VIOLENCE AND THE COSTS OF HONESTY: 
RETHINKING BUREAUCRATS’ CHOICES 
TO TAKE BRIBES

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Explanations of bureaucrats’ decisions to take bribes include accounts of incentives as well as expectations. However, there are further considerations in violent contexts, where refusal of bribes may have dire consequences. Yet, insight into this topic is limited. This article investigates how violence upholds bribery, through interviews with South African officials who enforce regulations in communities where gangs operate. The investigation shows that when citizens offer bribes to enable rule violations, this is a process of both temptation and threats: officials who refuse bribes face intimidation by both citizens and colluding colleagues. This illustrates how violence may function as a mechanism to enforce corrupt contracts between bureaucrats and criminal citizens. Through reducing costs in such settings, bribe-taking is partly a strategy of social protection. This has implications for policy and suggests that, besides incentives and expectations, administrative reforms may benefit from ‘fixing the security’ of bureaucrats in violent contexts.

INTRODUCTION

In a large number of countries, bureaucratic or petty corruption remains relatively widespread. Such behaviour occurs, for instance, when citizens have to bribe officials for services they are entitled to or when they pay enforcement officers to make law violations go unnoticed. Yet, there is nothing petty about this problem. Corruption in a country’s civil service is widely believed to result in numerous negative outcomes, social as well as economic (Treisman 2007). However, there is no such consensus over what drives bureaucratic corruption and especially a bureaucrat’s choice to engage in bribery. Keeping in mind the point that the treatment of corruption is closely related to its diagnosis (Dong and Torgler 2012), this is a crucial issue for social scientists that seek to advance reforms of public administrations.

Rationalist explanations for bureaucrats’ decisions to take bribes (or not) focus on incentives, stressing factors of gains in relation to the probability of getting caught and the potency of sanctions (Becker and Stigler 1974). This reasoning makes scholars propose that bribe-taking may be reduced by reforms such as raising civil servants’ salaries or increasing monitoring and punishment (Ades and Di Tella 1999). This approach may be contrasted to a conceptualization of a bureaucrat’s choice to engage in bribery as a social dilemma (Rothstein 2011). This thinking puts expectations into focus as bribe-taking is the logical strategy when most others in the bureaucracy are believed to be corrupt (Persson et al. 2013). This article proposes that these two depictions, regardless of whether one believes that they contradict or in fact complement each other, may be in need of supplements. Rather than presenting a third line of explanation, this article builds on previous approaches to craft an argument holding that prior research has not focused sufficiently on the costs of honesty – the consequences facing non-corrupt bureaucrats in contexts of widespread violence.

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Many nation states do not hold a monopoly over violence. In such areas, the officials’ task of enforcing laws may be characterized by tensions. For example, policemen in the Afghan countryside have to adapt to militias that do not conform to laws. Such officials will often be bribed so that law violations can proceed as usual. But what are the reasons for an official in such a context to take a bribe? It seems obvious that incentives matter: a miniscule salary and the low risk of getting caught must be important. And surely, expectations should matter: when most other colleagues take bribes, it must feel pointless to be honest (cf. Dong et al. 2012). However, these explanations do not consider the role of security for such officials. In these contexts criminal actors may enforce their will by violent threats. And it is plausible that, if it is dangerous to deny such actors the possibility of paying their way around the law, this will affect the choice to take bribes.1

This reasoning echoes the saying ‘plata o plomo’ – silver or lead – meaning that one can accept a bribe or face a bullet. The expression refers to the political influence gained by Latin American drug lords through the use of extortion (Thachuk 1997). In this sense, the article extends the scope of models on criminals’ bargaining power through temptation and threats targeting politicians (Dal Bó and Di Tella 2003; Dal Bó et al. 2006; Sberna 2014) to focus on bureaucrats and, more explicitly, on their choice to take bribes. Yet, while intuitive, research has rarely explored this reasoning in detail.

The aim of this research endeavour is to gain further insight into how violence and intimidation may affect bureaucrats’ choosing to take bribes and, therefore, corroborate with administrative corruption. The article asks the following question: In what way does violence and intimidation affect bureaucrats’ choices to take bribes? By exploring this question in a thorough analysis of original empirical material, the article seeks to arrive at both theoretical and empirical insights. It reports the results from interviews with officials in the South African Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF). These officials enforce regulations on resources in rural areas, threatening the income of gangs that run lucrative poaching operations. Focusing on bureaucrats who implement policy in a context where violence and bribery is widespread, this case study has rich potential to offer important insights into this relationship.

Through this investigation, the article contributes theoretically in two ways: first, it shows that there are direct costs for a bureaucrat who remains honest in a context where non-state actors use violence to carry out their law violations. Second, it illustrates that in such contexts, violence may be seen as a mechanism of corrupt contract enforcement between bureaucrats and criminal citizens. These findings have policy implications and suggest that anti-corruption reforms may benefit from ‘fixing the security’ of bureaucrats working in violent contexts.

EXPLAINING A BUREAUCRAT’S CHOICE TO ENGAGE IN CORRUPTION

Incentives matter
The work of Becker and Stigler (1974, p. 7) outlines a model where the choice of enforcement officers to engage in bribery, or not, is understood through a cost–benefit analysis: the gain from bribery is weighed against the probability of the state detecting malfeasance and, given that exposure could mean loss of employment, the minimum salary that would discourage enforcers from taking bribes. Scholars following this tradition of analysing the ‘market of enforcement’ have often focused on modelling the likelihood of detection, penalty rates and the relative size of salaries (e.g. Besley and McLaren 1993; Ades and Di Tella 1999).
This reasoning is similar to frameworks that describe bribery as a problem that is understood through principal–agent theory. Amongst its various applications, these frameworks are used to analyse the challenge of bureaucratic delegation. A typical principal–agent relationship is the dyadic one between an employer and an employee in public administration. The goals of principals and agents may conflict and, because of information asymmetries, principals cannot be sure that agents are carrying out their will (Milgrom and Roberts 1992). Therefore, the principal will face the problem of knowing whether or not agents will pursue the principal’s objective: thus, when delegating ‘agency costs’ may arise, that subordinates will act in their self-interest and engage in bribery to benefit themselves or their kin (Klitgaard 1988). The challenge for principals is therefore to align the interests of agents with their own in order to create incentive structures and to monitor the behaviour of agents (Shapiro 2005). Accordingly, ‘the essence of the principal’s problem is the design of just such an incentive structure’ (Moe 1984, p. 756).

In line with this influential thinking it has been proposed that bribery may be reduced through ‘providing the right incentives to bureaucrats’ (Ades and Di Tella 1997, p. 504). These explanations assume that civil servants seek to maximize their expected income and that higher pay, increased monitoring and stronger punishments may therefore be successful policies to reduce administrative corruption (Rose-Ackerman 1999; Van Rijckeghem and Weder 2001). Following this reasoning it is said that ‘sufficiently high rewards would eliminate all incentives to accept bribes’ (Polinsky and Shavell 2000, p. 4).

**Expectations matter**

A vein of contrasting research points to the role of expectations of other bureaucratic actors in upholding bribery. Rothstein (2011) pictures corruption as a social dilemma where collective and individual interests stand in contrast. This reasoning departs from institutionalist accounts where ‘corruption represents an example of what are called frequently-dependent equilibria, and our expected gain from corruption depends crucially on the number of other people we expect to be corrupt’ (Bardhan 1997, p. 1331). A ‘player’ in these game-like situations knows that most colleagues will engage in corruption. In such contexts, ‘bureaucrats or policemen, have no incentive to refrain from corrupt practices because even if they as individuals start behaving honestly, nothing will change’ (Rothstein 2011, p. 99). Authors drawing on research into social influence and criminality as well as insights from behavioural writings on reciprocity describe this as conditional corruption. They find empirical micro-level evidence suggesting that individuals justify corrupt behaviour based on assessments of other peers’ behaviour and that levels of corruption therefore tend to be ‘contagious’ across macro-level geographical units (see Dong and Torgler 2012; Dong et al. 2012). This reasoning has similarities to the literature on compliance to social norms, which provides reasons to believe that people indeed make decisions on whether or not to follow rules based on assessments of others’ behaviour (e.g. Torgler 2007).

Researchers have criticized how principal–agent theory depicts corruption, especially the postulation of the principal’s intentions: ‘A drawback of the principal–agent approach is that to some extent it assumes away the problem, especially in [a developing country] context, because the political will to engage in vigorous monitoring and implement appropriate strategies is lacking, or worse yet the principal is himself corrupt’ (Rauch and Evans 2000, p. 51). Similarly, authors have pointed out that the assumption of an ‘honest principal’ – such as a senior manager – may be problematic when corruption is widespread since ‘there will simply be no actors willing to monitor and punish corrupt behavior’
(Persson et al. 2013, p. 452). Put differently, Shapiro (2005, p. 280) observes an inherent problem of this theory’s recommendations: ‘in an escalating cycle of agents overseeing agents, we must ask: Who monitors the monitors?’ Persson et al. (2013, p. 457) instead conceptualize corruption as a collective action and highlight why this may have explanatory power: ‘Being the sole “sucker” in a corrupt game is the even worse outcome to everyone, which tends to lock the game into the suboptimal “corrupt” equilibrium as long as everyone expects everyone else to be corrupt.’

The implications for reforms following from these two depictions are contrasting. While the principal–agent frameworks emphasize incentives, the collective action approach differs. Its proponents instead state that ‘the important thing will be to change actors’ beliefs about what “all” other actors are likely to do so that most actors expect most other actors to play fairly’ (Persson et al. 2013, p. 464). Thus, this perspective argues that it is essential to ‘fix the expectations’.2

The cost of honesty matters

Whether or not one believes that the two perspectives contradict or in fact complement each other, it is important to note that explanations of bureaucrats’ reasons for bribe-taking may fall short for individual irregularities. Becker and Stigler (1974, p. 3) acknowledge that some bureaucrats will tend to remain honest as ‘for a given bribe, some men will condone offenses that other men would prosecute’. Also, Ades and Di Tella (1999, p. 984) state that ‘a desirable feature of a model of corruption is that it allows for the existence of both honest and dishonest agents’. However, previous explanations have not extensively reviewed the costs of remaining honest. The departure of this article from previous research is the proposition that there is more to bureaucrats’ choices to engage in bribery than financial losses or becoming ‘a sucker’ when considering contexts of widespread violence.

A key feature of states is to ‘offer [its citizens] protection from local and external violence’ (Tilly 1985, p. 171). Yet, states have different capacities to supply such protection. In Bäck and Hadenius’s (2008) discussion of state capacity they make the point that several countries in fact currently do not control their territory. More moderate weakness in state capacity are settings where a criminal syndicate or other actors challenge the violence monopoly. Authors have discussed such organizations, focusing especially on the Italian Mafia (Grossman 1995; Gambetta 1996). A further type of challenged state capacity is seen in localities where citizens violently resist policies. Fjeldstad’s (2001) description of tax collection in rural Tanzania in the late 1990s, where citizens sometimes assaulted public tax collectors, may serve as one such example.

There are several examples of situations where violence and corruption create problems of enforcement. Perhaps most discussed is the saying ‘plata o plomo’, stemming from the terror in 1980s Colombia. The drug lords in the region used coercion and bribes to influence the political sphere to allow their network of smuggling, and they killed judges, investigators and politicians who refused to engage in corruption (Thachuk 1997; Tate 1999). Similar events have more recently taken place in a number of countries, for instance, Mexico (Simser 2011). The presence of cartels and such behaviour has led to theories of influence in policymaking that discuss the use of temptations and threats. Notably, Dal Bó and colleagues use these examples to create a model where pressure groups use both carrots and sticks when influencing policy (Dal Bó and Di Tella 2003; Dal Bó et al. 2006). These theories focus on the bargaining power of criminal groups to gain political influence. Hence, they discuss large-scale corruption that involves politicians in higher government.
The scope of this article is instead explicitly focused on bureaucrats and their choice of whether or not to engage in small-scale bribery.

In light of such violence, previous descriptions of bureaucrats’ choice to take bribes may need to be complemented. Consider again a situation where an official enforces laws in an area where violent actors operate and may be accustomed to paying enforcement agents bribes to ignore their (illegal) actions. It is quite plausible that such an official is faced with difficult choices and pressure from actors who wish to violate the law. Can present theory explain this agent’s choice to take a bribe or not? The accounts focusing on incentives do not seem to include the impact from violence in the standard analysis. In the perspective where expectations are in focus, a bureaucrat’s worst outcome is the risk of being the only employee without extra income. Yet, if violence is a part of the game there is possibly more to such defection than just being a sucker: it could mean that bureaucrats that do not take bribes will face repercussions.

To be precise, the argument developed in this article does not seek to present a ‘third perspective’ on why bureaucrats engage in bribery. Rather, it builds on previous approaches to craft a reasoning holding that non-corrupt behaviour is in certain contexts very costly. The argument is to some extent informed by incentive-based thinking, which states that the choice to take bribes involves an estimation of potential costs and benefits of such behaviour. Yet, when considering violence there is much more at stake than economic parameters, as it becomes a matter of physical harm for the individual or their kin. More specifically, the argument in this article builds on the assumption that violence is likely to be different from other aspects in the calculation of taking bribes or not because of (a) its direct impact and (b) the magnitude of this cost.

The reasoning also draws on the collective action approach to bribery. In fact, it is plausible that the social dimension of expectations could be of importance here: the more individuals in a bureaucracy that are threatened to engage in a corrupt state of affairs, the less inclined is a single bureaucrat to refuse the will of law-violating actors. To illustrate, a policeman working in a Mexican town where criminals use bribes to enable drug smuggling is likely to perceive it as much riskier to be the only official to refuse to take side payments than compared to a situation where he or she expects that other colleagues also will remain non-corrupt and defy violent groups.

The objection to the proposition that bureaucrats in such contexts are pressured by threats to accept bribes is the following: why would violent actors simply not defy rules without offering a bribe? To bolster this argument I build on writings on contract enforcement. Studies have pinpointed that corrupt transactions are not legally enforceable (Rose-Ackerman 1999). Hence, such exchanges may involve opportunism, that is, that one party does not fulfil its side of the bargain. In the absence of legal prosecution mechanisms, Lambsdorff (2002, p. 229) points out that corrupt contracts must be constructed in a manner that ‘guarantees cooperative behavior at all stages of contract fulfillment, i.e. contracts must be self-enforcing’. Yet, he continues, ‘corrupt agreements are not self-enforcing in and of themselves. Special mechanisms are required to achieve this.’

I therefore assume that (1) the threat of violence may be one such way that a corrupt transaction is enforced. As shown by della Porta and Vanucci (1999), one enforcement device for corrupt agreements is to establish a reputation. I therefore further assume that (2) a solution for law-violating citizens could be to establish a reputation for violent behaviour. This key insight is in fact briefly mentioned by Lambsdorff (2002, p. 233), as he states that criminal actors’ ‘capability to use violence against people can provide them...
with a prime position to prevent opportunism [when engaging in corrupt contracts]. Importantly, it is rational for these actors to increase the number of colluding bureaucrats in the administration as this leaves fewer honest actors that may possibly act as whistle-blowers. I therefore finally assume that (3) by pressuring bureaucrats to engage in bribery they establish a stable corrupt relationship where the parties involved have the incentive to be silent.

To summarize, there are convincing reasons to assume that bureaucrats who abstain from bribery in contexts of widespread violence may face large costs. Yet, while intuitive, this reasoning is foremost hypothetical. Few studies investigate how bureaucrats’ choice of taking bribes or not is affected by the presence of violent actors and intimidation from them. Having identified this intuitive gap in knowledge, the article explores this issue with the purpose of gaining empirical as well as theoretical insight into how violence and intimidation affect the choice to take bribes and, therefore, uphold administrative corruption. The article reports the results from interviews with South African officials enforcing resources regulations. In this setting, the enforcement of legislation that seeks to counter illegal fishing threatens the interests of criminal gangs that thrive on poaching. Moreover, the enforcement authority is known to have corruption problems. The investigation therefore offers promising opportunities to flesh out our understanding of this relationship.

CASE AND METHODS

In order to investigate bureaucrats’ tendencies to engage in bribe-taking, focusing on the challenge of being non-corrupt in a context of violence, one could hypothetically use survey data with such officials across countries. To date, however, such a survey is not available and researchers are therefore left to collect primary data, which due to restraints in resources, will often focus on a smaller number of cases. This study is limited because it focuses on one such setting. Therefore, the claims of generalizing the findings from this inquiry should be seen in relation to the context described below. As the following section outlines, this context has certain features – for example, its low institutional quality and high degree of violence – and it is possible that other nuances would emerge if a similar study were conducted in a context with different features.

A context of corruption and violence

This study focuses on the implementation of the South African Marine Living Resources Act by officials in the DAFF. This legislation specifies the legal means to conduct fishing, for instance by outlining which actions are forbidden, such as fishing without a licence or in protected areas (Republic of South Africa 1998). The Compliance Directorate of DAFF enforces these rules with land-based patrols. Its officers, who work at substations of rural towns along the coast, inspect sites where fishers offload catches to monitor their compliance. Non-compliant fishermen will – in theory – face sanctions, such as receiving a fine or losing their fishing licence.

The relationship between state agents and citizens in South Africa in general, and in the fisheries sector in particular, has a history of conflict. During Apartheid, small-scale fishermen – where few, except boat owners, were white – were ‘considered “illegal” by the state or operated under the regulations governing recreational fishers’ (Hauck 2008, p. 638). In the 1990s, the present legislation outlined a system of rights and quotas that contained several areas of controversy, particularly with regard to who could fish and
how much. These regulations are often perceived as unjust, disadvantaging small actors who are not granted access to this source of livelihood. These aspects have contributed to widespread non-compliance and mistrust between actors.

Most notable is the situation in the abalone fishery (an edible mollusk, harvested through diving). Abalone was regulated over recent decades and – because of depleting stocks – its trade prohibited completely in some years. Yet, due to demand from Asian markets, harvesting is extremely lucrative and resources are continuously smuggled abroad: ‘This has led to what is known as the “abalone war” and has also contributed to violence between authorities and the poachers’ (Hauck and Sweijd 1999, p. 1029). Studies suggest that criminals from other sectors – such as drug dealers – entered the regime during the 1990s (Raemaekers et al. 2011). The enforcement should therefore be seen in this light: substations are located in communities that depend on a livelihood threatened by existing regulations.

A further aspect is the weakness in administrative capacity of DAFF and especially the practice of bribery among its low-level officials. Following a number of court cases in the 1990s, corruption has been known to exist in the Compliance Directorate during inspections (Raemaekers et al. 2011; Sundström 2015). Such behaviour may be manifested in receiving boxes of fish or money in exchange for ignoring fishermen’s rule violations. Accounts from fishermen depict how they seem to be accustomed to paying a bribe when they are caught for violations (Sundström 2013). For instance, a police officer was recently convicted of keeping abalone in his freezer with a value exceeding 1.3 million rands (approximately 125,000 US dollars) (Hermanus Times 2014).

Methods

The material consists of interviews with enforcement officers and key informants. This method was chosen since interviews especially have been shown to be successful in exploring perceptions of sensitive topics (e.g. Beck 2012). I carried out 43 interviews between January and April 2014. In detail, 34 respondents were inspectors at the Compliance Directorate. Among these were also former inspectors – facing fewer challenges for speaking openly. The other nine key informants were former senior managers from this directorate, including past directors, and stakeholders such as journalists, scholars and leaders of fishermen’s associations. They were sampled because of their insight into the situation and their views are mainly used to corroborate the accounts given by the inspectors.

A person involved in this research project who acted as a ‘facilitator’ to obtain contacts in this sector introduced me to key senior managers. These persons sent a message to the staff, giving the inspectors permission to talk with me about the problems of enforcement. Without revealing their names to management, I then visited these inspectors. They were purposely selected to vary on a range of individual features that may affect perceptions and experiences of bribery and violence. I also made sure to visit a large number of substations along the southern and western parts of the coast, known to have different challenges, that is, varying in how heavy resistance is from poachers. Respondents were then chosen from these differing locations. Without disclosing information about individual respondents that enables their identification, it can be said that the sample characteristics include five women, nine white inspectors, and seven substation managers. The average length of work experience is 12 years and ranges from under one to 39 years. Two inspectors were recently retired.
When faced with the question of participating in these interviews, the respondents were told that these talks would be voluntary and confidential. On no occasion did a potential respondent opt out when asked to be interviewed or, at a later stage, from being present at such a meeting. The interviews were most often performed in their offices, at the suggestion of these respondents as they believed that being interviewed in their homes would create unwanted attention in the local community. The conversations were held in English, the first language for a majority of respondents, so no third party was present during these meetings. The talks lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. To ensure confidentiality and trust, the interviews were performed without a recording device. Instead, I took detailed notes that were transcribed after the meeting. This may come at the potential cost of accuracy in wording, but is deemed better than other strategies such as employing another person to take notes and, thus, possibly risk making respondents more cautious about talking openly.

The interviews were in two parts. The first section’s questions focused on the challenge of enforcement and aspects surrounding bribery when inspecting fishermen. The second part contained open-ended questions where respondents were asked how the situation could be improved. They then often initiated descriptions of intimidation and how this was perceived to fuel corruption – accounts that were later analysed in detail. Briefly, it should be mentioned that since the sampling of respondents was purposive, the interpretation of this material seeks to find themes and illustrations of insights rather than to analyse answers with an approach suitable for probabilistic sampling, for instance, quantifying how frequently respondents mention threats during interviews.

A limitation with talking to inspectors may be that, because of social desirability, they tend to ‘justify’ their behaviour by blaming violent actors. While this is inherently difficult to ascertain, I deem that this is not likely to be the case. If the respondents wanted to put themselves in a positive light, it is intuitive that they would rather have claimed never to misbehave. Instead, the accounts often contained stories of how they had taken fish or money to be blind to violations. Moreover, several key informants, who are not inspectors and therefore do not have the same incentive to justify these agents’ actions, corroborated this general story by suggesting that inspectors work under the threat of violence from poachers. Furthermore, local media outlets report anecdotally about violent clashes taking place between poachers and enforcement officers (e.g. Cape Times 2012).

RESULTS

The following section first shows the presence of violent intimidation that these officials are working under and the implications this has for engaging in bribe-taking. It then presents further nuances of bribery in violent contexts, focusing on the interplay between colluding colleagues and law-violating citizens.

Through the interview material, respondents portray a situation where fishermen and officials are involved in widespread bribery that results in law violations going unpunished. An inspector describes this behaviour:

We have eleven substations [on one part of the coast]. And out of these I know that only three of them are without corrupt officials … If you should get rid of all corrupt inspectors, then out of our two hundred only thirty would be left. (R 13)

In more detail, these bribes often consist of giving a part of the catch to the inspector, but also of monetary payments:
[A fisheries actor that had violated certain rules] said, ‘Can we make a plan? I will pay you and you will write a better figure’ [i.e. legal level of catches]. Then he put something in my pocket; it was a thick wad of money. (R 19)

Stories of this kind are plentiful. However, it is also obvious that not all inspectors are comfortable with this situation. Many claim that they have problems with refusing these bribes and that they take place in the context of violent intimidation. Numerous accounts illustrate that the inspectors often feel threatened in their line of work. These threats have implications as inspectors sometimes consider it too risky to enforce as they are supposed to:

Last week some person there threatened us with stones. So we just had to let him walk away with poached resources. See this scar [shows his chin], a poacher cut me here two years ago. (R 24)

[Fishermen may] threaten that they are going to burn your house. This happened to a colleague … There was a case a while back when poachers kidnapped the wife of an inspector. This inspector was too enforcing. So there is a balance. (R 6)

And in practice, this ‘balance’ often means that inspectors start to be pragmatic when enforcing rules. Being lax with fishermen who violate rules is, in such a situation, the easier choice:

[A colleague] approached some guys who were coming up from the water. And he was stabbed … You cannot be too headstrong. If I see poaching I say to them kindly to throw it in. And I will not write a fine … So you show a nice attitude. (R 5)

There is a scaredness. You know that you can trigger violence … They threaten to do this if you are too harsh. It hangs over your head. So you start thinking, ‘Why should I?’ (R 1)

If someone is getting caught they will get aggressive … So then you have to make a decision, to take their fish or think about your life. (R 22)

The community will threaten us … So it’s much easier not to go there, to control, but to stay in the office instead. (R 29)

It is in such situations that violence seems to affect the choice to take bribes or not:

Since we work in a dangerous community with abalone poaching, it’s a choice between honest work and a relaxed lifestyle where you turn a blind eye or become a part of this business. (R 2)

The accounts above – and several others in the material – illustrate the argument put forward in this article, that violence makes honest behaviour very costly. As discussed in the theory section, this insight reflects the limitations of previous theory. In detail, the accounts illustrate that the view on bribe-taking as a calculation of costs and benefits is altered when violence is present. In such situations this choice is not only about the risks of getting caught for bribery weighted against the gains of side payments (Becker and Stigler 1974; Ades and Di Tella 1999), but is also a matter of dealing with repercussions from citizens wishing to violate laws. Yet, the material also contains features that have some similarities to the reasoning of expectations in writings influenced by collective action thinking. For instance, accounts suggest that few officials are willing to bear the costs of being non-corrupt and that this is based on expectations of how other colleagues will act:

If the station’s supervisor is corrupt, then why wouldn’t you yourself be? And no one will report. Because then they will report on each other. So people are quiet. This is how so many substations work along the coast. (R 13)

In this sense, there are accounts that are similar to writings on bribe-taking as a social dilemma, stressing that non-corrupt agents will be ‘the sucker’ (cf. Rothstein 2011).
Therefore, rather than refuting any of the previous theoretical perspectives this illustrates how the argument in this article builds on previous approaches to bribe-taking.

The investigation also provides insights illustrating an aspect of the argument made in this article – that of violence as a mechanism of corrupt contract enforcement. As a way of understanding this, there are important relationships between colleagues in this context to consider. Respondents perceive that there are professional costs of remaining honest that are manifest in signals from the senior manager of a substation:

[Our management] wants to promote people who always say ‘yes, yes’. But these persons are not hard on poaching. Many of them even had disciplinary cases against them, for corrupt behaviour. But these just disappear. And the persons assessing these corrupt guys, of course they get something back. (R 29)

Importantly, threats not only come from citizens but also from colluding colleagues. This may be seen as an illustration of the reasoning about enforcement of corrupt contracts, where colluding bureaucrats will have an incentive to make more colleagues involved as this reduces the risks of whistle-blowing. One such strategy is to threaten colleagues who do not accept bribes. For these honest actors, this means that working side by side with corrupt colleagues has implications. As described below, this is perceived as affecting personal security:

Working with such colleagues is dangerous. You’re in the dark at night … with colleagues you don’t trust. You generally know who the corrupt guys are. Their names come around. So you try to avoid these colleagues in the future. (R 23)

Inspectors who collude with poachers work as informants, sharing information about enforcement operations. This has effects for inspectors who refuse bribery:

Our job is dangerous. The other day they even threw stones. The community would know that you are coming. They have some ways of knowing about our operations. (R 20)

Three years ago I did a bust and it went bad. They threw a firebomb, burning me. And we exchanged gunfire. So they put a price on my head … I had to move to this station. And the sad thing is that it was my own people who had tipped them off, sharing information about this operation. (R 31)

But even more importantly, inspectors who do not take bribes are also threatened directly by other colleagues:

Being the only inspector at a station that does not accept bribes and that enforces rules hard, it is dangerous. You will be a threat to the livelihood of inspector colleagues … So you might be threatened because of this. (R 26)

A further cost that is relevant is about the social situation of these inspectors. The occurrence of violent threats has ramifications for how inspectors structure their life outside the office. One of the most important aspects is the choice of residence, as living in the same community as the fishermen has consequences:

I wanted to stay in the community, but it was not safe. Some fishermen had put fire to the place of the previous inspector. You confiscate fish and they will do something like this. So it is the price of not playing along. (R 20)

Besides the basic issue of security, an inspector who chooses to live within the community of fishermen will also face more frequent temptations and pressure to be lax on violators:

You cannot live with them. … I would be forced to be lenient [not enforce rules]. I would be threatened otherwise, my family. (R 12)

Say I would live here in [name], it would be a problem. I would have to turn a blind eye. If I know what is best for my life. (R 6)
Yet, besides being dangerous, strict enforcement is also met with social costs for inspectors:

Like my son’s friends’ fathers, they are fishermen. … If I am in a restaurant they will contact me and speak to me. It is very disturbing and it gets to you. Like constantly being asked to receive a box of fish. It’s a dilemma. (R 16)

Therefore, taking bribes solves many of these problems. The following account illustrates that bribes result in reduced threats:

If you take bribes you are protected. You have a role in the community. You got organization protection and police protection. In the community this is a social thing. They will start helping you. Some inspectors even help the poachers drive their vehicles. So its protection, social protection. (R 7)

In light of the fact that ignoring rule violations is easier than enforcing the law, several accounts also develop how the choice to take bribes may reduce the threats from fishermen:

Our personnel are scared to confront poachers … Instead [of enforcing rules] you start becoming less proud and ethical. (R 7)

This process seems to be almost a negotiation of both threats and temptations where it is implicitly made clear that taking bribes makes everything much easier for the inspector:

[The fishermen] sometimes even throw stones at us, at our cars. I don’t think shooting at us is far away … Some fishermen will try you. They will say ‘your colleague let me do this’ and they say that in these areas inspectors do not care about poachers. The abalone community always tries to bribe you. They say, ‘Let’s sit down and perhaps we can sort something out’. Here, if you catch them, they will hate you for the rest of their lives. (R 23)

They are aggressive. They will try to give you fish to look away. I live in the community of fishermen so it is not safe for me there. They will call me ‘heartless’, my neighbours, that I am taking away their bread and butter. (R 26)

The following account shows even more clearly how the choice to take bribes reduces the dangers for the inspectors:

Last week I almost got stabbed … These guys were hiding their illegal catches. So I parked my car next to them. Then one broke a bottle, coming towards me and another one had a knife … It is very risky. It is much easier to be blind. Some inspectors are blinder than others. And these officers will receive some fish. Not in the harbor, but at their homes, as a gratitude. (R 30)

The presence of violence also effectively hinders inspectors from telling outsiders of the commonly occurring bribery:

I would rather shush [puts finger on her lips]. If anyone is on the take here I cannot say anything, then I would be on the hit [makes the gun sign to her head]. This happened to me as a traffic officer. Back then I had to find the crooks threatening me to be silent and pay them. Not again. (R 9)

Yet, besides the fear of threats, another issue is that several inspectors are confident that management will not take such warnings seriously or could even make these warnings widely known since actors in management may also be involved:

Will the system support you if you expose such behaviour? … Confidentiality is required. Then you could blow the whistle. Honestly it is not there now. Say you give information to the head office about the actions of your colleague. The next day everybody at the office will look at you. You can get threats. (R 12)

This, in turn, reduces the willingness to make outsiders aware of the wide use of bribes in the sector:

I’m not scared to blow the whistle. That’s why what happened took place [he almost got killed by poachers after a tip from a colleague]. And although I told everybody in the department about this,
nothing happened. Everybody knows that nothing happens when you blow the whistle, so then no one will do it. (R 31)

DISCUSSION

This investigation provides empirical flesh for the argument put forward in this article and also suggests several important aspects of this process. As shown, there are dangers associated with refusing to take part in bribery. Further, there are social consequences of not taking bribes; for instance, it determines inspectors’ choice of residence. In this context, taking bribes reduces such costs and may therefore be seen as a strategy of social protection. The accounts Furthermore demonstrate the reasoning behind corrupt contract enforcement, that is, how violence and threats may serve as an enforcement mechanism. As seen in the interview material, an individual bureaucrat will benefit from engaging in bribery since it reduces the friction with colleagues, neighbours and regulatory subjects. The interviews illustrate how the use of both temptations and threats stabilizes the inspectors’ relationship with citizens and colluding bureaucrats and, making the official complicit, ensure that the bureaucrat also has an incentive to be silent.

The process in which violence is used as a mechanism to enforce such contracts has similarities to the discussion by Dal Bó and colleagues (2006) related to large-scale corruption. They focus on criminal organizations and the use of ‘private coercion’ to gain political influence and model how pressure groups use both carrots (bribes) and sticks (violence) when influencing policymakers. Similar to that theory, yet affecting street-level bureaucrats rather than politicians, the accounts from the investigation illustrate how temptations and threats are used as private coercion to get officials to engage in small-scale corruption and to be lax in enforcement.

Implications

Taking violence seriously has inferences for policy. Besides fixing the incentives and expectations in the structure of a civil service, this suggests that anti-corruption reform may benefit from ‘fixing the security’ of bureaucrats working in violent contexts. To reduce the costs of being honest, policy should attempt to find strategies to guarantee that violent actors are not able to intimidate bureaucratic agents. For instance, enforcement officials working under dangerous conditions are known to be helped by threat assessment that can determine vulnerability and guide interventions (Fein and Vossekuil 2000). Exactly how states can provide security for these officials is a topic outside the scope of this article. What is identified here, however, is the need for the anti-corruption policy community to engage in such a conversation.

Providing security for bureaucrats is inherently a challenge when the very problem at hand is the lack of administrative ability. Having a bureaucracy infested with corruption and difficulties to monopolize the use of violence are usually seen as two results of a low state capacity (Bäck and Hadenius 2008). Herein also lies the dilemma of building good government structures as countries with poor institutions tend to be ineffective in several aspects and these features may even reinforce each other: not knowing which came first makes it difficult to break the cycle. This study suggests that if violent threats were to decrease, some drivers of corruption would disappear. Therefore, this provides guidance on how to blend reforms in such settings and implies that policy should focus increasingly on the security of civil servants.

Another important finding is one that extends the argument presented in the theory section, relating to colluding colleagues working as informants and whistle-blowing. As
the accounts illustrate, intimidation also comes from colluding colleagues. Officials perceive it to be risky to tell outsiders of corrupt practices since it is believed that this will become known among colleagues. A way of making whistle-blowing opportunities secure is to install anonymous services of this kind. However, in the case of the DAFF a telephone hotline for reporting corruption was in fact installed in the early 2000s (Hauck and Kroese 2006). Yet, due to pressure from senior managers this system soon lost its effect (personal communication with former DAFF general director). Future research needs to disentangle how such interventions can be efficiently implemented.

Studies following the findings of this article may benefit from investigating whether other anti-corruption efforts, such as increased salaries for civil servants, may curb the situation described above. Specifically, the challenge of living near regulatory subjects, described as either triggering corrupt behaviour or personal costs, is a recurring theme in corruption research. One suggestion from the literature is to introduce rotation systems so that officials are transferred on a regular basis. Such systems are for instance in place en masse in the Indian civil service (Fjeldstad 2003). However, while the problem in DAFF certainly seems to be one of officials getting entrenched in corrupt networks, the implementation of a rotation scheme is not necessarily an appropriate solution. Rose-Ackerman (1999) noted early on that such reforms may be less suitable when supervisors are engaged in corruption, since it may be that non-colluding agents are instead sent off to less lucrative positions as a punishment.

Generalizability
One may reflect on how the findings might travel from the context of this investigation to other settings. As noted, the context of this case could possibly limit the extent to which these findings may be generalized. Is this sector more prone to violence than other sectors in South Africa? Is this story simply about South African state-building? While such questions demand investigation of themselves, one may argue that the challenge depicted in this investigation is quite comparable to other states where administrative capacity is limited. In fact, Persson and colleagues (2013) report interviews with Ugandan citizens that briefly touch upon coercive aspects of citizen–bureaucrat relationships. They also discuss the high-ranking Kenyan whistle-blower John Githongo who had to flee the country after exposing corruption in the civil service.

This suggests that South Africa is not the only state where there are costs associated with honesty. As discussed, the saying ‘plata o plomo’ suggests that there are many situations in other regions as well where such situations have arisen. Yet, one may also find anecdotes from administrations in richer countries. Consider for instance the situation of the New York City Police Department in the 1960s, made famous through the Hollywood movie Serpico. In reality, Frank Serpico – a patrolling policeman who received death threats and became a pariah among colleagues after testifying about corrupt practices – witnessed in 1971 the problem of refusing bribery: ‘the atmosphere does not yet exist in which an honest police officer can act without fear of ridicule or reprisal from fellow officers’ (New York Times 2010).

CONCLUSIONS
This article argues that more aspects than financial incentives and expectations of others’ behaviour may affect bribe-taking among bureaucrats if violence by non-state actors is widespread. Interviews with enforcement officials in the South African civil service illustrate this argument and provide further suggestive insights into the mechanisms of this
process. It is one of the first studies to examine the consequences for bureaucrats of refraining from or engaging in corruption against a violent backdrop. The results indicate that intimidation from citizens and corrupt colleagues is an important issue for bureaucrats’ decisions to take bribes, or not, because they considerably increase the costs of remaining honest.

This argument pertains specifically to bureaucratic corruption that is collusive, that is, when violators may pay enforcement agents to be lax in sanctions. The insight that violence may increase the presence of bureaucratic corruption of this sort has ramifications for sectors where bribery is known to spur non-compliance – for instance, customs offices (where bribes enable smuggling) or city police (where bribes enable actions such as drug trafficking). To tackle such civil servants’ propensity to take bribes from rule violators, considering their security – and hence altering the costs of remaining honest – may be a worthwhile option for policymakers to explore. Therefore, anti-corruption reforms should make further use of insights from research on protection and threat assessments of officials.

To advance this argument, future research may benefit from developing this reasoning theoretically as well as from investigating the claim empirically. For instance, research could compare the situation of civil servants in settings with both better and worse state capacity. It may also be worthwhile to explore the role of intimidation in relation to explanations focusing on incentives and expectations, for instance through investigating observational data of civil servants’ stated reasons for taking bribes, in order to examine the relative merit of this insight.

This article is, in its use of qualitative methods, different from much work on corruption that commonly relies on large-N corruption measures (Treisman 2007). I believe that the accounts reported here show the benefit of in-depth interviews for gauging sensitive behaviour and tapping into perceptions from open-ended questions where the researcher does not primarily seek quantifiable answers. Future research may benefit from similar approaches. With regard to the case in focus, I also believe that similar methods may corroborate the findings of this article, focusing on the violent actors discussed in this article. Sundström (2013) interviewed fishermen in this sector, but mentioned that he did not talk with poachers active in the abalone sector (perceived as the most violent actors) as this was considered a security risk. Although a challenging task, future research may benefit from looking further into these actors’ perceptions and how they pressure bureaucrats to engage in bribe-taking.

NOTES

1 This reasoning refers to petty corruption where officials are paid to turn a blind eye to law violations, often termed collusive corruption (Smith et al. 2003). The presence of violence should not have this effect on non-collusive corruption, when officials ask citizens for payments for services they are legally entitled to.

2 A reasoning in anthropological writings on clientelism offers a different take on why ‘expectations’ may inform bribe-taking – exploring how norms of bribery in social networks and family ties may explain why officials more commonly take bribes in some societies than in others.

3 This reasoning assumes that there is some balance of power between violent actors and bureaucrats. It is possible that violent actors in some contexts, if strong enough, do not have to worry at all about whistle-blowing.

4 Recent conceptual contributions disentangle the relationship between organized crime and political corruption (Sberna 2014). While novel, this work is theoretical and focuses on criminals and their relation to the political sphere rather than bureaucrats and their choice of bribery.

5 I refrain from using terms such as a ‘response rate’, since this is more suitable for a design where the researcher uses probabilistic sampling.

6 After each quote, R and the number indicate which respondent is being cited.
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