture and Africa (and parts of South America and Asia) is linked to the fear-power culture (Benedict, 1946). Thus, justice, ethics, right and wrong, and corruption may be perceived

differently in each culture. Hence, the purpose of this study is to shed light on the role of culture on allowing and normalizing corruption. Specifically, 1) what is the role of culture in allowing and normalizing corruption? 2) Do “shame cultures” perceive corruption differently than “guilt cultures”? And 3) to what extent do “shame culture” individuals accept plagiarism, wasta, and bribery? First, we will analyze the literature on these three questions, and then we will analyze these questions from the perspectives of 11 individuals from the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 The Role of Culture in Normalizing Corruption

Certain ethical standards and values are accepted among all human societies. Every major religion, from Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism to name a few, have this *golden rule* of reciprocity that “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matt 7:12; NIV). This may seem to suggest that there are common beliefs across cultures; however, the interpretation and application of some values may be different. In their book managing business ethics, Treviño and Nelson (2014) say that most cultures value honesty “but its meaning may differ from culture to culture” (p. 413). They elaborate their idea using the notion of *caveat emptor* (buyer beware) whereby hiding from the buyer the cons of a sale are considered as “dishonest” in countries like the United States compared to the same being “good business” in the MENA region. Gentile (2010) adds on the topic saying that “values may differ so much across cultures that common ground will remain elusive” (p. 39). She discussed the issue with a self-explanatory example that sums it all. Gentile (2010) tells the story about how, when asked about their attitude towards cheating in an exam, most Arab students at the University of Sharjah were trying to justify cheating by claiming that not *helping* a friend during an exam would put you in “conflict with other values like loyalty or with realities of peer pressure” (p. 40).

To find the relationship and impact of different cultural values on the level of corruption, multiple scholars have studied Hofstede’s dimensions of cultural differences. Of the five dimensions described by Hofstede (2001, p. 29), two seemed to serve the purpose of the study: *Power Distance*, and *Individualism versus Collectivism*. Hofstede (2001) defines power distance as “the relationship between a boss B and a subordinate S in a hierarchy... a measure of the interpersonal power or influence between B and S as perceived by the less powerful of the two, S” (p. 83). He also explained collectivism and individualism saying that “collectivists call for greater emotional dependence on members of their organizations” and the opposite to be true for individualists (Hofstede, 2001, p. 212). Kimbro (2011, p.175) gave an even clearer explanation by referring to the individualists as *me* and the collectivists as *we*. “In high power-distance countries there is considerable dependence of subordinates on their superiors in the form of paternalism...a paternalistic system thus leaves considerable room for corruption in the form of favoritism and nepotism” (Husted, 1999, p. 343). Cultures such as those of “Asia and Africa tend to be more collectivist” (AFS, n.d., para. 4); they place family and working community goals above the interests or desires of individuals. Whereas others like “European and Western are typically more individualist” (AFS, n.d., para. 3); they prioritize personal accomplishments even if it is at the expense of collective goals—a clear sense of competitiveness (AFS, n.d.). Fig. 1 shows a simple illustration of how high power-distance and collectivist cultures have a higher perception of corruption as opposed to low power-distance and individualistic cultures.

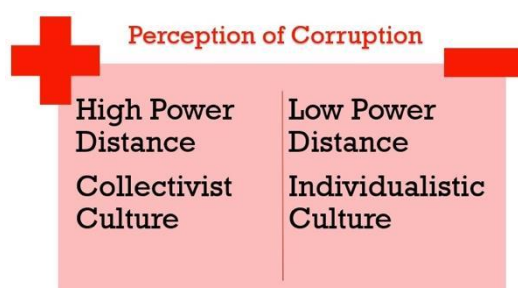


Figure 1. Impact of cultural dimensions on perception of corruption

On the other hand, Mangwana (2015) argues that “what is being called corruption should not be given a one-size-fits-all definition. The definition should have a cultural context rather than have one culture’s definition imposed upon everyone else” (para. 1). However, Alatas (1968) argues that “cultural practices are used for the purposes of corruption rather than being the cause of corruption” (p. 96). People tend to rationalize a corrupt behavior with the fact that the culture enforces it—an *apologia (excuse) for corruption*. Thompson et al. (2006) identify three misuses of the concept of culture in relation to corruption:

1. “Culture as an uncaused cause... because his culture told him to” (p. 322).
2. “Culture as an explanation of last resort... when other explanations... are inadequate” (pp. 322-323).
3. “Culture as a veto on comparison... each culture (and each subculture) is unique and can only be understood in its own terms” (p. 323).

In summary, though there are certain issues that can be considered corruption across cultures, there are other issues that while one culture considers it corruption, another culture may not consider it as such. Thus, cultural understanding becomes warranted to analyze corruption across cultures.

## **2.2 Perceptions of corruption: Shame-honor cultures vs. Guilt-Innocence cultures**

We live in a world with diverse cultures, and each culture is embedded in a worldview. While some people are not afraid to confront their mistakes, others avoid this confrontation, and yet others fear the unseen.

In cultural anthropology cultures are commonly categorized in *guilt* cultures (or guilt-innocence), *shame* cultures (or honor-shame), and *fear* cultures (or fear-power) (Nida, 1954). Though some authors dispute the validity of this categorization (e.g. Cozens, 2018), it is helpful to understand why cultures perceive corruption differently.

1. Guilt-Innocence culture: in guilt-innocence cultures people who commit mistakes seek forgiveness and are not ashamed of doing so. “A sense of guilt expresses itself as an inner feeling of failure for not having lived up to what the society or deity expects, irrespective of whether one is caught or seen” (Nida, 1954, p. 150). They differentiate between “the doer and the deed, the sinner and the sin” (Sacks, 2014, para. 5); they raise their concerns and fight for what they believe in; they are individualistic (i.e. Western).
2. Shame-Honor culture: in shame-honor cultures people who commit mistakes feel shame, “expressed as ‘I’d feel terrible if anyone saw me doing this’” (Nida, 1954, p. 150). Therefore, people’s main concern is to avoid bringing shame to the group they belong; they are collectivist (i.e. Eastern, including MENA). They would rather not speak to the truth if “the unspoken is as significant, if not more significant, than the spoken” (Lucenay, 2019, para. 7). The issue with this culture is that its people care less about right or wrong as much as they are concerned with honor and dishonor (Strutton et al. 1997).
3. Fear-Power culture: in fear-power cultures people normally belong to tribes and are afraid of the power of the spirits. They believe in evil and thus try to act in favor of gods, statues, or any other emblem of power. Fear-power cultures use those to “scare away evil forces” (Lucenay, 2019, para. 8). They very much look like collectivists and are mostly found in the East.

Research (e.g. George, 2015; Jaymee, 2019; Melgar et al. 2010) has studied the perception of corruption in relation to different aspects, like education, religion, gender, marital status, economy, and others, but most importantly the perception of corruption in relation to culture. These studies showed similar results. People who live in Eastern countries (like China) “tend to perceive higher corruption than those from other countries” (Melgar et al. 2010, p. 130) like Canada, the UK and the USA (Western). The studies also showed that the Eastern and Western cultures are not solely made of guilt, shame or fear. The East and the West have mixed cross-cultures, but with guilt-innocence controlling in the West, shame-honor controlling in the East and with more fear-power in the East than in the West. Georges (2015) illustrated the latter in a culture test he had done on over 1,200 people (see Fig. 2 below).

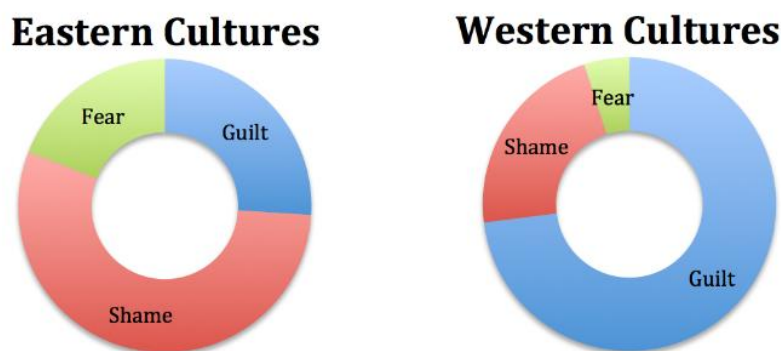


Figure 2. Global culture types: Results from a culture test (Georges, 2015).

In general, individuals in shame cultures perceive higher levels of corruption in their countries than individuals from guilt cultures (e.g. Melgar et al. 2010). While a decision to pay a bribe may not only depend on cultural values but also on personal and moral values, the “disposition to pay is likely to be positively correlated by people’s perception of corruption” (Melgar et al. 2010, p. 120). When individuals perceive a higher level of corruption they tend to justify their own corruption resulting in a vicious and reinforcing cycle of corruption.

### 2.3 Plagiarism, Wasta, and Bribery in Shame-Honor Cultures

#### 2.3.1 Plagiarism

The Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.) defines the act of plagiarizing as “to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own and to use (another's production) without crediting the source”. They follow up that the word is derived from “Latin *plagiarius*—kidnapper”.

Western cultures encourage appreciation of one’s work and that is the main reason behind copyright laws, something that Eastern cultures do not necessarily abide by, specifically the Arabs. Why is that so? Because they grow up in countries where “learning is by rote and memorization” (Fawley, 2007, p.72), caring less to who did the work. Independent thinking is highly unacceptable. If one has an idea, it has to be shared first with the family, group or tribe and then this idea would turn into a group thought. For instance, “in group-oriented societies there is also pressure to help the weaker members succeed” (Leki, 1992, p. 72). So, one is morally obligated to help a friend or member of the family and this would never be considered cheating. There is an ancient Arab saying that would translate to “one hand cannot clap alone” (Ahram, 2015). This proverb is often used to describe the bond between members of the family, minimizing individualism, and increasing the probability of committing fraudulent behaviors to serve each other.

#### 2.3.2 Wasta

Urban dictionary (2010) defined wasta as “an Arabic word that loosely translates into 'clout' or 'who you know'”. So, if you are connected or know someone who is connected then you would be able to survive, find a job, get illegal licenses, finish a long process fast, not wait in line even in the presence of queue-order machines, etc. “Wasta is a part of the regional industry and culture, and is a norm that is accepted within the Arab society” (Essays, 2018, Chapter 2, para. 1). It could mean *nepotism* in English, but would certainly go broader than giving jobs only. Cambridge dictionary (n.d.) defined Nepotism it as “the act of using your power or influence to get good jobs or unfair advantages for members of your own family”.

In order to be an intermediary, you must have influence, and in order to use this influence for doing favors, you must expect ones in return. Therefore, wasta comes with a price and “the person receiving the favor incurs a debt of gratitude which may have to be repaid in the future” (Al-bab, n.d., para. 3). Although wasta might be taken without any merit, sometimes it could just be the reason behind some people getting their rights amidst corrupt governments—a “poor people’s weapon” (Al-bab, n.d., para. 13). The Arabs call it Vitamin W or Waw (Al-Maena, 2001, para. 1), just like any other vitamin needed for survival. But the problem with this vitamin, is that if you keep taking it, you would ask for more and you would not be “addressing the underlying reasons of maladministration and, in the long run, probably

make matters worse by alleviating any pressure to reform the system” (Al-bab, n.d., para. 13). Even better, it is also referred to as “a genie in a bottle, but instead of three wishes you can get as many as you wish!” (Alho, 2015, para. 11). When wasta becomes so “ingrained that it morphs into family favoritism or expresses itself through bribery, it becomes corruption” (Zgheib, 2019, para. 8).

On the other hand, wasta is not limited to Arabs alone (Zgheib, 2019). Alho (2015), a Finnish author, explains that “the phenomenon of ‘who you know’ can be found everywhere in the world” (para. 3). However, she adds that in Finland, asking for favors specially to get jobs is unacceptable and that would be the main reason why Finland ranks on top of the least corrupt countries.

### **2.3.3 Bribery**

Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) defines a bribe as “money or favor given or promised in order to influence the judgment or conduct of a person in a position of trust”. Our world is filled with bribery, but in some places more than others. Hooker (2008) asks, “Is it that some cultures are ‘less ethical’ than others?... every culture has its own characteristic way of breaking down” (p. 1). Bribery in the West is corrupt because it drives people away from regulations set by the government; however, it became the norm in the East—especially in the MENA region—because governments do not exist to start with. Building relationships takes time; expediting this process is done through bribing. Some cultures, especially Asian, expect gifts in return for actions. For example, gift giving is expected when negotiating new business partners (Anderson, 2012). It is a norm in the East, a form of trust and a shortcut to gain this trust. “Japan is a strongly relationship-based culture in which interpersonal relations are based on maintaining harmony” (Hooker, 2008, p. 3). On the other hand, bribery in the west is “buying a relationship until the next bribe is required” (p. 4).

In summary, in shame-honor cultures plagiarism might be considered a moral obligation, especially when helping a friend or member of the family; wasta—using “who you know” to get something done—is an acceptable common practice; and bribery is frequently used to fill the void of inefficient governments and to build relationships.

## **III. METHODOLOGY**

Since the research questions of this study required to delve into people’s stories (Silverman, 2000) attempting to understand the issues from the perspectives of the participants (Hatch, 2002) a qualitative method was chosen. The participants signed an ‘Informed Consent Form’ (Berg, 2007) in which they were guaranteed complete privacy and confidentiality as well as they declared restraining from publicly disclosing any information revealed in the focus group.

### **3.1 Research Design**

The research design chosen for this research is the focus group methodology. “Focus groups are an excellent technique to capture users’ perceptions, feelings, and suggestions about a topic, product or issue” (Jones et al. 2018, p. 98). This methodology was selected for allowing participants to have active roles and providing opportunities to group interaction as they describe real-life phenomena (Kulavuz-Onal, 2011; Liamputtong, 2011).

### **3.2 Data Collection, Participants, and Protocol**

The data collection method was a ‘friendship focus group’ (Motivate Design, 2015). This method was chosen because of the need for acquaintanceship, diversity of opinions, and openness (Jones et. al. 2018). The fact that the participants were friends provided opportunity for openness and the spontaneous sharing of diverse opinions.

The participants of the focus group were 11 MBA students taking a course on corruption and integrity in a university located in Beirut, Lebanon. This groups was chosen for their friendship, nationalities (MENA region), and the fact that they were introduced to the issues of culture and corruption during the semester. Their demographics are shown in Table 1.



**Table 1. Demographics**

Demographic	Group Composition
Nationalities	7 Lebanese (64%), 3 Egyptian (27%), 1 Algerian (9%)
Professions	6 accountants (55%), 2 managers (18%), 1 auditor (9%), 1 software developer (9%), 1 teacher (9%)
Gender	6 female (55%), 5 male (45%)
Age	Average: 28

A Focus Group Protocol was used (Patton, 2002). The Protocol included things to remember (e.g. things to take to the focus group, using probing questions during the discussion) and the outline. The outline contained the program to be followed: seek informed consent from participants, start recording, assure complete confidentiality, welcome and thank you, introduction of topic, focus group guidelines, introductory question, topic questions, thank participants, and offer the possibility of sharing the summary of the findings. The data was collected on June 29, 2017, and the focus group lasted one and a half hours. The discussion was recorded, and it was fully transcribed for later analysis (Flick, 2006).

### 3.3. Data Analysis

The data was analyzed by adapting Thomas' (2011) *constant comparative method: eliciting themes*. This method seeks to develop themes and categories that best describe the data by comparing the interview transcript, notes taken, and the audio recording. Table 2 shows the steps and their descriptions.

**Table 2. Data analysis**

Step	Description
1	Examine all the data: read interview transcripts, notes, and listen to audio recordings.
2	Make two copies of all data and keep them separate: raw and working data files. Raw data you don't want to lose or corrupt.
3	List of temporary categories: read the "working" data highlighting parts that seem important. Listen again to the audio file. As you proceed, you will get an impression of important ideas or subjects that are recurring. These can be called temporary categories. Make a list of them.
4	Draw up a grid: with the temporary categories on the left and page references to where the constructs are evidenced on the right. Make notes and observations on the grid as you do this.
5	Counter-examples: get rid of any temporary category that does not seem to have been reinforced in the rest of the data. Don't delete that actual data itself, though—it may form an important counter-example for the general themes that are emerging. Highlight these counter-examples in a different color in your working data records and keep a separate list of them.
6	Second-order constructs: from the second reading, come up with second-order constructs that seem to be a good "fit" with your data. These second-order constructs should make a good job summarizing the important themes in your data.
7	Themes: look through once more, refining these second-order constructs now as marker posts for the organization of your data. Once you are satisfied that these capture the essence of your data, label these as final themes.
8	Think about the themes: how do they seem to be connecting together? What matches with what? Are there any unanimous areas of agreement? Are there any contradictions or paradoxes?
9	Mapping: find ways to map your themes.
10	Quotations: select good quotations or sections from your work to illustrate the themes.

Adapted from Thomas, 2011, pp. 171-172..

## IV. RESULTS

### 4.1 The Role of Culture in Normalizing Corruption

Research question 1, “What is the role of culture in allowing and normalizing corruption?” was addressed by the first question of the focus group, “What makes something right or wrong?” The key cultural theme that emerged was *relationships*. Since honor-shame cultures are collectivistic, upholding relationships is honorable and therefore the right thing to do (Lichtenwalter, 2014). The participants mentioned that relationships in different arenas (family, religion, society) are the sources that determine the rules of right and wrong that are learned in life (see Fig. 3).

According to the participants of our study, keeping relationships is the honorable and therefore the right thing to do (in shame-honor cultures). Therefore, we conclude that culture may contribute to normalizing corruption when the value of keeping a relationship is considered above other values such as lying or honesty or fairness.

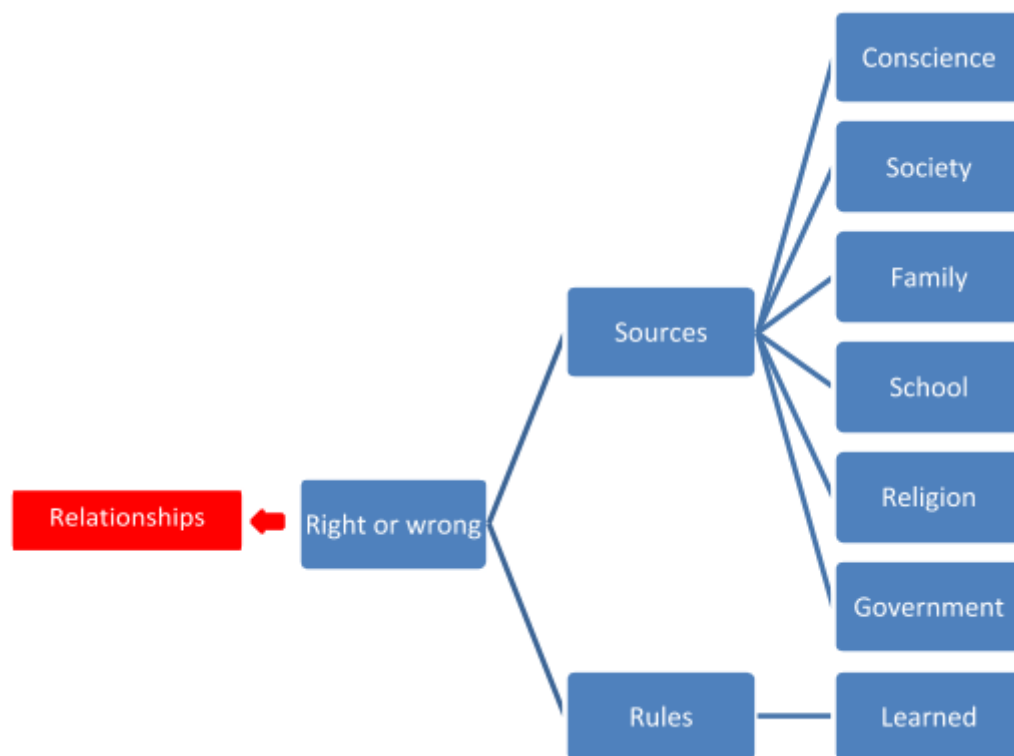


Figure 3. Sources and rules of right and wrong

### 4.2 Perceptions of corruption: Shame-honor cultures vs. Guilt-Innocence cultures

To answer research question 2, “Do ‘shame cultures’ perceive corruption differently than ‘guilt cultures?’” the topic of lying was chosen. Focus group question 2 was “Do you think less of person who told a lie? Is it shameful that your uncle told you a lie?” The answers revolved around whether lying was shameful or honorable (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Lying in shame-honor cultures*

Theme	Categories	Concepts	Sample Snippet
Relationships	Shameful	If a habit	When it's a habit, when you lie all the time, it's not healthy (FN, p. 3).
		If high status (pastor)	If you know that someone told you or someone else a lie, then maybe you would be affected and you would think less of that person. For example, if let's say your pastor tells a lie (FN, p. 4).
		Absolute: no big/small (religion)	For others like my family, I have a biblical background, evangelical background, we focus on all these things, like there's no small lie or small sin or big lie or big sin. It's all the same to God (FN, p. 3).
		Punishment (family)	It all comes back to the way we were raised. For example, now with my own children, if two of them were fighting and I didn't reach any like "who started the fight", or "who created the problem", and my investigation didn't result in anything, then I will punish both, for them to learn to really say the truth. "Ok, I did something wrong". If he confesses, he won't be punished. But if both didn't confess, both will be punished. So, they have to say the truth just to save themselves from being punished (FN, p. 3).
	Honor	To help	If I need to lie to help Rana, then it's ok (FN, p. 3).
		To gain	The more you can lie to gain more, of anything, maybe money maybe something else, they say you are good (FN, p. 3).
		To save/preserve/avoid (religion)	Islam says, there's a verse that says "if you want to lie, sometimes you can". That's why some people lie in certain situations. They say "this doesn't affect our lives, because we had to lie or we had to say something". That's why when you talk to Muslims they will tell you "it's ok, this is not lying, I just wanted to preserve or avoid something else (FN, p. 4).
		To "balance" (religion)	Some religions don't concentrate on these things; they just say "do good to people and that can balance your bad things, your lies". You can say, I did good here and bad here, it's one for one (FN, p. 3).



If convincing	There is something cultural, I have lived for a long time. If you can persuade the other person of your lie, you are stronger, you are convincing. That's why it's hard to stop it (FN, p. 3).
Culture ("salt of men")	We have an old saying like, "lying is the salt of men". It means "lying is something good for men" (FN, p. 3).

The key theme again was *relationships* as depicted in the following transcript snippet.

Here in Lebanon it's either on a *personal* basis or not. We don't have the concept of lying. The more you can lie to save yourself, and the more you can lie to gain more, of anything, maybe money maybe something else, *they say* you are good. There's no concept of a lie or cheating (FN, p. 3).

Our data appears to suggest that shame cultures perceive corruption differently than guilt cultures. In guilt-innocence cultures lying (used as a proxy of corruption) is considered wrong in most cases (e.g. Falbo, 2017; Faulkner, 2007). However, for the participants of our study (shame-honor cultures), lying may not be considered wrong if it is the honorable thing to do. Our participants seem to resonate with Pryce-Jones (2002): "Lying and cheating in the Arab world is not really a moral matter but a method of safeguarding honor and status, avoiding shame, and at all times exploiting possibilities" (p. 41). Besides, it appears that religion plays a role in the acceptance of lying. It may be accepted when used for saving someone or something, or for avoiding harm; and when religion allows to compensate it with good actions.

### 4.3 Plagiarism, Wasta, and Bribery in Shame-Honor Cultures

In this section we will present the data that answers research question 3, "To what extent do 'shame culture' individuals accept plagiarism, wasta, and bribery?" This section is divided in the three topics of the question.

#### 4.3.1 Plagiarism

The issue of plagiarism was addressed by focus group questions 3 to 5. Question 3, "What reasons would you give for helping (or not helping) a friend during an exam?" resulted in a heated discussion between those who believed helping a friend during an exam was cheating—and therefore wrong—and those who believed that it was not cheating but rather truly helping. The categories and concepts are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. *Reasons for helping/no helping during an exam*

Theme	Categories	Concepts	Sample Snippet
Relationships	Helping	If harmless	If someone else is doing something that hurts others, yes you should report it. But if he's doing something that doesn't hurt others, he's doing to benefit himself, then why should I harm him and teach him and report him (FN, p. 5).
		Not responsible to teach	Actually, we are not here to judge others. They are responsible for their own choices. We are not here to judge others, or to teach them how to do the right thing (FN, p. 5).
		Helping is good, cheating is bad	We all agree that cheating is forbidden, against God's will. But here we are saying if you are helping our friend (FN, p. 4).

Not helping	Slippery slope	I won't help him. Because I believe cheating is wrong. If you are helping the person, you are helping him to cheat, in small things. And then when he grows up he will seek for help for cheating in bigger things (FN, p. 4).
	Illegal	We are here to get a degree, to move further, and I used to give lots of hints. One day a close friend caught me cheating, and she gave me an example. When she was presenting her terminal exam, a guy asked her for help and she refused. He asked why. She answered "it's a combination of many things, it's not only lying. It's also being illegal (FN, p. 5).
	Unfair (scholarship)	He's getting higher GPA, later he can apply for a scholarship, and according to the grade they will choose the person... He's stealing the chance of the hard-working students (FN, p. 6).
	Upset	If during an exam, you saw someone cheating, what would you do? You spent 10-20 hours studying, and this guy copy-paste from his source and gets the same grade. It happened to me and I felt very upset (FN, p. 5).
	Bad reputation	He's harming every student in the university. Because he doesn't know anything, when he goes to a job they will see that he's not good (FN, p. 6).

The key theme of *relationships* is vividly described by this transcript snippet which was coded "helping is good, cheating is bad".

We all agree that cheating is forbidden, against God's will. But here we are saying if you are helping our friend. For example, if someone studies so hard for an exam, he just lost the point to answer the question that has a high scale in the exam. He studied, but he actually forgot, he got stressed and he forgot the idea. If someone helps him to just give him a hint, I'm not saying to give him the whole answer, just in order to proceed, not to lose all the grade, in order to get at least half the grade. That's actually not cheating, that could be helping your friend during the exam. But you cannot open the paper and just copy/paste, that's forbidden. So we should accept him and try to help him. Not teach him how to cheat, not tell him to always depend on your friend during exams, but help him during the exam (FN, p. 4).

The question of whether to help a friend during an exam was followed up by the question, "should you report it?" to the professor. The answers revolved around whether reporting it would hurt others or not. Again, relationships are at the core of the analysis. If it does not hurt others, there is no need to report it; but if it hurts others, it should be reported. Besides, the participants mentioned that it should not be reported to avoid harm, and because we should not judge others. On the other hand, participants who believed it should be reported mentioned it would be an opportunity to teach (and help) the wrongdoer as well as others.

The issue of plagiarism was also analyzed by focus group question 4, "Is it shameful to deny helping a friend who asks you to help him/her during an exam?" The distance of the relationship was the key theme that emerged. If the relationship is close, then it is not shameful; but if the relationship is distant, then it is shameful to deny helping

someone who asks for help during an exam. Participants also mentioned that it is not shameful because cheating is wrong (absolute), mentioned strategies to announce it before or after the exam. On the other hand, other participants felt that denying help is shameful and selfish.

The discussion triggered a follow up question, “Is it shameful to deny helping a friend who asks you to help him/her during an exam *if you previously helped?*” While some believed it was not shameful, the majority believed denying help is shameful because the relationship would be affected, we should not be selfish, and because it is not cheating but helping. As a result, the participants developed a distinction between helping and cheating. While denying cheating is not shameful, denying helping is always shameful. The following transcript snippet makes the point very clear.

It is always shameful to deny helping others. But here the word “help” is not used in the right context. Giving answers and helping are two different things. Why are we using the word help in the wrong context? Giving answers to people is not helping them. Not giving the answers to people is helping them become more responsible people (FN, p. 7).

The issue of plagiarism was closed by focus group question 5, “Is it right to answer a homework using copied/pasted information from internet without citing the source? Why or why not?” The participants agreed that copying and pasting information from internet without citing the source is wrong. The reasons given revolved around the fact that someone worked hard for it, we should respect copyrights, doing it is stealing, and you would harm yourself because you will not learn.

According to our data, shame-honor culture individuals accept plagiarism only under certain conditions. First, helping (or not helping) a friend during an exam may be accepted when considered *helping* and at the same time would not harm others. Likewise, there is no need to report it if it does not hurt others; but if hurts others, it should be reported. On the other hand, participants believed helping a friend during an exam would not be acceptable if considered unfair, or illegal; if it would help someone enter a slippery slope of cheating; and if it would make someone upset, or create bad reputation.

Second, plagiarism may be accepted when the distance of the relationship is distant. Participants said that it is shameful to deny helping a friend who asks you to help him/her during an exam if the relationship is distant. Moreover, *if you previously helped* that friend, the majority believed denying help is shameful because the relationship would be affected. However, it would not be shameful when involving two people within a close relationship.

#### **4.3.2 Wasta**

Wasta was explored in two questions of the focus group. First, question 6, “What is wasta?”, intended to give participants a common understanding of the term wasta. One participant said, “Wasta is when you ask a person in power to help you achieve something you can’t get it” (FN, p. 9). The answers revolved around using someone else’s authority and power to help you reach a specific goal or objective. “In Lebanon wasta is popular and very often used. For example, favoring your relative on people having more credentials for a certain job is considered wasta” (FN, p. 9). Another participant explained that this example refers to the “negative sense” of the term. He said,

The word wasta is often taken in a negative sense. For example, there is a job opportunity in one of the reputable firms, and you and another candidate got to the last interview; but because you know someone in power in this firm you will be chosen over the next candidate regardless if he is more qualified for the job (FN, p. 9).

In the western world wasta is frequently translated as nepotism. Again, we see the recurring theme of using one’s *relationships* involved in the framework of reference.

Second, question 7 explored the cultural aspect of wasta: “Is it shameful to deny helping a relative or friend who needs your recommendation to secure a job?” The key theme that emerged was *saving face*. Denying wasta to secure a job is shameful when the person will lose face. For example, lying on a person’s qualifications to secure wasta is shameful because an otherwise trustworthy person loses face. On the other hand, denying wasta to secure a job is not shameful if the person can save face by avoiding disclosure of the negative answer. Table 5 presents the categories, concepts, and sample snippets. Clearly, the theme save face is closely related to the recurring theme of *relationships*.

Table 5. *Denying wasta*

Theme	Categories	Concepts	Sample Snippet
Save face	Shameful	Lose face	Giving wrong information and lying to help your relative get a job then of course it is shameful. Giving your opinion in someone's abilities wrongly and you are known to be a trustworthy person then you will cause problems to the people who asked for your recommendation (FN, p. 9).
	Not shameful	Save face	I don't see it shameful to deny it but no need to declare it for the sake of the other person, or depends on the situation (FN, p. 9).
		Best candidate	If the recommendation is a frank one and will not mislead the party that you are contacting then it is fine (FN, p. 9).
		Not best candidate	It is not shameful do deny helping if that person is not the most qualified one among those applying for the job (FN, p. 9).

#### 4.3.3 Bribery

The third corrupted action analyzed was bribery. The topic generated a heated discussion among participants as they wrestled with 1) giving a bribe, 2) refusing to give a bribe, and 3) refusing to receive a bribe.

The first perspective to analyze bribery was from the standpoint of the person *giving a bribe*. In question 8 of the FG participants were asked, "Is it right to secure a business opportunity (e.g. government license) through giving a monetary gift to the person who would authorize the license?" Two themes emerged: relationships and government effectiveness. Giving a bribe was considered right if it does not negatively affect the relationship. But if giving a bribe affects the relationship, then it is considered wrong. Besides, it is considered wrong if the government agent is doing his job. If the agent is not doing his job, then it would be considered right. Table 6 presents the concepts and categories for each theme with some transcript snippets.

Table 6. *Bribery giving*

Theme	Categories	Concepts	Sample Snippet
Relationships	Not affected	If win-win	I would do it under one case. If it's a win-win situation (FN, p. 10).
		If harmless	If it's hurting no one in between, then I would do it. Why not? (FN, p. 10).
		To accelerate procedures	In Lebanon sometimes you have to bribe to get your papers done. Bribery in terms of accelerating the procedures is fine but not bribing to gain an unlawful benefit (FN, p. 10).
	Affected	Crime partner	Well, ethically speaking we should not encourage such a behavior cause we will be partners in the crime (FN, p. 10).

		Corrupts the receiver	I would say gifts are not bad but they lead in a bad way when those who receive the gifts get the impression where “we will not do a good job until we get the gift” (FN, p. 10).
		Corruption is absolute	In concept or in general it is wrong, and there is no grey area in the subject (FN, p. 10).
Government effectiveness	Absent	Obligated	We live in a world where you must give something for someone to authorize you a license. It is not right to do bribery, but there are cases where you don’t have any choice either you pay or you will not get it (FN, p. 10). Unfortunately this is the way people are dealing with each other and we are obliged to bribe people to get our work done (FN, p. 10).
		Standard procedure	From my personal experience you won’t get things done without these type of things. They will keep telling you it’s being studied and where the documents should take like a week, they will take a minimum of 4 months if you don’t “encourage them” (FN, p. 10).
	Present	Not right	If the government is doing its job on time, prompt, as they should, then it would be wrong (FN, p. 10).

The second perspective to analyze bribery was from the position of *refusing to give a bribe*. In question 9 of the FG participants were asked, “Is it shameful to deny giving a bribe when it’s requested from you?” There was agreement between the participants that refusing to give a bribe is not shameful. They mentioned two reasons: because refusing to give a bribe is based on values, and because it would make them proud rather than shameful. However, they pointed to the fact that “your paper will not be processed quickly” (FN, p. 10).

The third perspective on bribery focused on *refusing to receive a bribe*. It was framed from a third person perspective in question 10 as, “Do you think less of a person who rejects a bribe for doing his job (e.g. releasing a container from the port)?” After a quick answer, this question mutated into two stories which generated a long debate. The short answer was that participants did not think less of a person who refuses to receive a bribe for doing his job. They said, “Bravo. He is gonna be firm” (FN, p. 10), “He’s going to be respected” (FN, p. 10), and “I will send him a personal gift for his honesty” (FN, p. 10).

As facilitator of the FG, then I (Carlos) shared the story of my conversation with an MBA graduate who works for a shipping company. I mentioned that I asked him whether he faced issues of bribery as he had to release containers from the vessels through customs. His answer was, “when the guys of the customs office expect a bribe, they know I will never pay. And they release my containers within 1 or 2 days. They do their job as they are supposed to. But there are some customers who were offering a bribe to me just to process their shipments faster. And I say: ‘no, I don’t accept bribes, I will do my job because that’s my duty’” (FN, p. 10). I told participants that this person decided not to give nor receive bribes. That when I asked him how this is possible, he answered: “this is how I have been raised. *I believe the change needs to start in me*” (FN, p. 11). Then I asked participants, “What do you think about the ideas of this colleague?” The debate was thus switched to whether change can start in me or not. Participants were divided between an optimistic and a pessimistic view (see Table 7).

**Table 7.** *The change starts in me: is it possible?*

Theme	Categories	Concepts	Sample Snippet
Change starts in me	Optimistic (yes)	Expanding effect	It can happen. We start from ourselves, and it will proceed to our environment, then our society, then our country (FN, p. 11).
		Regardless of legality	If you need to fix the corruption, you should start by yourself, if there's a law or if there's no law (FN, p. 11).
	Pessimistic (no)	Others won't follow	If you start by yourself but others are not acting like you, you will not reach anywhere (FN, p. 11).
		Unfair government	There are two sides. If you are playing fair and the other side is not playing fair, which is the government, how can you make it fair when playing with someone who is not fair? The government will be affected by you? (FN, p. 12).
		Impossible	If the worker tells you "give me a bribe and I will finish it in 1 or 2 days". You say "no, I won't give you a bribe". He won't throw you the paper in your face? Go and fight the government to do your paper? (FN, p. 12).

While discussing this issue, one of the participants mentioned the interesting fact that when some Lebanese people travel to another country they don't throw garbage on the road; but when they reach back Lebanon they just start throwing. I resonated with that and added that while some people fulfill all traffic laws when visiting or living in the US and Canada, they don't fulfill them back home in Lebanon. The participants explained the situation by stating that in Lebanon there's no accountability, no enforcement and no punishment. However, in other countries there's a respect for the law and for people. For example, one participant said:

Like yesterday I was driving with my friends, I reached a point where there was traffic and there was an exit, so I stopped because someone will come from the road. And my friend said "ah ok, you can drive like this, you can drive anywhere". Ok, this is no logic. Then when the traffic went in front of me, I looked back in my mirror I saw the one after me, he just closed the road that I was keeping open. Nobody is telling, "no, don't do like this", there's no punishment. Because they don't feel the law. Ok you pay a penalty, but they don't feel the law (FN, p. 11).

In summary, it appears that in shame-honor cultures bribery may be accepted in some circumstances. A bribe may be given if relationships would not be negatively affected and if the government is ineffective. However, refusing to give a bribe is not shameful because it is based on values, and because it would make the person proud rather than shameful. Similarly, participants did not think less of a person who refuses to receive a bribe for doing his job. Finally, when confronted with the idea that *change needs to start in me*, participants were divided between optimistic and pessimistic views.

The FG ended with participants concluding that "we should stop creating excuses for anything that we do wrong" (FN, p. 12), "we should be honest with ourselves" (FN, p. 12), and "we should not rationalize" (FN, p. 12). Being honest



with ourselves implies thinking about our values, what is right and wrong, and creating boundaries for acceptable behavior. If we have boundaries, then we can be honest with those boundaries.

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Cultures differ in value scales which help shape understandings of right and wrong. Thus, the role of culture in normalizing corruption demands appropriate cultural contextualization (e.g. Gentile, 2010; Mangwana, 2015).

### 5.1 Conclusions

According to our data, in shame-honor cultures keeping relationships is the honorable and therefore the right thing to do. Therefore, we conclude that culture may contribute to normalizing corruption when the value of keeping a relationship is considered above other values such as lying or honesty or fairness.

In general, *shame-honor* cultures (east) perceive corruption differently than *guilt-innocence* cultures (west). For example, while in guilt-innocence cultures values are predominantly determined by rules, in shame-honor cultures values are determined by relationships. In guilt cultures, responsibility lies in oneself and decisions are taken in relation to myself. However, in shame cultures, decisions are taken in relation to the group (or important others) and responsibility lies on the group. In guilt cultures people normally ask, “is behavior fair?” But in shame cultures people ask, “is behavior shameful?” While in guilt cultures misbehavior creates a stain in deeds, in shame cultures the stain is in one’s character. Finally, whereas the results of wrongdoing make individuals “feel bad” in guilt cultures, it makes them “look bad” and lose face in shame cultures. Table 8 summarizes this comparison.

Table 8. *Guilt-innocence vs. Shame-honor cultures.*

Guilt-Innocence (West)		Shame-Honor (East)
Rules	Values	Relationship
Me	Decisions	Group (important others)
Oneself	Responsibility	Others
Fair?	Behavior	Shameful?
Deeds	Stain	Character
Feel bad	Results of wrongdoing	Look bad (lose face)

In shame-honor cultures, individuals tend to accept plagiarism, wasta, and bribery as long as it keeps the relationships. Plagiarism may be accepted if 1) it does not harm others, and 2) if it helps someone. Wasta may be accepted if the person helped deserves it. However, in the marketplace wasta is widely used even when it’s not deserved. Bribery may be accepted if 1) it is a win-win situation, 2) if it does not harm others, 3) if the government does not do its job, and 4) if it is considered as a standard procedure. In general, people tend to misbehave when there is a lack of accountability, enforcement, and punishment. However, people feel proud of individuals who refuse to give a bribe when requested from them. Though some participants are pessimistic, others believe that the change can start at the personal level; change can start with me. Similarly, research in Arab countries recommend that ethics efforts should emphasize both regulation and the ethics of individuals (e.g. Abdelzaher and Abdelzaher, 2017).

Finally, our data suggests that religion may play a significant role in understandings of right and wrong.

## 5.2 Recommendations

We recommend individuals trying to understand corruption in other cultures to withhold judgment, and learn about other cultures. With appropriate worldview understanding, assumptions and questions can be revisited.

We recommend individuals to think through their own values, boundaries, what is right and wrong, and to be honest with themselves. Our data suggests that even in contexts where corruption is pervasive, change can start at the individual level.

Since our participants were all from honor-shame cultures, we recommend further studies to explore the issues of this study with individuals from guilt-innocence and fear-power cultures. It would be interesting to have a focus group where individuals from the three types of cultures can freely share, discuss, and compare their ideas.

We used lying, bribery, wasta, and plagiarism as proxies for corruption. Future studies can use other forms of corruption, such as extortion, embezzlement, money laundering, misuse of power, and political repression, among others.

## APPENDIX FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

- Introductory question
  - a) Tell me your names.
- Topic questions

### Preliminary questions

- 1) What makes something right or wrong?
- 2) Do you think less of person who told a lie? Is it shameful that your uncle told you a lie?

### Plagiarism

- 3) What reasons would you give for helping (or not helping) a friend during an exam?
- 4) Is it shameful to deny helping a friend who asks you to help him/her during an exam?
- 5) Is it right to answer a homework using copied/pasted information from internet without citing the source? Why or why not?

### Wasta

- 6) What is wasta?
- 7) Is it shameful to deny helping a relative or friend who needs your recommendation to secure a job?

### Bribery

- 8) Is it right to secure a business opportunity (e.g. government license) through giving a “monetary gift” to the person who would authorize the license?
- 9) Is it shameful to deny giving a bribe when it’s requested from you?
- 10) Do you think less of a person who rejects a bribe for doing his job (e.g. releasing a container from the port)?
- 11) Anything else you would like to add? What should I have asked you that I didn’t think to ask?

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