

Reinforcement Contingencies, Escalated Commitment, and the Corruption Mantra in Nigeria: A Behavioural Management Precept

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Abstract: *This paper used behavioural precepts contextualized in reinforcement contingencies and escalated commitment to explain, predict and control the propensity and sustenance of corruption in Nigeria. The paper contended that the unabated corruption syndrome in Nigeria is engendered by misapplication of reinforcement contingencies in the fight against corruption. The paper also identified escalated commitment of the leadership as responsible for the continuous application of inappropriate models in combating corruption in Nigeria. Considering these unfortunate dynamics, the paper, suggested that the use of punishment, negative and extinct reinforcement contingencies; and leaders to avert sustained impressionistic devices defined in escalated commitment in the fight against corruption in Nigeria.*

Keywords: *Reinforcement Contingencies, Escalated Commitment, Corruption Mantra, Continuous Reinforcement.*

Introduction

There is no issue that has the longest history and has also dominated public discussion in Nigeria than corruption. It is in fact, hyperbolic to say that corruption in the public service in Nigeria has assumed the status of a mantra, as its attention and mention dominates the contents of every discussion both by the incumbent and opposition regimes. More seriously, it has been playfully made as an instrument of defamatory attacks to discredit the popularity of political opponents, either of individuals or of political parties. Indeed, it has almost become a tradition that every successive regime in Nigeria irrespective of it being military or democratic government, engages in anti-corruption crusade to indict the previous regime for financial recklessness that paves the ease for gross looting of public funds (Ojo, 2016; Obasanjo, 2003; Shirbon, 2017; Ishiekwene 2008; and Human Right Watch, 2011).

The corruption mantra suggests unarguably, the height it has assumed in the Nigeria public space. Several anti-corruption institutions and legal frameworks for the abatement of this socio-economic vice are established and huge financial involvements incurred, yet

surprising is its seemingly insurmountable tendencies (Elaiwu, 2016; Eboh, 2007; and Ojo, 2016). However, what appears to be unsettled is the reality as to either the pretentious or sincere intentions of the efforts of government. But judging from the body language of government functionaries, one will be almost tempted to settle at the conclusion that the efforts of government to combat corruption in Nigeria appear to be more pretensions than being sincere (Elaiwu, 2016; and Human Right Watch, 2011). This position seems logical considering the dynamics that often plays around every identified scenario and the insignificant results of anti-corruption crusade institutions.

To provide a more robust intellectual context and contents, precursor for pragmatic results, and as a departure from almost the redundant views rooted in economic, social, political, legal and technological explanations (Kottack, 2000; Horton, Leslie Larson, 2008; Hohen, 1906; Guerin, 1993; and Lawrence, 2016), this paper adopts the use of behavioural precepts to logically and analytically present an ideological paradigm involving reinforcement contingencies and the concept of escalated commitment to explain the sustenance and abatement dynamics of corruption in Nigeria. It further provides a remedial behavioural recipe for possibly eliminating or at least reducing the velocity and propensity of the corruption wind in Nigeria. This is necessary to abate further wreckage on the fragile economy, and to stampede on the fast growing tendencies of youth assimilation of corruption endearing way of life.

Nature of Corruption in Nigeria

Corruption is so prevalent in Nigeria that there is no public institution that has no experience of allegations on corruption. The most ridiculous and shameful is more of a contradiction that almost every incumbent head of the anti-corruption agencies have had cases of corruption involving huge amount of money leveled against them, while yet fighting corruption (Elaiwu, 2016; Agence France-Presse, 2008; and Ishiekwene, 2008).

Again, the widespread of corruption in the land has reached the depth where corruption cases involving few millions of naira do not attract any news or any serious attention (Elaiwu, 2016). The situation becomes even more hopeless when one observes that at the centre of high profile corruption cases are such near or assumed sacred personalities or saints as; clergies, generals, senior cops, judges, anti-corruption crusaders, senators, etc (Ishiekwene, 2008; Jibueze & Okeke, 2018; and Ojo, 2016). In this regard, it becomes who is clean enough to throw the first stone, without triggering a reprisal of unveiling the skeletons in their old cardboards, as it was in the “Balogun gate”.

Yet, it is quite evident that the vice has eaten deep into the conceptual consciousness of high-profile Nigerians. this has affected the etymological consideration of the concept of corruption in Nigeria. For instance, contentions as to the concept of sealing public funds, as not being a synonym of corruption has found space in the reasoning of high-profile Nigerians. Thus, “steal to corrupted, and corrupt to steal” are yet comical, signifying the endlessness of the pervading vice. In same consideration, the definition of corruption in Nigeria appears very narrow and only skewed to misappropriation of public funds. This has given way to the committance of all sorts of frauds that only directly or indirectly pave easy ways to unholy self-enrichment.

It is in like regards that corruption enjoys latitude of tolerance that is almost perfectly elastic. Otherwise, what audacity would a public officer entrusted with public fund gives an excused laced with such comic allegory that “snake or monkey has swallowed the funds”, if not for the conviction that he would be tolerated by his kind in the scheme or system. Yet political parties have declared that they are safe havens for looters, only if such looters of public funds can secure their membership cards. This merely reveals the unbridged distance between politics and governance in Nigeria, as the latter is often sacrificed for the former. The most recent revelations come with the opportunities presented by Covid-19 and NDDC saga where illogical excuses and presentations show scams on how public funds are handled in Nigeria.

The recent on NDDC has even introduced new concepts to the literature and lexicon of corruption. These are cyclic contracts and ghost contracts. The former involves when the address of a recipient of procured materials is the same as the address of the contractors who supplied the materials. The latter represent a scenario where no contractor or project exists in reality, but pseudo-contracts are awarded to pseudo contractors, but in reality, funds are disbursed and paid to proxies, without any real identities. Thus, it is suggested in this paper that there is no appropriate conceptualization than “cyclic contracts” and “ghost contracts”.

With all these, the propensity to be corrupt is very high in Nigeria. The tendencies are not only tempting, but are also becoming compulsive. Civil servants and other public servants are poorly paid. A security personnel put his life on the line, fights and die, but even for those lucky to survive, the entire salary and emoluments cannot build a small abode for their families; lecturers are poorly paid, with all the knowledge they have gathered and dispensed even in Federal universities, the salary cannot afford any meaningful living. They are urged to combine their employment with other sources of income to eke a reasonable living (A complete occupational distraction). All of these occurring within a system that few individuals are looting billions of dollars at every opportunity. These are all instigators for harvest of corruption by all and sundry, as the nation compete for space at the top of corruption index by Crime-Watch.

Behaviour Reinforcement Contingencies

Reinforcement is a dominant recipe for learning, and learning is a dominant foundation of individual attitude, perception, ultimate behavior, and a medium of cultural assimilation, association, sustenance, and transmission from one generation to others (McShane & Von Glinow, 2009; Robbins, 2010; Merton, 1968; and Ritzer and Stepnisky, 2014). Reinforcement is any stimulus that sustains a desirable behaviour by positive or negative consequences. McShane & Von Glinow (2009) argued that “behaviour modification identifies four types of consequences, collectively known as the contingencies of reinforcement, that strengthen, maintain, or weaken behavior”. The identified contingencies of reinforcement are: positive, negative, punishment and extinct reinforcements as given in Skinner (1938); and Luthans & Kreitner (2000).

Positive Reinforcement: This occurs when the introduction of a consequence increases or maintains the frequency or future probability of a desired behavior (McShane & Von Glinow, 2009).

Negative Reinforcement: This occurs when the removal or avoidance of a consequence increase or maintains the frequency or future probability of a behavior (McShane & Von Glinow, 2009).

Punishment: This occurs when a consequence decreases the frequency or future probability of a behavior. Punishment may occur by introducing an unpleasant consequence or removing a pleasant consequence to discourage undesirable behavior (Eketu, 2018).

Extinction: This occurs when a target behavior decreases because no consequence follows it. (McShane & Von Glinow, 2009). All reinforcement contingencies tend to follow A-B-C's of behavior modification, involving Antecedents (A) – Behaviour (B) – Consequences (C) (Luthans & Kreitner, 2000).

However, for optimal reinforcement effect, the identification of necessary schedules provides for continuous reinforcement – every time behavior occurs; fixed interval schedule – after behavior has occurred a fixed period of time; variable interval schedule – after it has occurred for a variable period of time around some average; fixed ratio schedule – after it has occurred a fixed number of times; and variable ratio schedule – after it has occurred a varying number of times around some average (McShane & Von Glinow, 2009).

However, such limitations as; difficulty in reinforcing non-observable behaviours; wearing off of reinforcers overtime; variable ratio schedule is a form of gambling; and the ethical concern about perceived manipulation (Mittenberger, 1997).

Besides, the individual effect of reinforcement, there are also the social implications on others in the social context, who are not directly exposed to the reinforcement therapy. This view secures practical value from the social learning theory of Bandura (1977). It therefore means the reinforcement has contagious effect, because individuals also learn from observation, besides direct experience (Robbins and Sanghi, 2010).

The Concept of Escalated Commitment

The models for decision making and their rationality have remained questionable, thus increasingly investigated in organizational studies. Robbins (2010) has suggested that a large body of evidence provides a more accurate description on how most decisions in organizations are actually made through judgmental rather than defined prescriptive modes (Razerman, 1994). However, because of the judgmental effect, decision making is always laced with biases rooted in heuristics or judgmental shortcuts. One of the major biases associated with decision making is the tendency to escalate commitment to a faulty course of action or failing process of attaining desired results.

Thus, the concept of escalated commitment is used to explain or describe “an increase in commitment to a previous decision in spite of negative information” (Robbins, 2010). Escalation of commitment therefore, is the kind of bias expressed in favour of a previous commitment even when there is information showing that the course of action is failing or wrong. The reasons advanced for escalation of commitment are; consideration of cost already shrunk in the endeavour, thus in the favour of continuance commitment; also, it

is argued that individuals escalate commitment to a faulty or failing course of action, when they assume themselves as responsible for the failure; prove that their words and action are consistent make them escalate commitment to demonstrate their consistency. Unfortunately, however, escalation of commitment has gross dysfunctionalities on organizational decisional outcomes. These are:

- The propensity of corruption depends on the sincerity of the reinforcement therapy.
- The propensity and sustenance of corruption in Nigeria is fueled by the insincerity in application of punishment reinforcement as a reprimand and detrimental

The Dynamics of Corruption Subsistence and Recipes for Abatement in Nigeria

From the literary and conceptual impression on reinforcement, escalated commitment and nature of corruption in Nigeria, it is implicit that the unabatement of corruption in spite of various measures is a clear manifestation of misapplied reinforcement and escalation of commitment against its existence. Eketu (2018) demonstrated that breachable laws, dual conscience, inequitable consequentialism, and discriminative justice all combine to reinforce the culture of corruption in Nigeria. The explanation is that when reinforcement fails, the undesirable or preventable behavior is invariably encouraged. This position is implicit in Bandura's (2000) Social Learning Theory, and Thorndike's (1991) Law of Effect.

In this context, meanings that will later become the object of learning by members of society are subsumed in the perspectives on action (Eketu, 2018); as either prospective emergent or retrospective perspective (Pfeffer, 2004). The precept on escalated commitment spans from the view that humans, and in this context, leaders are by nature impressionist (Eketu, 2019), thus their craving to be seen as consistent have made them to escalate commitment, even when it is obvious that the framework for fighting corruption in Nigeria has failed. With all of these, it is possible to view the corruption war in Nigeria as a paradigm of shadow boxing, where the ideal consequences remain in the idealized world of the actor. It therefore becomes even more meaningful to reason that the propensity and sustenance of corruption in Nigeria is fueled by the insincerity in the application of punishment reinforcement as a reprimand, and as deterrence and detrimental reinforcement contingencies, on one hand, and the impressionistic tendency of the leader to be seen as consistent even when the institutional framework has manifested gross failure or inadequacies, on the other hand.

With the aforesaid, it becomes clearly predictable that the abatement of corruption in Nigeria rests largely on the sincerity of reinforcement management, and the realization of the leadership that consistency of purpose and integrity are different from the consistency in the application of heuristics and combative models. The potency of the latter is determined by the situation and contingency factors, thus, consistency is not a constant factor. The politicization, romanticization and ceremonialization of corruption cases and trials will only encourage an endless gross indulgence by upcoming politicians and other public office holders.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The idealization, conceptualization, theorization and discussion in this paper were derived from behavior reinforcement phenomena which give impetus for learning to take place. The paper contended that subsistence of corruption in the Nigerian public space is sustained by the mismanagement of reinforcement contingencies and the escalation of insufficient or inadequate measures on the part of the leadership. The behaviour dynamics that have ultimately given rise to the present magnitude of corruption is simply in the axioms that, the philosophy of doing nothing is as effective as the philosophy of doing something, because doing nothing is doing something; and that behavior is a function of its consequence. This implies that if the consequences are adjusted, the corruption tendencies will most likely adjust itself variably or invariably proportional.

The implications of this on the formulation and implementation of anti-corruption policies rest squarely on sincerity of demonstrated purpose on the part of leadership. This evokes exemplification, not only of thought, but also on action. It means that new and appropriate approaches need to be institutionalized to evoke a new consciousness that will be naturally and normatively be an anathema to corruption. Strict measures as detriment and deterrence must not only be practically done, but should also be seen to have been done.

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