

Stories of grey zone between corruption and whistleblowing: insights from the Italian public administration

Stories of grey zone

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Abstract

Purpose – The literature on corruption and whistleblowing is increasing over the past years. However, the authors contend that individual reactions to a corrupt proposal could differ from the mentioned behaviours. On these grounds, the authors contend that a “grey zone” between accepting corruption and whistleblowing does exist. This paper aims to explore what are the behaviours defining this “grey zone” as nuanced behaviours adopted to react to a corrupt proposal.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors draw from Miceli and Near’s process of whistleblowing to open the scope for the comprehension of grey behaviours in the decision-making process following to a triggering event. The authors adopted a qualitative and explorative approach by interviewing 27 Italian public servants through open questions and storytelling to explore what kind of behaviours could define the grey zone.

Findings – The findings unveil nuanced behaviours in the grey zone configuring neither as corruption nor whistleblowing, ranging from ignoring the corrupt proposal to explicit contraposition. Also, they reveal different social and individual outcomes affecting future relationships in organizations. The findings allow to extend Miceli and Near’s process of whistleblowing to the wider spectrum of response behaviours to triggering events such as receiving or assisting to a corrupt proposal.

Research limitations/implications – Limitations might be recognized in that the situations detected could be only a part of a possible wider “grey zone”. However, the authors believe that the findings could encourage future research to continue exploring the grey zone to enrich its comprehension. Also, the paper offers useful and interesting insights on an undebated issue that has a prominent value under the theoretical, practical, social and policymaking perspectives.



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Practical implications – From the practical and policymaking perspective, the advancement of a debate contending the existence of a grey zone made of nuanced behaviours between corruption and whistleblowing could provide support both for organizations and policymakers to a better understanding of individual behaviours and improving actions and policies to prevent corruption and encourage whistleblowing.

Originality/value – As the authors are at least unaware of studies debating on the grey zone with specific reference to corruption and whistleblowing, the paper advances a discussion on the grey zone between corruption and whistleblowing as a continuum of nuanced behaviours that could provide a starting point for further fine-grained analyses.

Keywords Corruption, Whistleblowing, Grey zone, Public sector

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

Corruption represents a critical social issue considering the impact it has on the economic and social life of countries (Anand *et al.*, 2004; Ashforth and Anand, 2003; Thomas *et al.*, 2004; Trevino and Brown, 2004). This is particularly true when considering the public sector, where the interests involved are much more than those of a limited private audience, but rather are those of multiple stakeholders interested in the public benefit (Knott, 2011; Svara, 2014). The literature has mostly debated on how scandals related to public servants' corruption, opportunistic behaviours and rent-seeking, increasingly characterized the public administration (Liu and Mikesell, 2014; Knott, 2011; Knott and Miller, 2006; Mengistu and Vogel, 2006; Shaw, 2013).

In this paper, we do not focus on the person who is doing a corrupt act, but rather on the addressee of the corrupt proposal to understand what are the possible reactions to this proposal. Also, we do not limit our analysis to events of corruption in their strict sense (e.g. bribery), but we consider also events that are close to be considered as corruption (e.g. administrative corruption) and events involving people as witnesses (observers of wrongdoing, see Miceli and Near, 1992) to these kinds of events.

As consequences to the tentative of corruption, the literature has always highlighted two possible behaviours as follows: accepting a corrupt proposal (thus becoming “corrupted”) or doing the whistleblower (thus denouncing the tentative of corruption) (Pinto *et al.*, 2008). Instead, we contend that whistleblowing and corruption may represent two opposites extremes of a possible continuum made of nuanced behaviours that could constitute a “grey zone”. This concept is widely adopted in traditional criminal literature (Allum *et al.*, 2019; Canonico *et al.*, 2012, 2017, 2019). As stated by many scholars (Sciarrone, 2019; Very and Wilson, 2012) the grey zone may represent the possible link between crime and the legitimate economy. As Vander Beken and Van Daele (2008, p. 740) argue, “legal and illegal activities do not operate on parallel and distinct levels, but rather they are connected and interdependent”. In this sense, corruption and whistleblowing may represent two different and opposite behaviours coherent with the idea of crime and legitimate economy and so following Land *et al.* (2014, p. 234), the “grey zone” could be defined as an area “where the boundary between acceptable behaviour and misconduct is unclear”. Indeed, for different reasons, people might react to a tentative of corruption with nuanced behaviours that could be more or less close to the acceptance of a corrupt proposal or the whistleblowing, but that not necessarily are perfectly identifiable as the one or the other. Not all people are equally susceptible to corrupt practices through the pathways of socialization. For instance, newcomers in organizations usually bring an unalloyed perspective to organizations in many organizational matters. As they are not hardwired to the firm's routines, it is likely

that some might refrain or resist from becoming a part of corrupt activities even in the presence of strong organizational factors (Manz *et al.*, 2005).

On these grounds, this study aims to explore what are the behaviours that could contribute to defining the “grey zone” between accepting corruption and whistleblowing as reactions to a corruption proposal. In our study, we define the “grey zone” as the area that moves from accepting to denouncing corruption, made of nuances characterizing individual behaviours and reactions to the tentative of corruption. More specifically, the research question driving the present study is: what are the possible behaviours and reactions to episodes of corruption defining the grey zone between corruption and whistleblowing?

As we are at least unaware of studies on this domain, to reach the aim of the study we explored this issue by interviewing 27 Italian public servants attending an executive Master in Public Management, employing open questions and storytelling.

In so doing, the study has interesting contributions and implications under many perspectives. From a theoretical point of view, the paper contributes to the debate in the literature concerning the “grey zone”, like this concept, although somehow discussed in other fields (Sciarrone, 2019; Land *et al.*, 2014), has never been debated with reference to corruption and whistleblowing. More specifically, we provide a model describing the process from the triggering event to the social and individual outcomes that is an adaptation of Miceli and Near’s (1992) process of whistleblowing.

From the practical and policymaking perspective, the advancement of a debate contending the existence of a grey zone made of nuanced behaviours between corruption and whistleblowing could provide support both for organizations and policymakers to a better understanding of individual behaviours and improving actions and policies to prevent corruption and encourage whistleblowing. Additionally, by setting out corruption in the public sector, the paper suggests that improving internal control measures, sound governance and reducing unethical behaviour may support also accountants and auditors in public organizations in being able to report with integrity, thus increasing accountability and transparency towards the public interest. Indeed, accountants and auditors are more likely to witness misconduct (especially those accounting-related), thereby a further understanding of grey behaviours gives them the opportunity to improve the detection of misbehaviours (Lee and Xiao, 2018).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 assesses previous literature on corruption and whistleblowing, provides a description of Miceli and Near’s process on which we draw from, and explains the reasons behind the present study. Section 3 describes the research design. Section 4 shows the findings emerging from the interviews, while Section 5 provides the discussion. Section 6 will provide concluding remarks, contributions and implications of the study, and some suggestions for future research directions.

2. Understanding the grey zone between corruption and whistleblowing

In this paper, as mentioned above, we do not focus on the person who is doing a corrupt act, but rather on the addressee of the corrupt proposal to understand what are the possible reactions to this proposal.

Research to date is plenty of studies discussing and analysing the behaviours that people might adopt when receiving a corrupt proposal: accepting corruption or blow the whistle (Pinto *et al.*, 2008). Thus, academics have mainly focussed their analyses on the forms of corruption or on the ways and mechanisms through which people come to blow the whistle.

A significant amount of research has focussed on the aspects concerning corruption. Corruption is emerging as a central issue in the management literature as the recent corporate scandals raised the awareness about the effects that it produces, both on the

economic and social point of view (Anand *et al.*, 2004; Ashforth and Anand, 2003; Liu *et al.*, 2017; Manz *et al.*, 2005; Thomas *et al.*, 2004; Trevino and Brown, 2004). A widely acknowledged definition of corruption is: “acts in which the power of the public office is used for personal gain” (Jain, 2001, p. 73).

In this regard, scandals of corruption in the public sector are always at the centre of the debate, considered as episodes that might destroy citizens’ trust in leadership and system legitimacy (Yeboah-Assiamah, 2017). Yeboah-Assiamah (2017, p. 546) asserts that corruption in the public sector “is complex in nature, its causes and effects appear to be in constant flux and closely interwoven”, and that, following Shah (2007), it might be of four different types as follows:

- (1) *Bureaucratic corruption*, which consists of public officials misusing their authority to solicit bribes and kickbacks in return for individual gains;
- (2) *Grand corruption*, consisting of public resources, which are either mismanaged or stolen by public employees;
- (3) *State or regulatory capture* consisting of public officials and political elites get ensnared by the global capitalists or buoyant private sector trying to influence public decision-making; and
- (4) *patronage or clientelism* consisting of public officials doing favours in the interest of people whom they have some form of affiliation to public officials.

However, in studying corruption, two levels of analysis are prominent, namely, individual and organizational. At an individual level, corruption might generally be defined as the misuse of a position of authority for private or personal benefit (Doh *et al.*, 2003; Shleifer and Vishny, 1993; Tanzi, 1998), where misuse typically constitutes a breach of legal norms (Johnston, 1986; Kaufmann, 1997). Corruption is expected to occur where someone has control over economic benefits and costs and, thus, the potential for gaining economic rents, and where persons in positions of authority have discretion over the allocation of such benefits and costs (Mauro, 1996). On this ground, corruption reflects rational and self-interested behaviours by persons using their discretion to direct allocations to themselves or to other social actors who offer rewards in return for favourable discretionary treatment (Rose-Ackerman, 2001). Thus, corruption might be considered as a behaviour adopted in situations where it is possible gaining benefits through the use of discretionary power (Klitgaard, 1988).

At an organizational level, the literature focussed on how organizational settings can generate amoral reasoning and behaviour, such as is associated with obediently carrying out one’s role in a particular social situation (Ashforth and Anand, 2003; Brief *et al.*, 2001). Thus, corruption is understood as reflecting an array of interacting individual and situational factors within organizations and as including breaches of moral principles or social norms, in addition to legal norms (Ashforth and Anand, 2003).

Additionally, how corruption is defined and rooted within the organization might affect the individual perception or response to corrupt behaviours within the organization itself.

However, individual responses might differ according to the degree of moral and ethical integrity of each, thus leading to different reactions and behaviours in front of other people’s unethical behaviours or corrupt requests. In some cases, when corruption becomes part of everyday organizational life (Brief *et al.*, 2001), leaders might authorize unethical behaviours implicitly by imposing reward structures that promote corrupt practices when occurring (Misangyi *et al.*, 2008). Some authors highlight that this is the case when there is the perception that corruption might allow firms to overcome bureaucratic processes and

complex regulations (Lui, 1985), to conduct business activities more speedily or “grease the wheels” (Vial and Hanoteau, 2010), towards the improvement of firms’ growth and financial performance (Vu *et al.*, 2018).

In other cases, individuals might refrain or resist becoming a part of corrupt activities even in the presence of routinized or institutionalized corrupt beliefs. This might be the case, for instance, of newcomers in organizations (Manz *et al.*, 2005). As not all individuals are equally susceptible to corrupt practices (Manz *et al.*, 2005), some might accept to be embedded in such context to be accepted and legitimized by colleagues; alternatively, others might resist, even if facing the risk to be socially marginalized by the “corrupt” majority.

The literature considering models of negative organizational behaviours relies upon static individual traits and behaviours and the individual, interpersonal and group-level factors that influence them (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008). The result is that there is a narrow view on the issue that leads to a relative neglect of the role of processes and systems (Brass *et al.*, 1998) and of the dynamics among multiple levels of analysis (individual, group, organization, industry and nation) that create the foundation for corruption (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008).

Looking at the concept of perception of corruption in the public debate, Lascoumes and Tomescu-Hatto (2008) consider a social construction approach, based on the concept of grey corruption by Heidenheimer (1970), who rejects any *a priori*, “objective” definitions of corruption. Following this approach corruption is not a static phenomenon, but it changes with concern the social and cultural values. As stated by Lascoumes and Tomescu-Hatto (2008, p. 26) the way in which a behaviour is perceived varies with social group membership, and perceptions are also influenced by a wide range of conjunctures and contextual factors.

Corruption as a process implies that the corrupt person may influence and “infect” other persons, groups, and the whole organization (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008). On this ground, the focus must be not only on the corrupt person but also on the reactions and behaviours that other people in the organization might have as addressees or witnesses of a corrupt proposal coming from a colleague.

On the other side of the coin, a significant amount of research has focussed on factors concerning individuals’ intention to blow the whistle. Whistleblowing has been defined as a process of:

[. . .] disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral, and illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action (Near and Miceli, 1985, p. 4) that involves the whistleblower, the whistleblowing act or complaint, the party to whom the complaint is made, and the organization against which the complaint is lodged (Near and Miceli, 1985, p. 2).

The literature on whistleblowing has found many factors according to which people in an organization are likely to report unethical or illegal issues (Alleyne *et al.*, 2017; Chang *et al.*, 2017; Gao *et al.*, 2015). For instance, some authors (Chiu, 2003; Miceli and Near, 1984; Near and Miceli, 1996; Sims and Keenan, 1998) found aspects such as job performance reviews, better education, superior positions compared to the wrongdoer, higher scores in moral judgement tests and in some cases demographic characteristics (e.g. gender). Other studies found that employees’ intention to report fraud and willingness to blow the whistle is positively related to contextual and organizational attributes (Kaptein, 2011; King, 1999) such as perceived organizational justice (Seifert *et al.*, 2010), the supervisor’s support (Sims and Keenan, 1998), the organization’s propensity to encourage whistleblowing (Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran, 2005), public industry type (Perry and Wise, 1990) and general organizational climate encouraging to blow the whistle. Indeed, despite the benefits, the act of exposing wrongdoing within an organization is not an easy task, and whistleblowers are

often exposed to negative consequences such as demotion, dismissal and blacklisting (Alleyne *et al.*, 2017; Cassematis and Wortley, 2013; Chang *et al.*, 2013; Miceli and Near, 1992).

2.1 Individual reactions to corrupt proposals

Miceli and Near (1992) described the process of whistleblowing in five steps as follows: the triggering event, the decision-making process, the whistleblowing report, the reactions from external parties and the outcomes impact on future activities. We draw from their study to adapt the process of whistleblowing to the wider process concerning different choices ranging from accepting the corrupt proposal (the triggering event) to whistleblowing, considering the nuanced responses that might be in the middle between the two extremes. In so doing, we aim at contributing to the debate on how employees react to triggering events such as receiving or witnessing to a corrupt proposal.

In our study, we address the challenge to open the “black box” of obfuscated behaviours and reactions defining a “grey zone”, that is quite overlooked, while still crucial, in the everyday life of organizations (Land *et al.*, 2014). The idea of grey corruption is introduced to shed light on its ambiguity, as the concept of a “grey zone” has never been recalled in the specific literature on corruption and whistleblowing. Instead, interesting descriptions have been provided in other fields of research defining the grey zone as an obfuscated area where clear distinctions between light and dark behaviours cannot be made (Allum *et al.*, 2019; Canonico *et al.*, 2017; Land *et al.*, 2014; Vander Beken and Van Daele, 2008). There are many reasons for imagining the existence of a “grey zone” also between corruption and whistleblowing, as many scholars agree that the experience of workplace mistreat (as a corrupt proposal could be considered) depends on, among others, the characteristics and the powers of the parties involved, social norms, organizational climate, ethical and civility climate, politics and the nature of the relationship between perpetrators, victims and witnesses (Herscovis and Reich, 2013; Miceli and Near, 1992; Robinson and Schabram, 2017). First, people could react in different ways to a corrupt proposal (e.g. by condoning or ignoring corrupt practices). Second, what happens when the organizational climate or culture are not prone to whistleblowing? What happens when an employee does not recognize the superior’s support in whistleblowing? In this regard, problems might arise for an employee in understanding who is eligible as a recipient of disclosure of wrongdoing (Andrade, 2015). For instance, if the organization does nothing to accept internal disclosure, then the whistleblower may feel threatened by colleagues and superiors’ reactions to his/her action of whistleblowing.

Thus, while issues related to accepting corruption and whistleblowing have been largely debated in the literature (Aguilera and Vadera, 2008; Devine and Maassarani, 2011; Miceli *et al.*, 2008; Rothschild and Miethe, 1994), little is known about the anti-corruption activities of various organizations or about the consequences of these activities for administrations (Miller *et al.*, 2008; Power, 2007). Also, there is a call for more rigorous qualitative approaches such as face to face interviews and focus groups to gain in-depth opinions and feelings on the topic (Alleyne *et al.*, 2017).

Therefore, there is a clear gap in the literature specifically concerning what happens in terms of individual reactions to a corrupt proposal. On these grounds, we contend that a grey zone of nuanced behaviours might exist between corruption and whistleblowing.

Thus, the aim of the present study is to identify these behaviours defining the grey zone and what are the consequences in terms of interaction that might occur both on the individual and the social side.

Figure 1 readapts the process by Miceli and Near (1992) in four steps. We include whistleblowing in the second step as one of the outcomes from the decision-making process where an individual can decide among accepting corruption, blowing the whistle or adopting a “grey behaviour”.

As mentioned above, we are interested in contributing to the literature by unboxing the grey zone, as an area made of nuanced behaviours between corruption (the black zone) and whistleblowing (the white zone). Therefore, differently from Miceli and Near (1992), we are not looking whether individuals will report a triggering event, but we explore the obfuscated area of the behaviours influencing the decision-making process (Step 2 of Miceli and Near’s process) leading individuals to both not blowing the whistle and not adopting corrupt behaviours. Also, we are interested in understanding what are the outcomes in terms of social and individual reactions and the impact on future relationships, and how these outcomes affect people’s reactions to future corrupt proposals (both as addressees and witnesses).

3. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative and explorative approach (Yin, 2003) through the use of interviews and storytelling with the aim of exploring a still undebated issue in the literature. Explorative studies aim at better tapping into how specific processes and complex issues take place within contexts representing rare, unique and extreme cases (Yin, 2003). Also, unlike much of the existing empirical evidence, which is predominantly quantitative in nature, the use of qualitative methods allows a deeper understanding of human behaviours, tacit processes and other complex issues.

To the aim of this study, we interviewed 27 Italian public servants attending an executive Master in Public Management where the three researchers coordinate the scientific programme and teach organizational behaviour. We chose the public sector as one of the contexts mainly affected by corruption phenomena (Liu and Mikesell, 2014; Tanzi, 1998), thus being one interesting case to provide enough nuances in terms of stories and

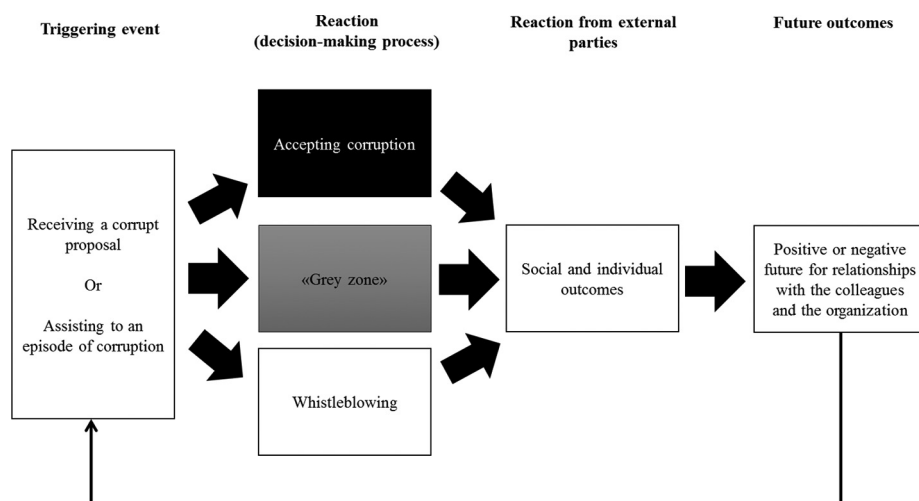


Figure 1. Process of reaction to an episode of corruption

Source: Re-adaptation of the process of whistleblowing by Miceli and Near (1992)

behaviours concerning reactions to corrupt proposals. Also, the public sector provides interesting implications for accountants acting as auditors and controllers on the use of public resources, as a deeper understanding of the spectrum of misbehaviours might support the definition of actions to prevent or spot corruption in public organizations.

One week before the interviews we asked participants to think about two or three episodes of corruption in which they were directly involved or episodes they witnessed as the third party during their entire professional career. We explained participants the ethical protocol according to which their stories would have been anonymized and used only for the purpose of this research. Also, due to the sensitive issue, we clarified participants that they were free not to take part to the interviews if they felt uncomfortable in telling us such intimate stories.

Table 1 provides a description of participants, showing age, gender, public administration of affiliation, role, years in service and a brief label assigned to the story told by each participant during the interview.

The mean age of participants is 44, and, averagely, they have been in service in the public administration for 18 years. Most of the participants are officers (44%) and women (59%).

In Table 1 we also reported the stories to give details on the corrupt proposals directly experienced or witnessed by participants. Following Shah's (2007) categorization of corruption (bureaucratic corruption, grand corruption, state or regulatory capture and patronage or clientelism), the cases reported in Table 1 predominantly, although not exclusively, fall in the categories "bureaucratic corruption" and "patronage or clientelism".

The table also provides detailed information concerning participants' working contexts, useful for opening the scope for a discussion also on contextual features affecting individual behaviours in response to a corrupt proposal.

Although we acknowledge that the specific setting and the qualitative nature of the study can suffer from a lack of generalizability, the aim in this study is not necessarily to generalize from our findings but to provide insights from a unique case (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003) to open the discussion on an undebated issue in the literature concerning corruption and whistleblowing.

Indeed, the stories narrated by the participants will be a support to explore for the first time the "grey zone" between corruption and whistleblowing. More specifically, they will provide an answer to the following research question:

RQ1. What are the possible behaviours and reactions to episodes of corruption defining the grey zone between corruption and whistleblowing?

The power of the narrative in organizations has been strongly recognized (Czarniawska, 1997; Vaara *et al.*, 2016) to better catch the nuances existing in behaviours, identity processes or in any other process relating to a continuous account of some set of events or processes.

Interviews were set following the storytelling by participants and lasted from 45 to 60 min with open questions to collect tales of behaviours and reactions to tentative of corruption that ended up neither with whistleblowing nor with accepting the corrupt proposal. Interviews have been recorded and transcribed by the authors; moreover, a follow-up with the participants was conducted when clarification was needed. Before the analysis of the data, participants were also asked to review the transcripts and to make any corrections.

In our inductive, open-ended analysis, we went back and forth between data, literature and emerging theory (Locke, 2001). In this process of gradual abstraction, we categorized

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Public administration	Role	Years in service	Cases reported
1	41	M	Local government	Officer	15	Bribery
2	46	M	Environmental agency	Officer	17	Unauthorized release of environmental licenses
3	58	M	National social welfare institution	Manager	33	Production of false documentation
4	34	F	Local government	Officer	7	Assisted to bribery
5	56	F	Health authority and research organization for animal health and food safety	Officer	32	Unauthorized release of food safety licenses
6	47	M	Local government	Officer	23	Bribery
7	50	F	Municipal police	Manager	25	Assisted to bribery
8	55	M	Court of auditors	Manager	30	Bribery
9	50	F	University	Officer	25	Assisted to drug dealing
10	38	F	Health authority and research organization for animal health and food safety	Officer	15	Assisted to bribery
11	51	F	Healthcare institution	Officer	25	Assisted to cheating in public bids
12	39	F	Healthcare institution	Officer	16	Workplace bullying
13	37	F	University	Employee	13	Cheating in public bids
14	51	M	Local government	Employee	7	Bribery
15	31	F	Central government (Ministry of Culture and Architectural Heritage)	Employee	2	Production of false documentation
16	56	F	Education institution	Manager	30	Cheating in admission tests
17	42	M	Environmental agency	Employee	20	Unauthorized release of environmental licenses
18	46	F	Regional government	Manager	18	Cheating in subcontracting procedures
19	43	F	University	Employee	16	Cheating in public bids
20	47	F	Central government (Ministry of Labour)	Officer	20	Production of false documentation
21	37	M	Central government (Ministry of Transportations)	Employee	15	Cheating in public bids
22	53	M	Central government (Ministry of Culture and Architectural Heritage)	Manager	25	Cheating on marking the office time card
23	43	F	Central government (Ministry of Customs)	Officer	15	Production of false documentation
24	30	F	University	Employee	4	Workplace bullying
25	37	F	Regional government	Officer	11	Assisted to bribery
26	33	M	Local government	Employee	5	Bribery
27	56	M	Healthcare institution	Manager	31	Production of false documentation

Table 1.
Description of participants

raw data, linked categories to themes and aggregated them (Pratt *et al.*, 2006) with the aim of identifying those behaviours defining the grey zone.

We began coding the interviews transcripts by differentiating passages of text describing response behaviour, interaction outcomes on the individual side and interaction outcomes on the social side.

We created a flow diagram of how a corrupt proposal engenders a specific response behaviour and specific interaction outcomes both on the individual and social side. Then, we identified the different behaviours and interaction outcomes. In the final step, we aggregated and abstracted our thematic codes to build a scheme encompassing the dynamics emerging from the interactions between the corrupt person and the addressee (or witness) of the corrupt proposal. We separated interaction outcomes on the individual side from the outcomes on the social side to distinct what are the outcomes affecting the single person that received the corrupt proposal from the outcomes occurring at the social level.

From the 27 interviews, for reasons of space, we had to limit the stories reported. We, therefore, followed the suggestions from the literature on the use of interviews (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012; Saunders and Townsend, 2016) to report the five stories representing the most recurrent cases and providing enough coverage through variation among interviewed participants. Indeed, Table 1 shows that some cases are recurrent (e.g. bribery, cheating in public bids and releasing unauthorized licenses). Also, we chose to report cases possibly representing at least one for each type of public administration emerging from the sample interviewed. In so doing, the reported examples provide both a differentiation of cases and insights from different contexts, representing central government, local government, healthcare institution and educational institution.

4. Findings

Public servants are probably one of the working categories most exposed to corrupt tentative of different sorts (Liu and Mikesell, 2014). The stories we collected show that corrupt proposals or activities range from the “classic” bribery to other kinds of misbehaviours that come as well to be identified as corruption, as they involve the misuse of power or unethical activity (e.g. workplace bullying) (Vickers, 2014). The cases reported by participants are situations they directly experienced or witnessed. In the latter case, some episodes are not identifiable as corruption but, as witnesses of corrupt proposals or misbehaviours, participants received a sort of corrupt proposal to “close an eye” on what they witnessed.

Table 1 shows interesting contextual information that deserves extensive comments. First, as mentioned above, the cases reported mainly fall in the categories “bureaucratic corruption” and “patronage or clientelism” (Shah, 2007). Indeed, most participants told us about cases of bribery and requests for favours of which they have been addressees or witnesses.

Second, at least from our interviews, a relationship between local government and bribery emerge, while moving towards administrations belonging to the central government (e.g. ministries and national agencies), the corrupt proposals are much more focussed on the production of false documentation and requests for licenses without respecting the administrative protocol (unauthorized release of licenses). Instead, universities and healthcare institutions are mainly the venues of cheating in public bids and admission tests.

A first interesting episode emerged from the story by Carla (Participant #9), 50 years old, working in the administrative staff of an educational institution for 25 years. Carla tells of an episode when she was at the beginning of her career, about a drug dealing that was occurring in her office. One of her colleagues and work roommate was selling drugs during

the office hours to other colleagues and other people. She decided not to do whistleblowing, as she had a lack of trust in the hierarchical chain and as she was afraid that her name could be easily associated with the denunciation:

I decided to adopt non-verbal behaviours and to avoid interactions with him. I also asked my superior to change room. This influenced my social interactions with my superior and with other colleagues, since they already knew about this situation, but they were ignoring it as if nothing was happening. I felt like socially marginalized.

Carla is still working in the same institution in a different room, but she had to find out by herself the way to enlarge her working activities, as this episode strongly affected her career and the social interaction with her colleagues and superior.

The case reported by Carla emphasizes the role the context has in supporting or not, whistleblowing. While she experienced a social outcast, other colleagues and her superior seemed to go through the motions as if the situation was in the norm, and thus, taken for granted.

A similar outcome from a different episode happened to Miriana (Participant #11), 51 years old, working in the administrative staff of a healthcare institution for 25 years. Miriana tells us about the time when she was in the office in charge of the internal career progressions. She was a member of an evaluation committee, and she found a discrepancy between the evaluation of some tests made by her and the president of the committee. When asking for the reasons related to this discrepancy, she found herself alone against the president and other members of the committee:

Some tests were objectively insufficient, but the president decided to evaluate them as sufficient. The tests were anonymous, but some elements of the calligraphy were recognizable. I thus decided to ask that my contraposition was signed in the committee final report. Since then, I decided to not participate anymore in evaluating committees, but at the same time also my superiors avoided to involve me in other procedures.

Although as then she has been blacklisted from evaluation committees, Miriana tells us about a second similar episode in which she was involved. In this case, she was only in charge of input evaluation data into the excel file. Even in this case, while inputting the data into the excel file, she found a discrepancy between the real evaluation of some tests and the evaluation that has to be input into the dossier. This time she decided to avoid any reaction and to not ask for clarification.

This case shows how the social outcome from a first episode might influence a person facing a similar episode in the future (see the arrow in [Figure 1](#)). Indeed, Miriana's reaction in the second episode has been inhibited by the response she had in the first case. As for Carla's case, also Miriana has been a work-wise outcast, as her president has no longer involved her in evaluation committees.

Both the cases reported by Carla and Miriana are representatives of cases of non-typical corruption, where a corrupt proposal is hidden behind the case the person is assisting to. Indeed, the real corrupt proposal resides in the interaction between two different people (the president of the committee and the third party in Miriana's case), while Carla and Miriana, as witnesses, are asked to "close an eye" on drug dealing and the positive evaluation of evident insufficient tests. Similar episodes were experienced by other participants that assisted in bribery (e.g. Participants #4, #7 and #10), cheating in public bids (e.g. Participant #13), where, although witnessing to the corrupt proposal, they decided not to blow the whistle.

A different episode emerges from the story told by Giovanni (Participant #17), 42 years old, working in the office for the release of environmental licenses in a central government

administration (a national environmental agency) for 20 years. The episode is about one of his colleagues that, additionally to the job in the public administration, was also illegally working as a professional in a private company. This company was often receiving favours by this person in terms of a reduced time to get environmental licenses. Every time this colleague asked for accelerating the procedures concerning that company, Giovanni alternatively adopted non-verbal behaviours or explicitly refused to process the request.

Once, the corrupt person was trying to favour his cousin's company. In this case, a good relationship with other colleagues came into help to Giovanni. The whole group opposed the corrupt colleague and convinced him to avoid favouring his cousin, thus to become a "paladin" and to change his renowned identity of a corrupt person:

We decided to invert the situation: by avoiding to favour his cousin, he would become a paladin and would have clean a little his dirty identity of a corrupt person. We worked as a group, and we succeeded in our intent. After that, our relationship and team cohesion improved.

Differently from Carla and Miriana's cases, in this case, reported by Giovanni the context has positively influenced the reaction by the addressee of the proposal and the counter-reaction by the corrupt person. Also, involving the corrupt person in taking part in a good action, avoided the intention of going on in the corrupt practice and prompted an increased group cohesion.

This case is representative of similar cases reported by other participants (e.g. Participants #2, #5 and #20), where they strategized with their colleagues working as a group to counteract to the misbehaving person's actions and directly involving this person in the solution process, without proceeding to blow the whistle.

Another interesting story, although that of "classic bribery", is the one told by Mario (Participant #14), 51 years old, working in the office for public works in a local government administration for seven years. At the beginning of his career, Mario received bribery of €1,000 from a private company asking to be selected in a public bid as the company devoted to doing some public works for road maintenance. Mario refused the bribery, giving it back to the company and making the selection process follow its natural administrative procedure. In this case, Mario tells us that his choice and behaviour had no impact and no social consequences and that he continued working through the years without any problem with his colleagues. However, he also interestingly tells us:

I don't accept bribes, and I don't see other colleagues adopting corrupt behaviour. At the same time, since I received this corrupt request, I think this is physiological. Maybe I just can't see others while receiving a corrupt proposal.

The episode reported by Mario is at least interesting as it shows that, although he refused to accept a corrupt proposal, his behaviour can be ascribed among the "going through the motions" as he does not "see others receiving bribes". Indeed, this rather seems to be a "closed eye" on what others do, thus allowing Mario to keep staying in the organization without impacts on his personal and social life.

This story is representative of other cases reported (e.g. Participants #1, #6 and #33), where participants considered the corrupt proposals as something not typical in their organizations, thus not classifying the episodes as worrying and worthy of whistleblowing, therefore, just letting the things going as they are.

Finally, another interesting story is the one by Alberto (Participant #22), 53 years old, working for a museum as an employee of the Ministry of Cultural and Architectural Heritage for 25 years. Alberto reports a story about when he was appointed as the chief officer of the museum, where some employees' misbehaviours became daily practices such

as laziness, inactivity, passivity and being systematically late on the working hours without marking the delay (therefore, cheating on marking the office time card). On his first day, Alberto marked the delay of two employees. When they, finally, arrived at work and went signing their time entrance to the office, they found the delay marked. They reacted by asking Alberto to remove the delay, but he refused. In front of Alberto's denial, they started intimidating him and one of them was about to beat him up. Then, the other calmed down the colleague and convinced him to leave the office:

When I saw the second one calming down and convincing the other to leave, I decided to convince him to stay. I understood that only talking with him I would have had the chance to let him understand the reasons why I marked their delay. From the day after, they started coming at work on time [...] even if then they decided to quit the job just one year later [...] I think that after a year they could not stand no more being on time at work [...] before my arrival at the Museum, they were all doing what they wanted [...] being late, signing their entrance and leave, doing nothing on the workplace, and other things like these [...] I think that I revolutionized their habits [...].

Alberto's case has some similarities to Giovanni's case in trying to invert the situation, although in this case he found himself alone and was about to be beaten up. However, he has been able to exploit the only moment in which the misbehaving people showed the availability for a discussion. He, therefore, tried to make the two persons understanding the reasons behind his choices and the need to change their misbehaviours.

The case experienced by Alberto is representative of similar situations, although less intensive, reported by other participants (e.g. Participants #12, #15 and #24), where they had to face both verbal and physical threats, but reacted trying to speak to the other person without proceeding to whistleblowing.

Many interesting aspects emerge from the interviews deserving extensive comments and insights that are provided in the discussion section.

5. Discussion

Research on organizational corruption has always focussed on two possible behaviours and reactions to a corrupt proposal, namely, corruption and whistleblowing. The literature has individuated, discussed and analysed many individual, contextual and organizational factors influencing employees' willing to whistle the blow, such as supervisor's support, organizational climate, employee's position in the organizational rank and demographic characteristics (Anand *et al.*, 2004; Ashforth and Anand, 2003; Doh *et al.*, 2003; Manz *et al.*, 2005; Miceli and Near, 1992; Tanzi, 1998; Thomas *et al.*, 2004; Trevino and Brown, 2004; Yeboah-Assiamah, 2017). However, we contended that, due to differences existing between individual and organizational characteristics and propensity to whistle the blow, people might react in different ways (e.g. by condoning or ignoring corrupt practices). Thus, we had an interest in understanding what happens when the organizational climate or culture is not set to encourage whistleblowing or when an employee does not recognize the superior's support in whistleblowing.

While there are some studies considering the "grey zone" in other contexts (Allum *et al.*, 2019; Canonico *et al.*, 2017; Land *et al.*, 2014), we were at least unaware of studies specifically focussing on the grey zone between the two extremes of accepting corruption and whistleblowing. Drawing from Miceli and Near's (1992) process of whistleblowing, we readapted the process by reasoning on what kind of behaviours might define this grey zone as a continuum of nuanced behaviours between the two extremes. On these grounds, we explored these behaviours by interviewing 27 Italian public servants adopting a qualitative and explorative approach through open questions and storytelling. We

contended that the public sector can provide interesting insights, as it is widely recognized as one of the fields most experiencing episodes of corruption (Liu and Mikesell, 2014; Tanzi, 1998; Yeboah-Assiamah, 2017).

From Table 1 interesting information emerged concerning the types of corrupt proposals and the contexts in which they are embedded. We highlighted that the cases mainly reported by participants were those of bribery and requests for favours. Therefore, they mainly fell in the categories “bureaucratic corruption” and “patronage or clientelism” (Shah, 2007).

With reference to the context, the local government appeared to be mainly affected by phenomena of bribery, while central government administrations (e.g. ministries and national agencies) are much more affected by the production of false documentation and requests for releasing licenses without respecting the administrative protocol. Finally, people working for universities and healthcare institutions mainly reported cases of cheating in public bids and admission tests.

We highlighted that, following the literature on the use of interviews (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012; Saunders and Townsend, 2016), both the sample of the 27 public servants and the 5 stories reported for reasons of space, provided enough coverage through variation among interviewed participants. Indeed, many interesting issues emerged from the interviews, especially considering the quite good balance of the public administrations represented by participants to this study (central government, local government, healthcare institution and education). The reported examples provide both a differentiation of cases and insights from different contexts, representing central government, local government, healthcare institution and educational institution.

The stories reported by participants, similar to that by Miriana, show how a pre-history of negative episodes might affect the behaviour in future interactions or episodes of corruption. After having witnessed changes made to tests evaluation, to which Miriana decided to explicitly demonstrate her contraposition with a consequent exclusion in other evaluation committees, in a second similar episode she decided just to show indifference as if nothing was happening. The outcome from this repeated episode is that she has been outcast both work-wise and socially. Indeed, she was no longer involved in evaluation committees and experienced problems in social interaction with colleagues. This outcome confirms that, when corruption becomes part of everyday organizational life (Brief *et al.*, 2001), leaders and other colleagues might authorize or share unethical behaviours implicitly, thus promoting corrupt practices when occurring (Misangyi *et al.*, 2008).

Stories similar to those reported by Carla and Miriana also tell us how an already negative organizational climate could also worsen when the whole office knows about the misbehaviour of a specific person without taking countermeasures. These are experiences where participants reported to have been socially marginalized by the colleagues and superiors that, differently from them, were accepting/legitimizing the misbehaviours of corrupt people.

These cases are in line with what stated by the literature concerning the reasons for not blowing the whistle when superiors to the addressees or witnesses are involved in the corrupt practice (Chiu, 2003; Miceli and Near, 1984; Near and Miceli, 1996; Sims and Keenan, 1998). Indeed, our findings show that the addressees or witnesses to the corrupt proposal found themselves inhibited both in future actions of blowing the whistle and in social interactions with colleagues and superiors. Also, both cases show that, even in the absence of whistleblowing in the true sense of the term, a similar approach has led the two interviewees to be blacklisted (Alleyne *et al.*, 2017; Cassematis and Wortley, 2013; Chang *et al.*, 2013; Miceli and Near, 1992).

Instead, more classic episodes of corruption confirm what stated by the literature on newcomers in organizations (Manz *et al.*, 2005), in terms of refraining or resisting from

becoming a part of corrupt activities even in the presence of routinized or institutionalized corrupt beliefs. However, the interesting point in cases like Mario's one resides in the fact that, while, on the one hand, they refused to accept the bribery, on the other hand, they reported the episodes as not worrying and worthy of whistleblowing, therefore, just letting the things going as they are. This behaviour mainly falls in the category of people "closing their eyes" and accepting things as they were physiological and taken for granted in the context. Indeed, Mario's words do not mean that his colleagues do not accept briberies, but, conversely, that he simply does not assist in such practices. This might indicate that, while at the beginning of his career he resisted the corrupt proposal, now he recognizes corrupt activities as routinized or institutionalized in his office. Thus, all the cases like Mario's one have to be labelled as those of people ignoring or condoning corruption, also because they contend that there have been no substantial changes in the social interaction in the office, and, as corrupt behaviours are recognized as physiological.

Instead, stories similar to that by Giovanni show how a positive organizational climate and a high level of team cohesion allow to isolate the corrupt individual and to invert the "role played" by the counterparts. The corrupt person, that was initially trying to force others doing something (help him in a corrupt behaviour), became the addressee of the action that the opposed group wanted him to do (changing behaviour and abandoning his corrupt plan). In this case, the group emerged as the mechanism through which the isolated corrupt person found himself in the minority to an opposed majority that blocked his corrupt intention. These stories, emerging from some participants (e.g. Participants #2, #5, #17 and #20) although with small differences, show the same influence of a positive organizational climate within the "grey zone", as the literature stated about the willing to whistle the blow (Kaptein, 2011; King, 1999; Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran, 2005; Sims and Keenan, 1998).

Finally, stories like that by Alberto reinforce our view of an existing continuum from accepting corruption to whistleblowing. Reactions and behaviours reported by participants like Alberto (e.g. Participants #12, #15 and #24) can be placed in the middle of Figure 2, between "isolating the corrupt" and "explicit contraposition". Indeed, although with

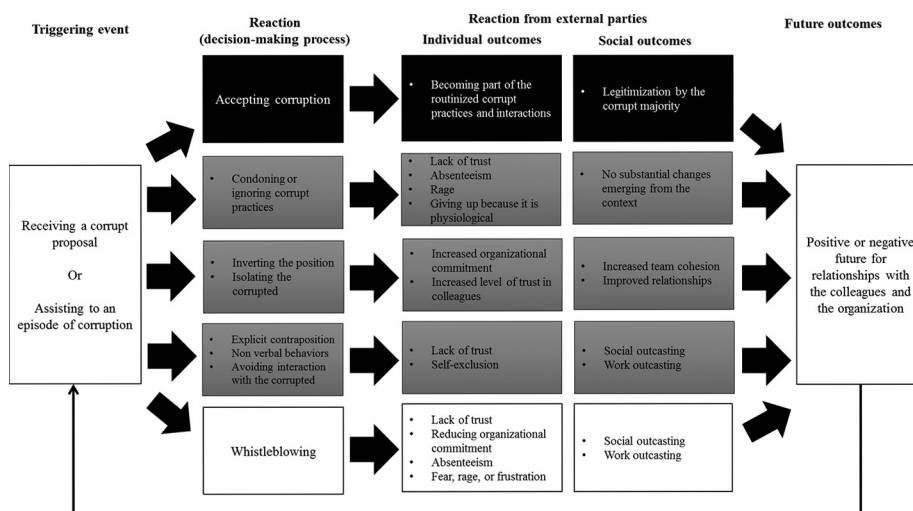


Figure 2. Episodes of corruption, response behaviours and interaction outcomes

Source: Own elaboration

different degrees of intensity, participants, in this case, faced both verbal and physical threats, but reacted trying to make the corrupt person reasoning without proceeding to whistleblowing. In these cases, participants used explicit contraposition as an instrument to demonstrate to other colleagues – not only to the corrupt people involved – the right behaviour to adopt in the workplace.

In this regard, stories falling into this category are representative to confirm the importance of the social and informal dimension, and of how this dimension may intervene even to solve conflicts, practices and situations rooted in the culture and behaviour of some individuals, that would be otherwise quite difficult to solve only through the application of formal rules and punishments.

This outcome is interestingly in contrast with the literature concerning corruption as part of everyday organizational life (Brief *et al.*, 2001; Misangyi *et al.*, 2008). Indeed, the above mentioned behaviours demonstrate that also taken for granted malpractices and misbehaviours can be scratched.

Although acknowledging that the behaviours emerging from our interviews might represent only a small part of the possible spectrum defining the grey zone, based on the findings emerging from our study, we grouped the most recurring behaviours and outcomes from the decision-making process “corruption-grey zone-whistleblowing”. We, therefore, enriched the process shown in Figure 1 by providing some details in Figure 2 on the nuanced behaviours defining the grey zone and the subsequent social and individual (current and future) outcomes. The figure also shows an arrow indicating that the process is iterative, as individual reactions and the outcomes from the triggering event influence reactions to new triggering events in the future, as demonstrated, for instance, by stories similar to that of Miriana (Participant #11) and other participants (e.g. Participants #4, #7, #9 and #10).

In some cases, behaviours close to the whistleblowing, such as explicit contraposition, non-verbal behaviours and avoiding interactions with the corrupt person, result in both individual and social outcomes from the interaction similar to that of whistleblowing. People experiencing situations like these came to be both work-wise and socially marginalized and found themselves to be less willing to repeat these behaviours in the future.

Moving on the scale towards corruption, it is possible to find behaviours such as “inverting the position” and “isolating the corrupt person”. Situations like these occur when there is a strong positive organizational climate enabling a group reaction that leaves the corrupt person in the minority against the majority refusing the corrupt proposal. In these cases, the positive climate engenders a virtuous circle improving the relationships within the group that defeated the corrupt person, with a positive impact on future interactions in the organization.

Finally, there are people “going through the motions”, by ignoring or condoning corrupt practices. This kind of behaviour has been considered much closer to corruption, as people adopting this behaviour acts as if nothing happened, thus closing their eyes when receiving or witnessing a corrupt proposal. The outcomes deriving from this behaviour may be different. Some people just hide behind a justification “because corruption is physiological”. Others experience feelings of rage, lack of trust or intention to leave the organization as, on the one hand, they choose to close the eyes for some reason, but, on the other hand, they do not share or approve their colleagues’ behaviours. On the social side, interactions seem not to have substantial changes. Indeed, when the corrupt person perceives that the addressee or witness, is ignoring or condoning the proposal, it does not necessarily interpret this behaviour as a contraposition. Therefore, this does not necessarily affect the relationship between the corrupt person and the addressee of the proposal.

From all the above, although our findings show some similarities with corruption and whistleblowing in terms of effects on the individual and social sides, the novelty in this

paper resides in the exploration of the grey zone as nuanced behaviours between corruption and whistleblowing when a person reacts as addressee or witness of a corrupt proposal. This provides value added to the discussion on corruption and the actions to prevent it, as the reasons behind blowing or not the whistle often remain unclear, and this might be because of the chance that people have to adopt a “grey behaviour” enabling them not to blow the whistle without necessarily being (or becoming) corrupt.

6. Conclusions

This study aimed at exploring what kind of reactions and behaviours could define the “grey zone” as a zone made of nuanced behaviours between accepting corruption and whistleblowing. More specifically, in this paper, we adopted the point of view of the addressee of a corrupt proposal, to understand what kind of behaviours he/she could adopt as a reaction to the proposal.

We highlighted that the literature has always focussed on corruption and whistleblowing as behaviours that people could adopt in reacting to a corrupt proposal. Instead, people might also react or behave differently by avoiding future interactions with the corrupt person or just ignoring the corrupt proposal and “going through the motions” as if nothing happened. This is even more true considering that, as many scholars argued, the experience of workplace mistreat (as a corrupt proposal could be considered) depends on many contextual, organizational and individual factors that might engender different reactions and behaviours.

Although the sample of public servants we interviewed provided an interesting variation in terms of roles covered (managers, officers and employees) and public administrations represented (central government, local government, healthcare institution and education), we acknowledge that our findings provide only a first step in the analysis of the possible behaviours defining the grey zone between corruption and whistleblowing. However, the findings unveil the existence of nuanced behaviours the understanding of which can support regulatory and organizational interventions towards an improvement in preventing corruption, providing at least interesting insights on an undebated issue in the literature.

Indeed, by drawing from Miceli and Near's (1992) process of whistleblowing, we extended the process to a wider spectrum of behaviours that cannot be identified either as corruption or whistleblowing. Additionally to the response behaviours, we investigated the outcomes deriving from the interaction between the corrupt person and the addressee of the proposal, in terms of individual feelings and social reactions.

In this study, corruption emerges as the result of both formal and informal interactions, influenced by individual characteristics and organizational climate, norms and rules. Therefore, corruption results as a practice that is difficult to define, especially from an employee's perspective. This ambiguity is a critical issue to be managed both by organizations and employees. Indeed, the consequences of employees' reactions to intertwined individual and organizational factors could affect employees' future roles and work in organizations.

Our study shows how people react differently when involved in a corruption's attempt. The ideal desire to denounce is counterbalanced by at least two different reasons as follows: the idea of being part of that organization nowadays and in the future; and the ambiguity of the concept of corruption. The organizational commitment, but, above all, the fear of being refused or isolated by the organization, could influence people's reactions. This apprehension could be even more critical when people are involved in a grey corruption area (interpreted according to Heidenheimer, 1970).

On these grounds, the present study provides interesting contributions and implications under many perspectives. From a theoretical point of view, the paper contributes to fill a gap in the literature as the “grey zone”, although somehow discussed in other fields (Allum *et al.*,

2019; Canonico *et al.*, 2017; Land *et al.*, 2014), it has never been debated with reference to corruption and whistleblowing. In more detail, the process provided in Figure 2 shows the existence of this zone made of nuanced behaviours that are not identifiable neither with corruption nor with acts of disclosure about the misuse of power.

From the practical and policymaking perspective, the advancement of a debate contending the existence of a grey zone made of nuanced behaviours between corruption and whistleblowing might provide support both for organizations and policymakers to a better understanding of individual behaviours, improving actions and policies to prevent corruption and encourage whistleblowing. In more detail, we opened up the “black box” of obfuscated behaviours and reactions that is quite overlooked while crucial in the everyday life of public administrations.

Furthermore, in dealing with rooting out corruption in the public sector, the present paper has interesting implications for accountants and auditors in public organizations insofar that improving internal control measures, sound governance and reducing unethical behaviour may support also reporting with integrity, thus increasing accountability and transparency towards the public interest. Indeed, accountants and auditors are in a better position to witness misconduct, thereby a deeper understanding of grey behaviours provides them the possibility to detect also those situations where it is unclear the boundary between good and bad behaviours. On these grounds, we suggest that formal accountability measures should be accompanied by other kinds of measures and actions related to improve individual and group behaviours.

Indeed, we provided an explanation concerning the interaction outcomes, both in terms of individual feelings and social effects. In so doing, the paper supports the understanding of the interaction between “good” and “bad apples” and how the social relationship evolves according to the outcomes of this interaction.

Next, our results may be of support in detecting how organizational climate and support influence individual behaviours and willingness to whistle the blow, accept the corrupt proposal or adopt a “grey zone” behaviour. On these grounds, the study supports the understanding of how organizational and personal factors affect the likelihood of workplace mistreatment, shape targets’ coping behaviours, influence perpetrators’ behaviours and contribute to resolution attempts. Also, the results enable the understanding of the third party or witness reactions to corrupt proposals, particularly the role of moral motivators such as loyalty, respect and obedience to the victim or perpetrator in an attempt to explain why under certain circumstances witnesses intervene while in other circumstances witnesses remain silent or even take part to corrupt practices. Indeed, people might adopt a “grey behaviour” that enables them not to blow the whistle without necessarily being (or becoming) corrupt. In this regard, exploring the grey zone might be a useful support to develop better anti-corruption activities, policies and organizational practices.

We acknowledge that our results are not directly transferable to other settings or generalizable to the public sector as a whole. However, this is a qualitative and explorative study relying on the stories told by participants as in the literature there are no studies exploring this area (the grey zone and the behaviours defining it). Given this explorative nature of the study, here the aim is not necessarily to generalize from our findings, but to provide useful insights on a still undebated issue in the literature. Indeed, our contribution provides a deeper understanding and articulation of a specific case that may well provide insights into the issues examined (Parker and Northcott, 2016). Despite the purposive selection of the specific Italian setting and the implications that the observations are not universally generalizable, we believe that the findings emerging from this analysis still

provide valuable insights on the nuances that might characterize the grey zone spectrum between accepting corruption and whistleblowing.

Limitations of this work might be recognized in that the situations detected could be only a part of a possible wider “grey zone”, mainly related to the findings emerging only from the interviews we carried out. Indeed, we are convinced that other behaviours possibly emerging from further studies could enrich the comprehension of the grey zone. In this regard, this also represents a point of strength as it gives the opportunity to future research to continue exploring the grey area between corruption and whistleblowing. Therefore, the analytical and theoretical contributions to the literature and the results of this study could encourage corruption scholars to deepen the issues debated in this paper to open the scope for the discussion on the grey zone, exploring other individual behaviours to expand on the process in [Figure 2](#) and contribute to further fine-grained research to appreciate nuances in how, why and with what implications people in organizations behave and react in a specific way to a corrupt proposal.

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