Petty corruption in Central and Eastern Europe: the client's perspective

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Abstract This qualitative study examines the role of clients in petty corruption by analyzing actual corrupt exchanges between ordinary citizens and low level public and private employees in post-communist Hungary. Using a grounded theory approach, interviews reveal how clients from different social strata deal with low-level agents in corrupt situations. Findings suggest two contrasting forms of low-level corruption: transactions where the client and the agent do not have a prior relationship and where external factors dominate the relationship; and cases with stronger social ties between the actors, where the client has more freedom to structure the transaction. However, a client's social background frequently determines the form of corrupt transaction and the form of resources illegally exchanged in the deal.

Introduction

Scholars often distinguish between two types of corruption: petty and grand corruption. While grand corruption occurs at the highest levels of state institutions and private corporations, petty corruption typically involves low-level officials of state administrations and their clients [1]. In grand corruption, powerful economic or political actors—such as political parties, firms, international agencies and national governments—are able to influence policies and regulations to extract huge amounts of public expenditures for their own benefit [2, 3]. In contrast, petty corruption typically involves relatively small sums of money or exchanges of favors between street-level bureaucrats and ordinary citizens.

Empirical studies suggest that, since the fall of communism, corruption in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has permeated all spheres of society [4–6]. Personal experiences of petty corruption are part of an ordinary citizen's everyday life [7]. Locals report that extortion by corrupt street-level officials is the most typical form of

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low-level corruption: ordinary people have to pay a bribe in order to receive a service that ought to be free, or pay to avoid the threat of a punishment or a negative administrative outcome [6, 8].

Most studies of corruption focus on public bureaucracies but not on the common people who are on the client side of corrupt deals. One goal of this paper is to examine how corruption varies according to social status and the relationship between the client and the corrupt actor. A second goal is to provide a portrait of corruption from the perspective of ordinary citizens who have to face corruption. These add some new pieces to the puzzle of enduring corruption in the CEE.

The research literature on petty corruption

The principal–agent model

One strand in the literature focuses on the client side of corruption, but where investors, entrepreneurs, or managers of firms are the clients rather than ordinary citizens [9, 10]. The most typical form is so-called 'market' or 'competitive corruption', when government contracts and licenses are allocated to the firm that pays the highest bribe [11]. Low-level officials exploit their monopoly to collect bribes while they betray the trust of the principal of the organization who cannot monitor the subordinates properly [12–14]. In principal–agent models, an isolated agent's individual greed and utility-based rationality are seen as responsible for low-level corruption [15].

A systemic approach

A different strand in the literature focuses on pressures and opportunity structures for corruption within a formal organizational context. This approach also examines the role of the 'agent' who acts corruptly in a formal structure, but it discounts the importance of the clients who are consumers of illegally sold goods and services. Instead, according to the systemic view, what is important is that external forces—such as environmental pressure, industry structure, and an organization's cultural influence, norms, values, routines, and socialization—are the major explanatory variables for the existence of deviance and corruption within organizations and firms [16–18]. For example, intense competition in an industry may cause employees to become corrupt because managers set unrealistic sales goals which are not legally achievable [18–20]. Sometimes, there is direct pressure on employees by the organization to become corrupt [21]. Ditton details a case study about an English bakery where the sales department required its bread salesmen to cheat costumers, and to return the profit to the firm [22]. In another variant, employees' illegal practices may become part of an organization's 'unofficial reward system'. Informally allowed pilferage by the managers is often a 'wage-supplement collusion' between the employer and the employee [23].

An organization and its members may no longer perceive their actions as corruption because they have become a normal part of everyday routines. The perception and enforcement of external social norms may also become weakened inside corrupt

organizations because they may create a culture of silence and cover-up, such that even the honest members show solidarity with their deviant colleagues and refuse to 'blow the whistle' on their co-workers' misconduct [24, 25]. The police are a classic example.

Structures, processes, and transactions provide varied opportunities for misconduct [26]. Features such as the division of labor, geographic dispersion, and presence of specialized units may ensure structural secrecy and facilitate invisible misconduct. For example, lower-level employees who have frequent contact with outside customers or clients (e.g., ticket inspectors, parking attendants, police officers, and security staff) are best able to participate in corrupt practices and sell local organizational resources to outsiders [27]. In his seminal book, Gerald Mars created a typology of the workplace crime of "normal people" based on the way a job is designed and structured [28]. Factors of the particular job, such as a 'strong group' or 'weak group', the level of employee autonomy, and the strictness of rules determine the crimes an employee is liable to conduct.

A relational approach

Yet other corruption researchers emphasize the role that social relationships play in low-level corrupt practices. These scholars pay attention to informal networks, patronage, gift-giving, reciprocal exchange, kinship, and clientelism [29–34]. Social networks are used to circulate resources such as jobs, bureaucratic favors, political support, certificates, licenses, permits, tax clearances, school admissions, economic information, and access to cheap loans. For example, in the Soviet Union and later in post-communist Russia, working- and middle-class residents created *blat*, an informal exchange system based on interpersonal bonds and trust [35, 36]. *Blat* was a way to obtain goods and services in a highly regulated and planned social system, an adaptive mechanism to escape totalitarian control, scarcity of goods, and the rigidity of the Soviet system.

The relationship and the degree of social distance between corrupt partners may influence the nature of the informal exchange [30]. If the relationship is horizontal, there is a balance of reciprocity between the partners who trust each other. According to this model, more trust and a more intimate relationship between two actors indicate a short social distance and vice versa. The successful repetition of corrupt transactions also increases the partners' trust each other [37, 38].

When the social distance between the actors increases, the reciprocal relationship may transform into 'market exchange' [30, 31]. Lomnitz calls this phenomenon the "secularization of reciprocity" [30]. Direct cash payments and short-term relations are more typical in this market type of corrupt exchange.

Fábrega's empirical study confirmed that corrupt public officials will accept paybacks other than immediate cash only if there is a long-term relationship between them and their clients [39]. Bribery emerges when the actors are not sufficiently well connected to each other to transform the corrupted exchange into a trade of mutual favors and gifts.

Mobilizing alliances between corrupt actors sometimes require specific brokers, corruption entrepreneurs who introduce corrupt actors to each other, and mediate between the partners if they do not trust each other [40].

Gerald Mars and Yochanan Altman drew upon a combination of systemic and relational approaches to analyze the relationship between corruption, the occupational structure, and personal networks. In a case study in the country of Georgia, the authors claim that strong personal networks function to reduce risk in illicit practices [41]. Small and weak networks enable an individual to operate only in a low-risk occupation, such as in low-status shop-floor jobs where the opportunity for illegal benefit is very limited. However a strong and extended network allows people to take bigger risks when combined with prestigious occupations such as professional and executive jobs; for example, the head of the local police. These high-status, high-earning, high-risk jobs, supported by influential networks often provide opportunities for corruption. There are also high-status and low-risk jobs such as physician in which people do not need the safety function of the network to carry out corruption. In much of the CEE, patients routinely bribe physicians and nurses to ensure they receive prompt attention and good treatment [32]. Here, the strictly face-to-face interactions with the clients minimize the chances of detection of bribe-taking.

A conceptualization of petty corruption

Corruption is an elusive phenomenon conceptually. Here, I use the term in its widest sense: from the illicit exchange of cash, favors, or gifts, to influencing official decisions through illicit means, manipulating technology or documentation, speeding up or slowing down bureaucratic processes, and leaking insider information. In this paper, I regard corrupt transactions as systems of economic or social exchange "in which each participant gains something while paying a price" [42]. However, contrary to normal exchanges when the transaction is legal and approved by all, in corruption, actors subvert the formally approved or legally mandated distribution of organizational resources for their own benefit [43].

This paper examines corruption from the perspective of those actors who try to obtain resources in an illegal way, actors whom the literature often calls "clients." The main emphasis of this paper is on micro-level exchanges and strategies and on the differences between petty corruption patterns between clients with different social backgrounds.

Methodology and research strategy

Site, sampling, and interviews

Like many countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Hungary has a high level of corruption, as measured by polls of the population [4, 5, 44–46]. I conducted 50 in-depth interviews—speaking in Hungarian—in Budapest between December 2009 and May 2011. I sought people from different social and organizational backgrounds who had themselves participated in corruption or at least had a very close and direct insight into the phenomenon. I had ten initial starting contacts, drawing upon a deliberately wide spectrum of people from low-level private firm employees to top executives of

national governmental organizations, based on my own social networks of friends and friends of friends.

I subsequently used snowball sampling, a technique applicable when it is difficult to identify and contact the members of a target population, or when the subject matter–like corruption–is sensitive. I asked people whom I had interviewed to recommend other people whom they knew could talk to me about petty corruption. Respondents want to know that an interviewer is trustworthy before agreeing to be questioned. Snowball sampling uses interpersonal networks to vouch for the researcher's trustworthiness, as well as being a strategy to find new respondents. This snowball procedure meant that, beyond my first ten interviews, my informants were not previously known to me.

I promised anonymity to all informants. Given that assurance, plus the recommendation of the prior respondent in the snowball chain, people were eager to discuss their experiences with corruption. Some justified it; other condemned it; but everyone was open to talking about it.

I conducted semi-structured interviews in Hungarian, using a flexible interview protocol that allowed me to tailor my research questions to each interview situation. Some questions, however, were asked of all interviewees (see Appendix). My main goal was to collect detailed descriptions of actual corrupt cases.

I classified as 'working-class' those respondents who did not have college degrees and who were manual workers or low-level administrative workers. The respondents I label 'entrepreneurs' have a common characteristic that their personal and family existence depends on their everyday business decisions. It was also typical that their family life and entrepreneurial activities overlapped. For example, they often financed their families directly from business accounts and vice versa. Interviewees that I describe as 'middle-class' had at least a college degree and typically held professional or white collar jobs. Respondents whom I categorized as 'elite members' were top executives in either private or governmental organizations. Table 1 summarizes the backgrounds of my respondents.

Analysis and findings

This study took a grounded theory approach, a method that focuses on explanatory models rooted firmly in empirical observation [47]. Grounded theorists look for

Table 1 Social background of all respondents

Social Background	n	%
Elite	13	26
Middle-class	12	24
Entrepreneur	9	18
Working-class	9	18
Lower working-class	3	6
Investigative Journalist	4	8
Total	50	100

patterns in qualitative empirical data. Although this paper was informed by the literature of petty corruption, it was not my purpose to test existing theories but rather to obtain new insights into corruption based on rich empirical material and systematic inductive analysis of transcribed interviews.

I started the data analysis while interviews were still being conducted. In order to synthesize my transcripts, I used qualitative coding to identify connections between the narratives and the codes. I also used "theoretical memos" to save my thoughts on the nature of the phenomena, the relationships between categories, codes, and existing models in the literature. Memo-writing is an important intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers. Writing ideas down makes the analysis concrete and manageable and helps to increase the level of abstraction of the ideas [48].

By the end of my analysis, I had constructed a list of core categories, theoretical memos, representative examples of quotes from interviews and, finally, a portrait of how petty corruption evolves among clients with different social backgrounds in Hungary. The data analysis identified two different types of petty corruption, "on-the-spot," and "bond-based" transactions, and multiple categories or dimensions distinguishing aspects of corrupt transactions. Table 2 and Table 3 present these categories.

In this article, I provide selected quotations as examples to support and illustrate my argument. Space constraints required that I limit the number of quotations.

Results

Interviewees described two contrasting types of petty corruption. In the first, "on-the-spot" transactions, the client and the agent do not have a prior relationship. Here, the corrupt act is the first, and almost always the last, time they meet. The other type is a "bond-based" transaction that is grounded in social ties between the corrupt actors and a higher frequency of interactions. Bond-based corruption often goes beyond dyadic relationships and takes on a network characteristic, involving brokers and other participants.

Table 2 Categories and codes: on-the-spot corruption

Category	Code
What is exchanged for what?	Cash for avoiding negative consequences
	Obtain benefits
	Cough up cash
Social distance matters	Unaffordable
	Constraint
	A way of life
	Not my level
	Embedded in impersonal patterns
Communication strategies	Mating dance
	Ask it openly
	Frozen at the formal level

Table 3 Categories and codes: bond-based corruption

Category	Code
Structures of bond-based relationships	Infrastructure for illegal deals
	Need for a contact
What is exchanged for what?	We have everything that is needed
	Old acquaintances
	Symbolic resources

When corrupt actors meet on the spot, a particular external social setting dominates the relationship. A client is dealing with an agent who has formally-assigned authority and power in the situation. There is also a time constraint: that the deal must be made immediately in that particular place. In contrast to on-the spot cases, in bond-based transactions, the clients see their corrupt act as more voluntary, and they have more freedom to delay and arrange the appropriate setting for the transaction.

On-the-spot corruption

Corruption does not just happen. Being corrupt is an active process, generated and structured by the participants. It requires organizing efforts from those involved. For example, on the spot, actors must have social skills to communicate effectively to make a corrupt deal. It takes a certain degree of savvy and self-confidence. As we will see, some affluent individuals are quite inept at dealing with low-level corrupt bureaucrats and will suffer fines or overlook opportunities because they are not comfortable negotiating and interacting with low-level people.

> "You know, on the street it [corruption] is different. You have to solve it….I mean, on the spot. You cannot call your friend in the office to help you and you cannot make phone calls to find a contact either. You are alone." (A working-class respondent)

What is exchanged for what?

Cash for avoiding negative consequences When clients have to deal with agents on the spot, they may try to avoid negative consequences, or they may seek some illegal benefits. In the first situation, clients are legally obliged to perform duties, and they try to purchase an exemption from this duty [27]. My interviewees mentioned the first type when they had to deal with authorities such as traffic police (for speeding). Although this is hardly mentioned in the literature, petty corruption is not found solely in public organizations. In Hungary, many on-the-spot situations happen between citizens and employees of private companies, such as electric and gas meter readers, or parking and ticket inspectors. Several parking companies in Hungary are private firms or private–public joint ventures with local governments. Corrupt agents in such organizations use different degrees of threat in order to demand bribes. Here is an example of on-the-spot corruption when the client paid to avoid a sanction.

"I had an unpaid electric bill, older than 60 days. The guy came from the electricity provider company and told me that he would shut down my electric meter immediately if I could not show him any proof that my bill had been paid. A 'shut down' means a lot of paperwork, an expensive reset of the meter, and at least three days without electricity. I saw that he was a nice man and felt that maybe I could make a deal with him. I gave him 5,000 HUF and asked him to come back in about 30 min. He was willing to do it. So, I just ran down to the nearby post office, paid the bill, and showed him [the receipt] when he came back later. I guess I was not the first guy who bribed him to buy some time." (A working-class respondent)

In this example, although the agent was the more powerful actor, the client had the option to choose the legal way and pay his fine. Therefore, we cannot say that violators are always forced to pay bribes. However, there are other on-the-spot transactions where the actor uses authority to extort from the client. In these cases, the client has to pay for "not distorting true information" [49]. Extortion is still the dominant form of petty corruption in many post-communist CEE countries according to various researchers [6–8]. Here is an example where a car mechanic described extortion by parking attendants:

"I would mention this parking thing. In some districts things have gone from bad to worse. If you buy a ticket to park, it does not mean anything. The parking attendants need extra money and [can fine me] even if I have a valid parking ticket. If the money [I offer] is not enough for him, he does not even allow me to bribe him. They have some cheek. And if you ever talked with a parking attendant you already know that dealing with these guys is not fun. If I say they are not smart that is a wild exaggeration. Can you believe that these assholes can control you?"

Obtain benefits Another type of on-the-spot corruption occurs when the client's main goal is not avoiding negative consequences but rather obtaining certain benefits. In these examples of "corruption with theft", the agent steals the goods of his/her organization and the client then buys the "stolen" resources [13]. This corruption reduces the cost of goods or services for the buyer. In the examples I collected, the agent and the client were eager to deal with each other and both were beneficiaries of this corruption. These were win–win situations for both parties.

"I think in Hungary about 60–70 % of adult citizens encounter corruption every day. Frankly, if I want to buy something, for example, when I was building my house, in a hardware store the salesperson told me that without a receipt we "could solve" this deal 40 % cheaper…. I surely went for it. Everybody would go for it. It means this price was without sales tax and he could give me the stuff even cheaper. Everybody wins here. All right, not everybody; it may harm the state." (A working-class respondent)

and

"This story just happened to me today. We were coming back from this rock festival, it was a big crowd. We were in a hurry… so we did not buy a bus ticket at the station but asked the bus driver for a ticket instead. I had to pay him 400 HUF but he did not give me back a receipt. [The driver pocketed the money for himself.] I remember 2 days ago when we were heading to the festival the bus cost 600 for the same distance. He did this with all of us, meaning 15 people. So, he earned illegally about 6,000 HUF, immediately. In our group not everybody thought that it was totally all right, but nobody complained. We also saved 200 per ticket [by not buying a regular ticket]. But we did not want to do it. So, what did the driver do with us? He bribed us, not we him. I've never seen a thing like this before." (A young adult middle-class respondent)

Cough up the cash Whatever resource a client wants to obtain, she/he has to provide something in return. According to the literature, in a market-exchange type of corruption the low level of trust and the ad hoc characteristic of the transaction lead to a cash payment between the actors [30, 39]. My research supports this argument:

"When you are in front of the police…man…you have to cough up cash… severely cash…but once when I did not have enough with me they even escorted me to a nearby ATM machine." (A working-class respondent)

Social distance matters

Mark Granovetter claims that relative social status may be an important factor in corrupt transactions, determining the type of exchange and whether it is defined as corrupt. My results confirm this [40]. However, I found that the actors' unequal status plays a dual role. First, the agent has authority over the client. All of my respondents who participated in on-the-spot petty corruption agreed that the person who pays for the goods or services is placed in an inferior position despite the fact that the client initiated the corrupt deal.

However, there is a broader aspect of social status that is derived from actors' positions in the wider social structure. Although the agent has greater power on the spot, the client may have a higher social status than the lower middle-class or working-class agent. This social distance can have several consequences for the corrupt relationship between a client and agent.

While working-class and entrepreneurial respondents often participated in petty corruption on the spot, many middle-class and elite interviewees were more reluctant to participate. The following examples show how people with different social backgrounds solved the same instance of street-level corruption, namely dealing with a speeding violation.

Unaffordable Some clients cannot participate in corruption at all. There is obviously a lower working-class group whose members are excluded from petty corruption simply because they cannot afford to be corrupt. This does not mean that they are never corrupt; in other situations, they can obtain resources for a bribe by gathering, for example, family resources for it. The low-income person who gave me the

following example also mentioned that, on a different occasion, she bought a fake high school diploma because it was necessary to gain a job. However, on-the-spot situations are often beyond low-income people's financial abilities, especially since they rarely carry around much cash.

> "Usually I don't have enough money with me to bribe the police. So, there is no risk that I would participate in corruption. They can write me a ticket because I do not have 40,000 HUF in my pocket. Or I can say to him: I have 1,000 can you please release me? (laughing). You need some capital to solve something like this, which I do not have. Yes you need…(waving imaginary money sadly)."

Constraint My working-class respondents reported that they drive a lot. Using cars and vans to commute to different places where they work is a crucial part of their job. It also means that they often have to deal with traffic police. They told me that they are constrained to bribe police in these situations because they cannot afford to pay all the fines or to lose their driving license. A painter told me this:

> "You know we travel all around the neighboring towns…we do not work just in Budapest. Especially in the evening I drive the minivan fast because everybody wants to get home rapidly. So every two or three months they [police] catch us speeding. Thank God so far we were able to get off by bribing them. We pool our money together. It is sometimes one day's salary for two people. It is a little scary now because there is much more severe control over them [police officers] by their bosses. So they are reluctant to take the risk and receive bribes. But I have to take the risk because this [driving license] is my working tool. I cannot afford not to be corrupt (laughing)."

A way of life Researchers argue that frequent dealing with officials in the CEE positively correlates with use of contacts, giving presents and bribes in petty corruption [6]. My interviews with Hungarian entrepreneurs confirmed this: Entrepreneurs participate in petty corruption quite frequently. They repeatedly told me that without constantly offering bribes and corruption they could not run their businesses. I also recognized a pattern among entrepreneurs that corruption becomes regarded as a universal tool to solve all problems, almost a philosophy of everyday action.

> "Yes. After a while it is just so natural. For me it is an everyday process. So, it is not like my blood pressure is going up because I have to bribe somebody….. There is 3,000 HUF in my hand and "hello." "Hey Tomikám, please check my car accurately and do not write down everything on the receipt". Understand? It goes like that. I went to an authorized car service place and once I just started to "jatt" [Jatt is a Hungarian slang term (verb and noun) for a tip but also for a small bribe]. Why did I "jatt"? I just felt like it. He did not know either why I gave him "jatt". Now he knows why. I do the same with the police when they stop me. It is like: "Mr. policeman, why don't you buy something nice for your wife with this money?" And it works perfectly." (An entrepreneur respondent)

Entrepreneurs have more knowledge about petty corruption situations than their working class counterparts. They are confident and pro-active in dealing with low-level authorities. They know when circumstances make it possible to avoid paying a bribe or being extorted. A road construction entrepreneur who very often participates in corrupt deals put it like this:

"I would say that small entrepreneurs are trained for it [petty corruption] because it is necessary for survival. I just had a case last week. The police stopped me because I was driving in the lane restricted for buses. You know, I am not a chicken in these situations. I told him that my engine had suddenly stopped. That is why I was driving in the bus lane. Frankly, it did not make any sense. He said he would officially report me. I laughed at him: I do not care. Then he released me because he was too idle to start the paperwork. I already saw in his face when he stopped me that he just wanted to squeeze some money from me. I know this face. He made an attempt. That is it. I was too tough for him." (An entrepreneur respondent)

Not my level In contrast to the entrepreneurs and working class interviewees, I found that the middle-class interviewees rarely participated in on-the-spot corruption. They seemed to be unwilling to bribe traffic police, even though they frequently participated in more serious white-collar corruption.

"I do not care….I won't bribe them. I can easily pay in the 100,000 HUF penalty…and that is it. I will get back this money from somewhere else. If I bribed him [policeman] I would lower myself to his level." (A middle-class respondent)

and

"I would never bribe anybody on the street. Why?… It is just not my level. Tax evasion, buying fake receipts, concealment of income, this is my level (laughing). No, I am wrong because sometimes we give money to the doctor. When my wife was pregnant, we gave money regularly to the gynecologist. But that is it." (Another middle-class respondent)

and

"I do not participate in these things [low-level corruption] for moral reasons. But there are the bigger things, where you will settle for less…the stakes are much higher. This is the area of your personal existence and career. And I often say: all right, let's do it. Solve it in an illegal way. I do not say: give me money. I just say, solve it somehow." (A middle-class respondent)

Embedded in impersonal patterns My respondents in the elite never dealt directly with low-level officials in street-level petty corruption. They often simply paid the penalties. I also recognized impersonal patterns embedded into the formal structures that make elite members immune from the consequences of low-level rule violations.

"In Hungary only undersecretaries or higher-level guys are eligible for private use of state cars, usually with a chauffeur. But I went on all my private trips with a state car but no driver, of course…. I remember when I first saw they [the police] took a picture of my speeding car. I was speeding and I was waiting for the speeding ticket to arrive in a letter. You know, I saw the camera's flash. After six months I realized that I would never get that ticket because it was a state car. It does not matter who drove it. OK, I thought: that is fine. Then I had this other story. I went home with the state car, too fast I guess, and the police stopped me. He asked for my driving license and just started messing with me. You know the usual shit. But when I gave him the car's registration book and he saw that it was a state car, he suddenly froze. Then just: 'thank you and have a good trip' and just released me. Because there was a stamp in the book: The Ministry of the Interior." (An elite respondent)

Here is another example of how powerful formal settings can guarantee impersonality for top executives in low-level rule violations. The CEO of a Hungarian subsidiary of a huge multinational company put it this way:

"You know our executives like to drive fast. We have speeding cases almost every month. Recently we had to give a statement to the police about the identification of the driver. It is a new regulation. And we just say that it was Sergey the company's Russian guest or something like this. And the company pays the bill. There is no personal responsibility at all. Nobody will lose his driving license because he collected 15 tickets a year. It is a kind of fringe benefit here." (An elite respondent)

Communication strategies

On-the-spot corruption has a distinctive feature: the participants have to initiate a corrupt transaction with a partner whom they do not know. This is quite different from bond-based cases when the partners have a longer relationship and trust each other or the illegal deal is already arranged by corruption brokers. On the spot, they must use effective communication to start a negotiation because, very often, there is a time constraint in such deals. They also have to recognize the signs, gestures, and language of the agent that may indicate his/her willingness to be corrupted. This requires special social skills. Based on the respondents' social background, different communication strategies emerged from the interviews.

Mating dance Working-class interviewees told me that they are usually cautious about asking the other side directly about corruption. They leave room for maneuver just in case the agent is not willing to be corrupt.

"Corruption is a mating dance….You have to play the nice guy to the lady but both of you know what will really be the end of this….But you also have to be prepared if she rejects you. So, do not reveal too much. This is the art of corruption." (A working-class respondent)

They also emphasized the importance of meta-communication:

> "I looked into his eyes, very suggestively…and I saw in his eyes that he would be OK. I saw, I knew that he would accept the money." (A working-class respondent)

or

> "After one sentence I know if we are speaking the same language or not. I do not know why…the gestures, the words the other one uses. The language is important. You can know if your partner did this before…and it is not just the language, it is the invisible link between two people. Sooner or later you will feel it. It is like a man and a woman meet in a bar…and your instinct tells you that now it is possible.... maybe…." (A working-class respondent)

Ask it openly Entrepreneurs move comfortably in the world of petty corruption. They know the structure of corrupt situations and how to communicate with skill in such situations. My entrepreneur respondents initiated corrupt transactions boldly:

> "I always ask for it. You have to know how to ask, but you can ask it openly." (An entrepreneur respondent)

Frozen at the formal level Neither middle-class nor elite interviewees seemed to be eager to participate in low-level, on-the-spot corruption. When they had to deal with street-level authorities, they used formal language because they wanted to maintain their status or social distance. They told me that the other side was also often suspicious about them because the agent detected the social distance between them and decided that possible corruption would be very risky. Low-level officials noticed that their middle-class clients spoke differently, had nice clothes, and seemed well educated. All of these signs made the officials ambivalent about attempting corruption. In some cases, the officials started to use an overly formalized language, trying to emphasize their authority, while their clients with higher social status also tried to keep social distance and show their social superiority. In these cases, transactions became frozen at the most formal kind of interaction, because neither partner allowed any informality. Middle-class clients could not change the rules of relevance of their relationship with the agent on the spot. Therefore, they often chose the legal way.

Both sides play the generally accepted role of an agent and a client, the most typical framework regarded appropriate and relevant in a given situation, as in the following example [50]:

> "We play that he is the serious official and I am the polite client. We both know that probably my monthly salary is close to what he earns in a year. Anyway I do not want to lower myself to his level. So I remain a polite, but firm, client." (A middle-class respondent)

or

> "I think if I tried to bribe her [an official] I would just speak to her in a way that makes her feel I am different. It probably would not work because she fears me." (A middle-class respondent)

Keeping the business formal may also provide opportunity for middle-class clients to complain effectively about ill treatment and extortion attempts by the agent:

"It is very interesting because I think I could not bribe anybody in that office [department of local government]. For sure, the official would feel: 'I am not messing with this guy because he has tools to put me on the spot.' Because I can bring the case to higher forums…to the supervisor…or I can call my lawyer. I can do all these things. On the other hand, if I participate in corruption I cannot go on these legal ways anymore…because I got dirty, too."

Bond-based corruption

CEE countries have network-oriented cultures that provide a low-cost infra-structure for ordinary citizens to organize informal and often illegal transactions [51, 52]. Miller and coauthors found that, in CEE, on average, two-thirds of their respondents had not known anyone in the office when they dealt with low-level officials [6]. However, "knowing someone else in the office" signif-icantly increased their chances of using contacts, small presents, and bribes. Prior, repeated non-corrupt legal exchanges may establish stronger relationships and mutual trust between the actors, and these bonds can be the basis of future corrupt relationships [53, 54]. My interviewees gave me numerous examples where corruption was based on a previous relationship between the actors. In contrast to on-the-spot situations where the immediate formal authority of the agent dominates the relationship, bond-based corrupt transactions are rather social relationships that the participants enter into purposefully and voluntarily. The client also often has an opportunity to control some parts of the corrupt situation such as date, time, place, or regularity of the deal. Sometimes, brokers mediate between the agent and the client, which may also reduce the risk for the client in participating in bond-based transactions. Two different types of bond-based corruption emerged in my interviews. In the first type, an already-established connection was used as infrastructure for future corrupt transactions. Here, the client and the agent have a prior relationship. The second type occurs when the client does not know the agent. Since he/she does not have direct contact to the agent, the only way to obtain such resources is to find somebody who can reach out on their behalf. In this case, a third party broker acts as a middleman in introducing the corrupt actors to each other or in carrying out the corrupt exchange.

Structures of bond-based relationships

Infrastructure for illegal deals A successful previous corrupt transaction or originally legal relationship can be transformed into a stronger bond-based corrupt relationship. For example, police officers, customs officials, or bus drivers, who are regularly assigned to the same place, had more options to meet with the same people and develop a bond with them. My interviews suggested that small local governments in

suburban districts of Budapest are also places where local community members have a higher chance of meeting the same officials again. A working-class respondent explained:

"I think if you are a returning guest or customer somewhere, sooner or later you will ask [for a corrupt deal]. You know, just ask if you can do it in a "smarter" way. Nobody is the enemy of his money [an idiom for 'no one pays more than he has to']."

If the infrastructure is used for corrupt transactions regularly, the corrupt relationship may become institutionalized: the partners create standard frameworks of the transaction, such as regular prices or times and places of meetings. Both parties are interested in this standardization because it reduces uncertainty and decreases the transaction costs of repeating negotiations and arrangements [54, 55]. When stable and repetitive patterns of illegal activity emerge, the phenomenon becomes part of the actors' normal everyday lives [18]. Participants here more explicitly formulate the rules of transactions and construct the corrupt relationship.

"I agreed with the nurse of my doctor that she can do my blood work in the doctors' office. So, I do not have to go upstairs and wait an hour in front of the laboratory. I always leave her 500 HUF and she knows this. This was the standard price in our little established business." (A working-class respondent)

However, bond-based corruption can also be institutionalized when the client tries to avoid negative consequences or extortion. This example also highlights the weaknesses of the often-mentioned anti-corruption policy, rotation. We see how such measures can be circumvented. A small shop owner told me this story:

"My shop is in downtown Budapest. So, if I want to go by car I have to put a fortune in the parking meter…and run from the shop to put more money in, every two hours. After I had collected some tickets in the first two months I thought I should do something. I got to know the parking attendants. Once I asked one of them: what if I pay an amount each day to their pocket and they just turn a blind eye to the relation between the parking meter and my car?. And I was shocked because the guy routinely responded: OK, this would be 3,000 HUF a week. It sounded like an official tariff. That was two years ago, now I pay them 16,000 a month. Yes, they raised the price a little, but I can park anywhere around the shop. They know my car. And there was another thing. About a year ago new parking attendants appeared which made me nervous. But they soon assured me that they had known about my little deal with the former guys. They said the parking company had started to rotate them because of corruption. Of course these guys did not want to give up their business. They created a list, and the phone numbers, of people and small shop owners who bribe them and they shared these lists. So, if they are ordered to another neighborhood, based on the list, they know from whom they should collect the money. They work like a small illegal company within the big company." (An entrepreneur respondent)

Need for a contact In some cases, when the client did not have a direct relationship with the agent, the client had to find an actor who could provide them. Typically, this required several mediators (brokers). The client had to activate his own network and ask acquaintances, friends, and family members. In these cases, corruption brokers mediate between the agent and the client, which also reduces the risk for the client in participating in bond-based deals.

> "OK. I'm not a corrupt guy but I can solve some difficulties…actually I have to. If my old car has to go through the yearly inspection test, I just call some friends and they find me a corrupt car inspection service. Let's say there is a crack on the windshield. An average guy like me is struggling with money problems. A new windshield is 20,000 HUF and we are not even talking about the worn tires and brake shoes. If I bribe the guy to pass my car through the inspection, that costs only 8,000. I need the car every day to get to work. What will all poor men do? Just bribe the inspection staff. But you need somebody because you cannot just walk in. That is not because I do not dare to ask, but it takes too long a time to find the person to whom the bribe should be paid. So you could easily go to the wrong person. You have to know the source and the exact amount." (A working-class respondent)

An interviewee quoted above gave me another example of a bond-based corruption experience. She was unemployed and sought a shop assistant's job at an international chain of newspaper stores, but the employer required all applicants to have at least a high school diploma. Since the woman had only an elementary education, she activated her social network:

> "I asked a few people. I wanted a high school diploma with a commercial qualification. One contact was through my sister and the other one was a former colleague. Both could have got me a diploma but the second one was too hungry and wanted too much. So finally my sister's acquaintance brought it to me. I did not meet with the guy who actually sold it. I gave my sister's friend my personal data and the money. I trusted him." (A working-class respondent)

What is exchanged for what?

In their study, De Graaf and Huberts found that, next to material gains, the most important motive for officials to become corrupt was a combination of achieving status and impressing others, and in some cases love or friendship were also among the motives [56]. Although the likelihood that the actors might meet again and the stronger social ties between them would make payments other than cash possible, my interviewees said that a cash bribe is still the dominant form of payment in bond-based transactions.

> "They need only my cash, man,…nothing else. And this is what I bring them."
> (A working-class respondent)

We have everything that is needed Middle-class and elite members often do not need the illicit resources that can be offered at the lowest levels of organizations.

> "Yes, I heard that it is possible to buy a fake college degree. But this is what we [middle-class] never do. Because we have eight college diplomas. Therefore, we have everything that is needed." (A middle-class respondent)

or

> "No no no [laughing], I do not have to bribe those car inspection guys. Do you know why? Because I usually sell my cars before they would need a technical test…and just buy a new one." (An elite respondent)

Old acquaintances In other cases, when higher-status clients want to solve problems at lower levels, they often simply use their social contacts in the middle or higher levels of organizational hierarchies. Then, the contact person handles the cases within the organizational hierarchy using their authority or informal contacts. These are typically reciprocal exchanges when favors, rather than cash, are exchanged.

> "There was this parking hysteria a few years ago. I had an apartment in Kertész Street…you know where…next block to the Academy of Music. My little son lived there. He sometimes went home in the morning when these parking guys already had given him a ticket. The car was registered in another district, so parking was not free there. He suddenly accumulated a 330,000 HUF penalty. By luck, the head of the parking company was an old acquaintance…and I said it was too much money to pay …I called up this guy and he said: 'come on in my office but bring your boy too.' He [the acquaintance] was dressing my son down…as it should have been…like a good colleague. Then, he just typed his code and pushed Enter. And that is it, the record was deleted. And he still hesitated to take the whisky." (A middle-class respondent)

or

> "I have never tried to solve things in this way because when I had to go to the local government in our district everybody knew my mother. She and the deputy mayor were classmates at college. I did not even know. But everything went so smoothly and quickly when, for example, I wanted a new ID." (A middle class respondent)

or

> "Listen, I cannot get a good electrician, but an average working-class guy can hardly get a good doctor, a specialist. It is not a big deal for me because my father is a doctor. So, little people have to pay gratuities to get a doctor. They even have to wait two months for a special examination. For me, my father just calls one of his old classmates and I nip in the same afternoon." (A middle-class respondent)

Table 4 The role of the clients with different social backgrounds in on-the–spot transactions

	Lower working-class	Working-class	Entrepreneurs	Middle-class	Elite
Participation in on-the-spot transactions	Cannot afford to participate	Feel constrained to participate	Confidently and pro-actively participate	Rarely participate	Never participate
	Use legal ways		Corruption can be a 'way of life'	Use legal ways	Use legal ways
					Enjoy impersonal immunity from negative sanctions
Communication strategy	Formal communication	Cautiously initiate	Boldly initiate	Formal communication	Formal communication
		Meta-communication is important	Dominate the communication	Play the socially accepted role	

Table 5 The role of the clients with different social backgrounds in bond-based transactions

	Lower working-class	Working-class	Entrepreneurs	Middle-class	Elite
Participation in bond-based transactions	Try to find a contact	Try to find a contact Regular transactions become institutionalized	Try to find a contact Regular transactions become institutionalized	Do not need resources offered at low levels Reach higher levels of the hierarchy through informal networks	Do not need resources offered at low levels Reach higher levels of the hierarchy through informal networks

Symbolic resources Bourdieu claims that a gift-giver can accumulate symbolic capital in return, such as recognition, honor, prestige, or nobility [57]. I collected this interesting example from a doorman and locker room inspector in a Turkish steam bath. He was an agent who obtained symbolic capital from clients in return for short cuts. In this case, the agent was in a subordinate position to the clients, because of the social status differences.

> "Some days the pool is crowded with pensioners and tourists and the guests need line numbers and have to wait one or two hours to get in the pool. I let some habitués into the bath immediately and for free. In return these guests give me generous tips. I have known them for years. They are wealthy businessmen and entrepreneurs. These guys drive very expensive sports cars and come to the bath in the middle of the day when everybody else works in an office. Knowing these people and talking with them like friends gives me a very high prestige among other staff members in the bath. They really envy me." (A working-class respondent)

Conclusion

This article has explored the role of clients in petty corruption in post-communist Hungary through the unusual strategy of conducting in-depth interviews with actors who actively participated in corruption. Much of the past literature on corruption has collected data in a very indirect fashion, either drawing on press reports or using surveys and reputational measures. Scholars have assumed that, because corruption is illicit, that they cannot study it in a more direct fashion. In contrast, I found that, in a country where corruption is widespread, people of varied social statuses are willing to provide details about their experiences with corruption, and these provide rich data for research and analyses of corruption.

My interviewees described two different types of petty corruption. When the actors meet on the spot, clients have to adapt very quickly to circumstances such as the already given time and a place as well as the immediate formal authority of the agent. This kind of corruption is frequently coercive and involves extortion. Sometimes, however, it is the client who takes the initiative to gain some bureaucratic purpose or to reduce the cost of a transaction by offering a bribe to an official.

A contrasting type, bond-based corruption, is built upon already existing relationships and networks. In this case, clients usually see their corrupt act as voluntary and they also have considerable freedom to structure the transaction.

Tables 4 and 5 summarize my observations about the role of the clients with different social backgrounds in petty corruption. The most noteworthy finding is that different social classes are affected by and experience corruption in quite different ways. Variation in social distance in petty corruption, measured by social class differences between clients and agents, affects the strategies that clients use to deal with street-level agents. There are significant differences in petty corruption patterns depending upon the circumstances of the relationship and depending on the client's social background.

According to Lomnitz, the social distance between corrupt actors has an impact on the form of corrupt exchange: greater social distance tends to produce cash-based

"market type" exchange, while in the context of shorter social distance reciprocal exchange between the actors tends to predominate [30]. My research supports Lomnitz's argument about on-the-spot situations when the actors do not know each other. However, I found that cash bribes still remain the dominant payment method even in bond-based cases. Although here the relationship is built on stronger social ties, many clients cannot provide valuable resources other than cash to the agent. I document one case when higher-status clients provided symbolic resources to the agent, rather than cash.

While working-class respondents and entrepreneurs, even if they use intermediaries, make corrupt deals with agents at the lowest level of organizations, middle-class and elite members in Hungary tend to avoid making direct corrupt deals with low-level agents. They prefer to follow legal methods in on-the-spot situations, even if there is a certain loss in doing so, such as paying an unfair fine. However, having followed the legal path, using bond-based transactions, clients with higher status will often transfer the case to their arena of influence, the higher levels of organizational hierarchies where they can deploy their social capital, and use their middle-class and elite contacts to gain their desired ends. Here, we find reciprocal exchanges between the client and their intermediaries who then handle the low-level case within the organizational hierarchical settings. In other words, although middle-class and elite members may seem (like lower-SES individuals) to be victimized by corrupt lower-level officials, they can often mobilize their networks of influence to undo or reverse any harm that has been done to them. Thus, they stay 'clean' in on-the-spot encounters with corrupt officials, but use a different kind of corrupt influence higher up organizations to reverse any costs of staying clean.

Although these findings about class-based differences in how petty corruption plays itself out were obtained from research in Hungary, it is my belief that the types of petty corruption and mechanisms that I have described are likely to be present to varying degrees in other countries and cultures. Hopefully, other researchers will attempt similar data collection in additional countries.

Appendix

The interviews included questions such as the following:
    What do you think generally about corruption in Hungary?
    How common or widespread is corruption in your opinion?
    What are the possible reasons for corruption in Hungary?
    What are the typical excuses or explanations for corruption?
    How does corruption influence your life?
    Have you ever participated in corruption?
    How did you get involved in a corrupt transaction or corruption?
    What was your role in the transaction?
    What was the other actors' role in the transaction?
    Can you describe the main phases of the transaction?
    What was the status of the actors in the corruption you got involved?
    Were they equal or rather unequal participants?
    Who can initiate a corrupt transaction; in what situations?
    Are there rules, codes, rituals or routines in these transactions?

Why do they remain silent about it?
Who are the central figures in corrupt networks?

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