Message received: how messages about corruption shape perceptions

Caryn Peiffer, Ph.D.
Developmental Leadership Program
International Development Department
University of Birmingham

Abstract

Most anticorruption programs include an awareness-raising element, wherein messages about corruption and anticorruption are crafted and propagated. However, little is known about whether and how these and other messages about corruption influence the perceptions that people hold about their corruption environment. Using data from an original survey experiment—conducted across 1,000 households in Jakarta—this study tests what influence four different types of messages have on four different types of perceptions. As expected, messages making salient the widespread prevalence of corruption heightened worries about its ill effects, depressed confidence in the government, and reduced the belief that ordinary people can fight corruption. Surprisingly, however, positively toned messages, making salient successes that the government has had in controlling corruption and informing people of how to get involved in the fight against corruption, tend to have the same effects. The study discusses how we might make sense of these seemingly surprising findings and what they mean for those working in the fight against corruption.

Introduction

In many developing countries, and especially in their major cities, residents are fairly regularly presented with several different messages about corruption. A simple commute through a major city will probably present advertisement spots—billboards, posters, and murals—taken up with messages about the ills that corruption has caused, encouragement to refuse to bribe, the rights afforded to citizens to report corruption and/or the hotline to call to report it to. Even in the privacy of homes, messages about corruption may seep in; the KPK in Indonesia, for example, has funded corruption-themed films, television programs and commercials (Kuris, 2012), and if a resident avoided learning about corruption and anticorruption through these channels, they may even hear about it from their children. In several countries, including in Indonesia, children go through anticorruption ethics programs. These programs are expected to raise the awareness of adults as well as the youth; children are expected to go home from the lesson and talk to their parents about resisting corruption

(Kuris, 2012; the author learned this of a child focussed anticorruption program in Fiji).[1] Those hoping to control corruption craft many of these messages, but, in an environment wherein the press enjoys some freedom, there will also likely be frequent headlines that cover high profile corruption scandals, news stories that report on the government's efforts to control corruption, or, of course, the salacious coverage of when a politician publicly brands another politician with the scarlet letter 'C'. Speaking of the news coverage in Indonesia, Widjayanto, a Professor at the University of Paramadina commented "Nowadays, if you open the newspaper, my friend jokingly says, if there are 10 stories, then 11 will be about corruption" (Kuris, 2012).

The high profile that corruption now enjoys is partly due to the success of the anticorruption awareness-raising agenda; it has achieved an extraordinary geographical reach and now has a prominent role in many anticorruption programs. Several things remain unclear about what effect, if any, the varying messages people may receive about corruption have had. Of particular interest to the research presented here is whether and to what extent different messages about corruption shape perceptions of the corruption environment. At the most basic level, the extent to which messages about corruption might shape perceptions is important because people act based on their expectations and beliefs. Messages that alter attitudes towards corruption, their government's efforts to control corruption, or their own efficacy in resisting corruption might therefore offer an important tool in the fight against corruption, or alternatively serve as an additional barrier in mobilizing popular support behind genuine resistance to corruption. To understand if and how these varying messages influence whether people choose to mobilize to fight corruption or partake in corrupt activity, we arguable first have to understand how these messages influence the perceptions that people rely on to make those types of decisions.

We know relatively little about how different messages shape perceptions of corruption. Research from different strains of social and political psychology, on the influence of other, not corruption-related, primes/framing and information/messages give cause to expect two opposing straightforward possibilities; messages about corruption may indeed be very influential, or they may not shape perceptions at all. One the one hand a large literature exists which has showed that even subtle primes can influence perceptions of

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[1] The KPK's awareness raising tactics are not exceptional; a similar set of activities has been supported by international donors and domestic anticorruption bodies in several countries (see ADB/OECD, Pakistan Case for another example).

political issues, and on the other hand, research on desensitization and motivated reasoning suggests that people can either become numb to a message if they have seen it repeatedly and often or they can discount new information that they are exposed to if it challenges preconceived perceptions that they have already formed.

Only two studies have gauged how messages influence perceptions of corruption, specifically. However, they are limited as they each only test for the effect of one type of message and test for the message's impact on only one or two types of perceptions, respectively (Chong et al. 2015; Hawkins et al. 2015). In contrast, using data from an original survey experiment—conducted across 1,000 households in Jakarta—the current study tests for the influence of four types of messages on four different types of perceptions. The messages tested attempt to make salient corruption committed by high profile public officials (*Grand Corruption),* the pervasiveness of low-level government corruption (*Petty Corruption),* successes the government has had in controlling corruption (*Government Success),* and the various channels through which citizens can get involved at a civic level to fight corruption (*Civic Engagement).* The four categories of perceptions gauged include beliefs about how corrupt the government is or has become (*Levels),* what harm corruption has caused (*Consequences),* how effective the government has been in fighting corruption (*Government Efficacy),* and what role ordinary citizens can play in fighting corruption (*Civic Involvement).*

The results of the analyses can be summarized along three lines. First, the messages had little impact on shaping perceptions of how corrupt the government is (*Levels).* Second, and as expected, messages on the prevalence of corruption heightened worries about corruption's ill effects, depressed confidence in the government's fight against corruption and reduced the extent to which people thought it was easy for ordinary people to fight corruption. Third, and most surprisingly, the study shows that even positively framed messages about the fight against corruption can have similar negative influences on perceptions. The *Government Success* and *Civic Engagement* treatments also worked to increase worries about corruption's consequences, depress pride in the government's efforts to fight corruption, and also reduced the extent to which people thought it was easy for ordinary people to fight corruption. The paper concludes with a discussion of how to make sense of these unexpected findings, the implications all of the findings have for anticorruption efforts and the next research steps that will be taken.

Literature Review

The potential power of perceptions

The study of how perceptions of the corruption environment are formed, shaped, and maintained deserves the attention of both academic and policy-making audiences because, at the most basic level, "agents base their actions on their perceptions, impressions, and views," (Kaufmann et al. 2009: 4). Several ideas have been developed on the topic of whether, how and why perceptions of corruption have influenced the political actions of ordinary citizens. Optimistically, for example, many anticorruption campaigners hope that raising awareness to the problem of pervasive corruption will motivate the public to get involved in the civic anticorruption movement or at least reject opportunities to engage in corruption (Peiffer and Alvarez, 2016). Those espousing for greater transparency as a measure to fight corruption similarly assume that citizens will both disapprove of the corrupt acts revealed and that that disapproval will translate into a willingness to become active in the effort to hold corrupt officials accountable (Bauhr and Grimes, 2014). Many others, on the other hand, warn that popular worries about the pervasiveness of corruption may result in unsavoury outcomes instead. A few of those worries are outlined below.

Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell (2013), among others, argue that the more people perceive corruption to be a widespread, the more they will participate in corruption themselves and the less confident they will be that their own efforts to control corruption will work (see also Mungiu-Pippidi, 2011; Bauhr & Nasiritousi, 2011; Rothstein, 2011). The first concern—that perceptions of corruption will lead to more corrupt behaviour—is rooted in the logic that when people believe that corruption is a widespread problem, they may think that resisting corruption 1) will be sanctioned either socially—for deviating from the perceived norm—, 2) mean that they will have to either pay more or wait longer for a service than someone else who has engaged in corruption, 3) result in being refused a needed service, altogether, and/or 4) miss out on an opportunity to gain from a corrupt exchange, which others will benefit from.

Speaking to this concern, several studies on bribery have established that perceptions of high levels of corruption are positively associated with the likelihood of paying a bribe (Morris, 2008; Hunt & Laszlo 2012; Mocan 2008; Peiffer & Rose 2014).[2] Being survey based analyses, these studies, however, have not been able to nail down the causal direction; while

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[2] A related study is Dong, Dulleck and Torgler (2012); Using data from the World Values Survey and the European Values Survey, they show that the more respondents perceive their compatriots as engaging in corruption, the more tolerant they are towards someone accepting a bribe in the course of their duties.

it seems plausible that people prepare themselves to pay a bribe when they think that it will be expected of them, the positive associations found may speak to the fact that having to pay a bribe increases the perception one has of how corrupt the government is (Peiffer & Rose 2016: 17). Attempting to tease the causal direction out, using a survey experiment in Costa Rica, Gingerich et al. (2015) found that respondents who were exposed to a message that depicted a high rate of co-nationals paying bribes were more likely to state that they would pay a bribe than those who were not. The results of this particular study, while not generalizable beyond the Costa Ricans surveyed, do indicate that there may be good cause for this particular concern.

The second concern—that perceptions of corruption reduce willingness to fight it—is described by Peiffer and Alvarez (2016); they write that a feeling of corruption as normality may induce a "corruption fatigue," "instead of motivating people to voice their discontent with how pervasive corruption is, people become less motivated to do anything to counter it." The idea here is that when people think that corruption is widespread, people may become overwhelmed by the problem and sceptical that it can and/or will ever be effectively tackled; at the very minimum, people might be most sceptical that their individual actions will do much to change the corruption tide. Speaking to the potential validity of this concern, using data from the 2013 Global Corruption Barometer, Peiffer and Alvarez (2016) find that, in developing countries, perceptions of corruption being widespread are associated with an unwillingness to protest corruption, report corruption to the authorities and pay more for a product produced by a company that has not engaged in corruption.

There is some evidence to also suggest that perceptions of corruption may negatively influence political engagement; when citizens expect that corruption is widely practiced, they may be more likely to be politically cynical and, as a result, disengage from the political system (Andersson & Heywood, 2006). The worry here is that people will wash their hands of trying to engage with political system that they think is being bought. To this end, Bauhr and Grimes (2014) found that in countries where corruption is prevalent and there are higher levels of transparency, citizens tended to have less political interest, want to be less politically involved, and had lower trust in the state. This finding is interpreted as meaning that *because* the citizens in these countries have access to information about the high levels of corruption that occurs, they have become politically resigned, rather than inspired.[3] Along this vein of

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[3] Galtung and Tisne (2009: 100) warns that perceptions of corruption potential reform may also have a similar impact, "corruption-awareness campaigns—complete with radio spots, billboards, newspaper ads, and leaflets in schools—are frequently mounted in an attempt to

interpretation, using experimental methods, others found that when people are exposed to information about the corrupt activity of a candidate, they are less likely to vote (Chong et al. 2015; Figueiredo et al. 2011). However, in other experimental studies, exposure to corruption information led people to say that they would punish the implicated politicians at the polls (Winters and Weitz-Shapiro, 2013; Ferraz and Finan, 2008). [4]

How might messages shape perceptions?

Because of the potentially influential role that perceptions play in motivating behaviour, and the plethora of messages about corruption that one can be confronted by, the main research question this paper asks is how do these messages shape perceptions of corruption? Drawing on research from social and political psychology, two straightforward expectations are discussed, which are that messages about corruption may not be influential in shaping perceptions at all and that messages about corruption may be very influential.

Especially in an environment wherein people are inundated with messages about corruption, we may not expect that an additional message about corruption—coming from the discussed survey experiment, for example—will have any impact at all. This is because people, in this type of environment, may have already become desensitised to messages about corruption. 'In general terms, desentisation refers to the gradual reduction in responsiveness to an arousal-eliciting stimulus as a function of repeated exposure' (Krane et al. 2011). If a person has become desensitized to a message about corruption deeply harming development, for example, though perhaps a message on this topic initially heightened fears about corruption's consequences, once desensitized, additional exposure to similar messages would not necessarily stimulate worries at all, and certainly may not stimulate worries to the same degree that happened with the initial exposure.

A second reason why exposure to corruption messages may not influence perceptions of the corruption environment is that people tend to ignore information that disagrees with certain perceptions that they have already formed (Taber and Lodge 2006; Taber, Cann, &

rein in graft. In post-war settings, however, bringing attention to the problem risks doing more harm than good: By raising expectations for reform, such campaigns, if they do not succeed, can have a destabilizing impact, fuelling cynicism about the state and politicians."
[4] Also using a survey-experiment, though this time in Spain, Anduiza et al. (2013) found that information about corruption scandals negatively influenced evaluations of the involved politician, though the effects were tempered both by partisanship and the political awareness of the respondents. Finally, in Uttar Pradesh, Banerjee et al. (2010) found that citizens who were exposed to a message of encouragement to vote for 'clean' politicians failed to have an impact on prospective voting.

Kucsova, 2009; Meffert et al. 2006; Druckman & Bolsen, 2011). Motivated processing (sometimes called motivated bias) describes the tendency of people to discount information that upsets how they have come to view the world. So to apply this to the subject at hand, if someone has come to view the government's efforts to fight corruption as ineffective, and they are exposed to a message that touts the government's achievements in fighting corruption, they may not, fully or at all, take the message's information about success into consideration. If they are motivated processors, when evaluating the government's efforts, instead of drawing upon the new information that was presented to them about successes that have been achieved, they will recall only the failures that had so strongly shaped their initial perceptions of the government's efforts.

These concepts – desensitization and motivated processing – give rise to the present study's overarching null hypothesis:

H0: Exposure to a message about corruption will have no influence on perceptions of the corruption environment.

Alternatively, plenty of other research suggests that even the simplest messages about corruption can significantly shape perceptions. Much experimental political psychology (Taber & Lodge, 2006) literature has shown that political messages, and the ways in which those messages are framed, can have significant influences on attitudes and behaviour on a subconscious level—i.e. outside of the awareness of citizens (Berinsky et al., 2010; Carter, Ferguson, & Hassin, 2011; Nosek, Graham, & Hawkins, 2010). And, arguably, messages about corruption are especially poised to be influential. According to Erisen, Lodge, and Taber's (2014) review of experimental social psychological literature, messages are likely to have a large subconscious impact when they are centred around a topic that may be tainted by social desirability biases. Arguably, corruption itself—as an abstract concept—is, across most societies, socially undesirable. Cross-national survey responses to questions about how wrong bribery is tend to show that the vast majority of people condemn bribery as being morally reprehensible (Rose & Peiffer, 2015: 21-22). Moreover, especially those messages crafted by anticorruption government bodies or civil society frame corruption as being socially undesirable. Messages have also been found to be impactful, on a subconscious level, when they go noticed, but are not recognized as particularly influential (Erisen, Lodge, & Taber 2014). If this is the case, even in an environment wherein one is inundated with many

messages about corruption, a single message may impact perceptions, even if it did not necessarily 'stand out' among the rest.[5]

> *H1: Exposure to a message about corruption will significantly shape perceptions of the corruption environment.*

Messages about corruption can take several different tones. For instance, messages that encourage citizens to get involved may take a positive empowering 'you can make a difference' tone, while messages from a headline news account of a corruption scandal can take a very negative 'elites caught stealing public money' tone. If messages do influence perceptions, should we expect that differential effects based on the tone of the message? Erisen, Lodge, and Taber (2014) argues perceptions are cognitively formed at an early stage of processing information and during that early stage either positive or negative feelings about the subject and environment are aroused. Describing this process in their own words, they write that at a subconscious level 'positively valenced primes spread activation to considerations in memory that are themselves positively charged, while negative stimuli tend to activate negative considerations.' Relating this to corruption messages, it suggests that those that have a positive tone will bring forth positively charged perceptions, and those that have a negative tone will bring forth negatively charged perceptions.

> *H1a: Exposure to a positive/negative message about corruption will have a positive/negative influence on perceptions of the corruption environment.*

Despite the likely influential role perceptions have in motivating behaviour and that messages about corruption are now commonplace in many urban landscapes, for the most part, scholars have neglected examining the ways in which different types of information and messages about corruption affect perceptions of the corruption environment. Two exceptions stand out. In Lima, Peru, Hawkins et al. (2015) exposed a convenience sample of survey

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[5] Others have found that repeated exposure to messages can lead to stronger or cumulative effects on perceptions (see Lecheler & de Veresse, 2013 for a review of this literature). This may be because if a message has an initial impact on shaping perceptions, then repeated exposure to the message or a similar message will cause a recall of the initial reaction to the message, heightening its salience and thereby reinforcing the original impact the message had (Price and Tewsbury 1997; Cappela & Jamieson, 1997). Price and Tewsbury articulate the effect as being "when particular constructs become subject to routine activation and use over time, via applicability and accessibility, then there is certainly the potential for long-term and perhaps cumulative effects" (1997: 199).

respondents to 'transparency information'—information on how money is spent and what procedures exist to execute policies—from government websites. They found that exposure to transparency information about the government increased positive perceptions about the government's fight against corruption, but did not impact perceived levels of corruption. Somewhat similarly, Chong et al. (2015) examined whether information about mayoral corruption in Mexico influenced perceptions of corruption levels. They report that, for the most part, their corruption-information treatment did not influence the degree to which people thought that the municipal government was dishonest.

Going beyond what these studies have done, the present study makes two main contributions. First, in exposing survey respondents to four different types of messages about corruption, it is able to examine whether and how different messages about corruption impact perceptions. Hawkins et al. (2015) and Chong et al. (2015) only expose citizens to one type of message each—they were, respectively, transparency information and corruption information about a specific politician. Second, the present study goes beyond gauging how messages or information about corruption impact perceptions of how prevalent corruption is—assessed by both Hawkins et al. (2015) and Chong et al. (2015)—or how well the government has done in fighting corruption—assessed by only Hawkins et al. (2015); in addition to testing for what impact various messages have on these two types of perceptions, the present study also examines how exposure to different messages influence perceptions of the consequences of corruption and whether an ordinary citizen can make a difference in the fight against corruption. Arguably, these two perceptions are both potentially incredibly important. In the same way that messages about how prevalent corruption is can potentially induce a 'corruption fatigue', messages about the harm that corruption has caused may provoke a sense of being overwhelmed by the entirety of the problem, and reduce willingness to fight it. And, perhaps, messages that positively shape the belief that ordinary people can be instrumental to controlling corruption may work to counter any 'corruption fatigue' that exists.

Method

To test how different messages about corruption influence perceptions of the corruption environment an experimental study was conducted in Jakarta, Indonesia. Indonesia was chosen as the site for the test for a few reasons; first, both high profile or 'grand' corruption and 'petty' or low-level corruption are thought to be considerable problems in Indonesia. Corruption also tends to be discussed socially and is not a taboo topic to openly

give an opinion on, and as such, it was assumed that responses to the survey questions about corruption have a good chance at being honest reflections of beliefs. And third, the government's KPK has led a very public, and by some accounts, successful fight against corruption. This was important to the interest this study has in examining what impact a message about genuine government success in fighting corruption might have on perceptions.

The study ran from June 8th 2015 to July 7th 2015. 1,000 participants from different households within Jakarta were recruited. Participants in the study were randomly assigned to one of five groups: *Control* (no treatment), *Grand Corruption* (treatment designed to make salient corruption scandals involving high profile officials and large sums of money), *Petty Corruption* (treatment designed to make salient the pervasiveness of bribery by ordinary citizens and local-level corruption), *Government Success* (treatment designed to make salient successes that the KPK specifically has had in fighting corruption), or *Civic Engagement* (treatment designed to make salient the opportunities and ease through which ordinary citizens have to participate in civic-based anticorruption activities). Following exposure to the treatments (or no exposure in case of the *Control*), subjects were asked a number of questions concerning varying perceptions of corruption and their corruption environment.

Recruiting participants and design

Working with the *Regional Economic Development Institute,* 100 villages within Jakarta were identified, and in the aim of recruiting subjects from different socio-economic backgrounds, 35 of the 100 identified villages were considered to be relatively 'low income', 45 'middle income, 15 'higher income', and 5 were of a 'very high income'. At the village level, 10 households in each were selected. These households were selected by choosing every 5th household encountered by the enumerator who was walking through the village.

Nine percent of the sample was under 25 years old, 24 percent were between 25 and 35 years old, 30 percent were between 36 and 45 years old, 21 percent were between 46 and 55 years old, 13 percent were between 56 and 65 years old, and the rest (3 percent) were over the age of 65. A small percent of the sample (2) had no formal, 14 percent had completed primary school only, 67 percent had completed secondary school, and the rest (17 percent) had either some University education or had completed University education. Twenty-eight percent of the sample reported a household monthly income of below 3 million IDR, 29 percent reported an income between 3 million and 6 million IDR, 18 percent made between 6 and 9 million IDR, 13 percent made between 9 and 12 million IDR and 10 percent made over 12 million IDR. The sample was split evenly between males and females.

The households were randomly assigned to the *Control, Grand Corruption, Petty Corruption Government Success,* and *Civic Engagement* groups (n=200 for each group). Difference of means tests on basic demographic indicators revealed that there were no significant differences among the five groups with respect to the data collected on demographic variables. To the extent to which they were available, the demographic statistics of the sample can be compared to statistics for all of Indonesia, reported by the *World Bank's World Development Indicators* (most recent year available). According to it, close to 100 percent of the adult population have completed primary school, and 81 percent have completed lower secondary school. These statistics are fairly consistent with the sample of subjects used here. Also, 93 percent of the Indonesian adult population are between 15 and 64 years old, and 7 percent are over 65 years old. The sample of subjects in this experiment, therefore, seems to be slightly younger. While this and other potential differences not unearthed should be kept in mind when drawing generalizations from this study, there is no expectation that this difference will impact the efficacy of the experiment.

Procedures

Eleven professional enumerators, from the *Regional Economic Development Institute,* visited the selected households. Enumerators read to the subjects a short introductory paragraph which described the study's aims as wanting to 'learn what citizens think about public services and the experiences they have had with public officials.' It was explained that the responses to the questions on the survey would be treated confidentially, that the interview would likely take a maximum of 15 minutes, and that, if at any time they wanted to, the subject could stop answering the questions posed. The subjects were then asked some basic socio-demographic questions. If assigned to the *Grand Corruption, Petty Corruption Government Success,* or *Civic Engagement* groups, the demographic questions were followed by, depending on the preference of the subject, either the enumerator reading the respective treatment paragraphs to the subjects or the subject reading the treatment themselves. After reading or being read the treatments (or not for those in the control group, which proceeded immediately to the next set of questions), the subjects were then asked questions about their perceptions of corruption.

Treatments

Subjects in the *Grand Corruption, Petty Corruption, Government Success,* and *Civic Engagement* groups were presented with paragraphs as treatments, which were either read to

them or were read by them. The *Grand Corruption* treatment sought to make salient in the subject's mind many corruption scandals that involved high profile public officials and very large sums of money. It mentioned scandals that have been the subject of front-page news in Indonesia. The paragraph read:

"Corruption continues to undermine the economy, the quality of services, and the capacity of the government to reduce poverty in this country. A recent report notes that 'never in Indonesian history have there been so many politicians imprisoned for corruption, often together with officials and businesspeople.' Recent corruption cases include a former Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court taking billions of rupiahs in bribes and the Sport Minister being involved in a multi-billion rupiah corruption scandal."

The *Petty Corruption* treatment exposed subjects to statements meant to heighten awareness about the widespread prevalence of 'local-level' corruption that involves ordinary citizens. It used statistics that *Transparency International* produced and have publicised. It read:

"Corruption continues to undermine the economy, the quality of services, and the capacity of the government to reduce poverty in this country. Local-level corruption is considered to be widespread across all public services and agencies. According to a recent survey, 43% of Indonesians have had to pay a bribe to a government official in the past year and 70% believe that this type of corruption has increased in the last two years."

The *Government Success* treatment aimed to make salient achievements made by the Indonesian government, and specifically the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), in fighting corruption. It read:

"The government has received praise from the international community for its recent successes in fighting corruption. The Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), especially, has an impressive record of attacking corruption. Since the KPK was established it has arrested nearly 400 people on charges of corruption, and has achieved a 100% conviction rate. In the first 6 months of 2014 the KPK recovered 2.8 trillion rupiah of stolen government money."

The *Civic Engagement* treatment included statements to emphasise the many things that citizens can do to join in the fight against corruption.

"Now, more than ever before, ordinary citizens are finding it easy to get involved in the fight against corruption. If corruption is witnessed, ordinary citizens can either call or

text the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK)'s 1575 corruption hotline, and those that do are guaranteed to remain anonymous and the information shared confidential. People have the right to access government information and last year the government launched an online data portal to make it even easier for the public to access government budgets and documents. Also, several vibrant anticorruption organisations exist across the country; citizens can get further involved by becoming a member of these organisations or attending their events, like the annual anticorruption week events or rallies held on International Anticorruption Day."

All of the facts cited in the treatments were drawn from news and political reports, or from the results of Transparency International's *Global Corruption Barometer.*

Dependent variables

Four categories of perceptions were scrutinized and two questions on the survey were asked of each category. Table 1 displays the exact wording of each perception question, the range of response options and the mean response score given by the full sample of respondents (full distribution figures are provided in Appendix 1).

Perceptions of corruption levels were gauged by responses to a question about how common corruption was believed to be amongst public officials and whether corruption levels had changed in the last 2 years. The mean responses to both of those questions revealed that the average respondent thought that corruption was common and that corruption levels had stayed the same over the last 2 years.

Two questions were included in the survey to capture the extent to which respondents were concerned over whether corruption—grand and petty corruption, respectively—is harming development in Indonesia. The average respondent expressed that they were 'somewhat worried' about the negative consequences corruption has had on development in Indonesia.

In order to assess perceptions of the government's efforts to fight corruption, one question on the survey asked about how proud the respondent was of its government's efforts and another question asked for an opinion on whether the respondent was 'all talk but no action' on the issue of fighting corruption. The average respondent was paradoxically somewhat proud of the government's efforts and tended to slightly agree with the idea that the government had done very little to reduce corruption. As the full distribution shows (in Appendix 1), the responses present a bit of a puzzle: a fairly high percentage of the respondents express some degree of pride in the government's efforts and a similarly high

percentage of the respondents also agree with the notion that the government is all talk and little action on the matter.

The final category of perceptions gauged referenced civic engagement in the anticorruption movement. The first question in this category asks for an opinion on how easy it is for an 'ordinary citizen' to get involved, and the second asks whether respondents think ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption. The average respondent agreed that it was easy to get involved and that ordinary people could make a difference.

Estimation Strategy

Pair-wise difference of means tests were conducted in order to determine the extent to which the treatments affected the dependent variable responses. These analyses test for whether the mean response given by each group to each respective dependent variable question is statistically different to the mean response given by all other groups. If a statistically significant difference is detected, it is then concluded that the associated treatments had differential impacts on shaping the perception gauged. The use of this type of analyses is appropriate when one can assume that the only differences between the groups are that they received different treatments in the experiment (or did not receive a treatment, in the case of the control group). This assumption is made in this case based on the fact that there were no significant differences found among the five groups with respect to the demographic questions posed at the beginning of the survey. Given the size of the sample (1000 respondents), a difference in means is considered to be statistically significant at the less than 0.05 p-value level.

Table 1: Dependent Variable Questions

Perception Category	Label	Wording	Response Options	Mean Response
Corruption Levels[6]	Corruption common	Taking into account your own experience or what you have heard, corruption among public officials is…	1 very uncommon to 5 very common	4.1 (closest to 'common')
	Corruption change	Over the past 2 years how has the level of corruption in Indonesia changed?	1 decreased a lot to 5 increased a lot	3.4 (closest to 'stayed the same')
Corruption's Consequences	Grand Corruption's Harm	How worried are you that grand corruption is harming development in Indonesia? By grand corruption, I mean corrupt acts involving large sums of money, committed by high profile public officials.	1 not worried at all to 4 very worried.	3.4 (closest to 'somewhat worried')
	Petty Corruption's Harm	How worried are you that petty corruption is harming development in Indonesia? By petty corruption, I mean bribes paid by ordinary citizens and corrupt acts committed by local level public officials.	1 not worried at all to 4 very worried.	3.2 (closest to 'somewhat worried')
Government's Anticorruption Efforts	Pride in Government's Efforts	How proud are you with the government's efforts to control corruption?	1 not at all proud, to 4 very proud.	2.4 (closest to 'somewhat proud')
	All talk, No Action	How strongly do you disagree or agree with the following statement: there is much talk from the government about fighting corruption, but very little is done to actually reduce corruption?	1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree.	3.5 (between 'neither' and 'agree')
Civic Involvement	Easy to Get Involved	How much do you agree with the following statement: it is now easier than ever for an ordinary citizen like me to report corruption or attend rallies against corruption?	1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree.	3.7 (closest to 'agree')
	Ordinary People Can Make a Difference	How much do you agree with the following statement: ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption?	1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree.	3.7 (closest to 'agree)

Note: Mean response scores reflect the full sample's mean response.

[6] Both of these questions have appeared on *Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer Survey.*

Results

Perceived corruption levels remain largely uninfluenced

The messages had very little influence on shaping perceptions of levels of corruption. Figure 1 displays the mean response each group had to the 'corruption common' question, as well each mean's confidence intervals (95 percent level). As the difference in means in table 2 shows, there were no statistically significant differences found between the mean responses of the groups to the question of how common corruption is in government. This means that, irrespective of whether and which treatment a group was exposed to, each group tended to perceive corruption to be similarly as common as the rest of the groups. Similarly, there was not a statistically significant difference between the mean response given to the question of how corruption levels had changed in the last 2 years between the *Control Group* and each of the treatment groups (figure 2, table 2). In other words, those not exposed to a message about corruption tended to hold the same perception of whether corruption levels had changed as those who were exposed to the four different messages. The idea that messages do little to impact the perceived level of corruption is not entirely surprising; as discussed earlier, the two studies that have examined perceptions of corruption using experimental methods drew a similar conclusion. Hawkins et al. (2015) found that transparency information had no impact on perceived levels of corruption, and Chong et al. (2015) found that information about mayoral corruption did little to influence perceptions of how dishonest the government was. This type of perception, it seems, is quite stable and therefore difficult to shift.

There was, however, a statistically significant difference in the mean responses to the question about whether corruption had increased between *Petty Corruption* group and the *Government Success* group (p-value: 0.030). Compared to the *Petty Corruption* group, the *Government Success* group, on average, were less likely to think that corruption had increased in the past 2 years (see figure 2). The difference between the two group's mean response is quite large, almost a quarter of a point (on a 5 point scale). This finding aligns well with the H1a hypothesis; the *Petty Corruption* treatment—a negatively toned message— brings forth a more negative perception of corruption being on the rise—while the positive message of *Government Success* did the opposite. Given that this is the only pair of groups for which a significant difference is found, however, caution should be used when judging the weight of this finding.

Figure 1: mean responses to 'corruption common'
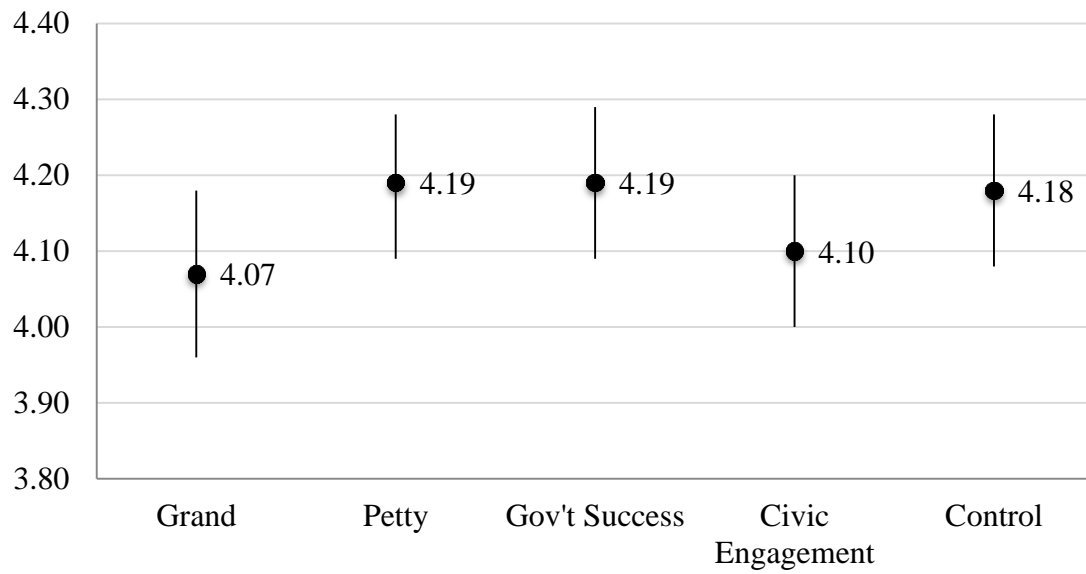
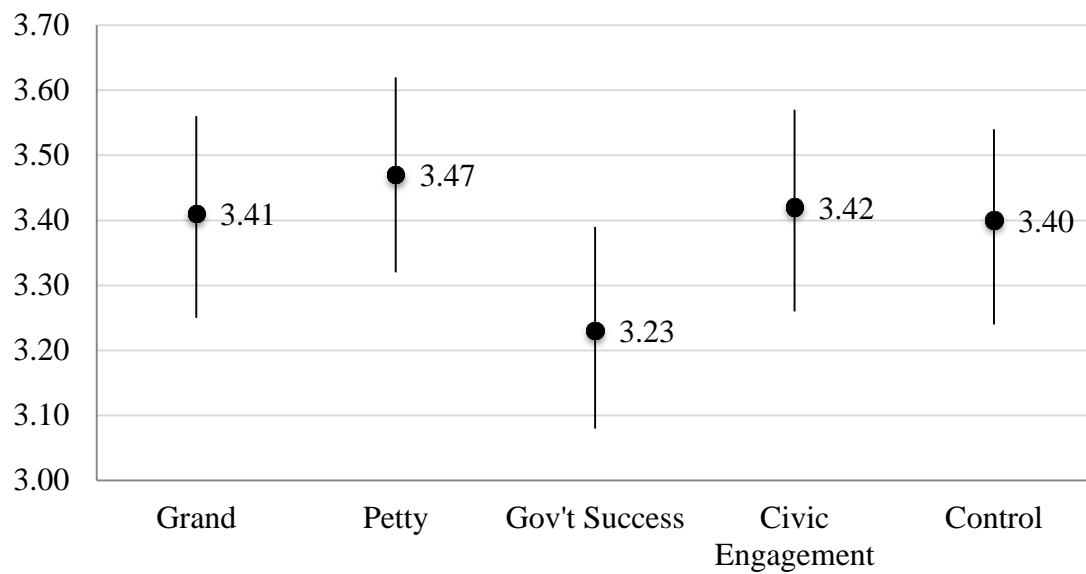**Figure 2: mean responses to 'corruption change'**

Table 2: Full results from Pairwise Difference in Means Tests

	Corruption Common		Corruption Increased		Grand Corruption		Petty Corruption		Pride in Gov't		All Talk, No Action		Easy to Engage		Ordinary Make Diff.	
	C	PV	C	PV	C	PV	C	PV	C	PV	C	PV	C	PV	C	PV
Petty vs. Grand	.12	.117	.06	.567	-.04	.576	.06	.450	.02	.837	.15	.090	-.08	.347	.09	.194
Gov't vs. Grand	.12	.113	-.18	.111	-.07	.382	-.04	.661	.13	.116	-.05	.572	.01	.944	.06	.370
Civic vs. Grand	.03	.729	.01	.949	-.13	.084	-.14	.072	.14	.096	.04	.673	-.05	.533	.02	.793
Control vs. Grand	.11	.132	-.02	.891	-.16	.038	-.36	.000	.76	.000	-.03	.712	.15	.071	-.02	.807
Gov't vs. Petty	.00	.980	-.24	.030	-.02	.751	-.10	.235	.12	.170	-.20	.024	.08	.314	-.03	.682
Civic vs. Petty	-.09	.223	-.06	.612	-.09	.243	-.20	.011	.12	.144	-.11	.201	.03	.752	-.07	.298
Control vs. Petty	-.00	.956	-.08	.478	-.12	.128	-.42	.000	.74	.000	-.18	.039	.22	.006	-.11	.123
Civic vs. Gov't	-.09	.215	.18	.097	-.06	.397	-.11	.175	.01	.924	.09	.322	-.06	.490	-.04	.525
Control vs. Gov't	-.01	.935	.16	.145	-.09	.230	-.33	.000	.62	.000	.02	.844	.14	.084	-.08	.253
Control vs. Civic	.09	.246	-.02	.841	-.03	.724	-.22	.007	.62	.000	-.07	.428	.20	.016	-.04	.611
Std Err	.07		.11		.08		.08		.09		.09		.08		.07	

C: Contrast; PV: P-value

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*Expected and unexpected influences on perceptions of consequences*

The messages had both expected and unexpected influences on perceptions of corruption's consequences. As expected, the difference in means, displayed in Figure 3, and the means tests of Table 2 reveals that exposure to the *Grand Corruption* message heightens worries about the harm that high profile corruption is having on development in Indonesia; the *Grand Corruption* group's mean response is significantly higher to that question, than the *Control* group's. The effect, however, is modest; the difference in means is less than a fifth of a point on the 4-point scale. Those exposed to the *Petty Corruption* message were also significantly more worried about petty corruption's harm on development (Figure 4 and Table 2), than those in the control group. In this case, the difference in means is much larger, .42 points. These results are quite intuitive; they show that exposure to information about the widespread prevalence of a type of corruption will likely raise concerns for what negative influence that type of corruption is having on development, more widely.

Perhaps more interestingly, however, is that across both questions, there is not a statistically significant difference between the mean response given by the *Government Success* group and the *Petty Corruption* group or between the mean response given by the *Government Success* group and the *Grand Corruption* group. Put another way, promoting government's success, the tests indicate, has a statistically indistinguishable influence on heightening worries about corruption's consequences as publicising how widespread the problems of corruption are. Moreover, in the case of the responses to the question about the harm petty corruption is causing, those exposed to the *Government Success* treatment are significantly more worried about petty corruption's harm than those in the control group (significant difference in means, p-value: 0.000). The effect is quite large too; there is a third of a point difference between the two means. This means that messages that promote the government's wins in the fight against corruption will have a similar influence on heightening worries about corruption's harmful effects to those messages that make salient the widespread nature of corruption. While unexpected, these are not necessarily unintuitive findings. Especially if people are prone to be motivated processors when it comes to information about corruption, awareness raising messages promoting success might cause citizens to recall already formed opinions about all of the problems with corruption that the government has had to deal with as it built its record of success, as well as those that it still has to tackle.

Those exposed to the *Civic Engagement* treatment also were significantly more worried about petty corruption's harm to development than the *Control Group (*p-

value:0.007), which again shows that a 'positive message' can too heighten worries about corruption's consequences. As the difference in means in table 2 shows, the effect of the *Civic Engagement* treatment on worries about petty corruption is much smaller (a difference in means of a fifth of a point); while the treatment significantly heightened worries about harm (compared to the *Control* group), it did not do so to the same degree that the *Grand Corruption, Petty Corruption* or even *Government Success* treatments did.
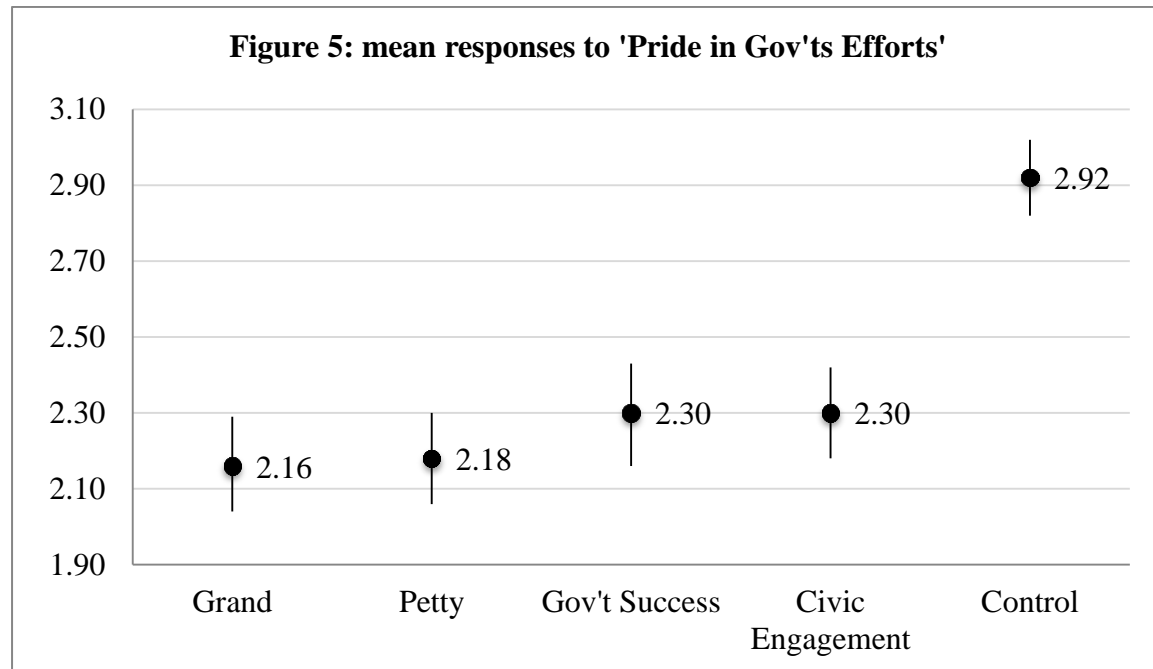
Both the expected and unexpected findings are potentially very important to the role messages might play in encouraging a civic fight against corruption. If worries about corruption's consequences tend to promote a sense of corruption fatigue, than these findings suggest that those working to rally a popular anticorruption movement would be safer to not invest in any awareness campaigns about corruption. Even 'positive' messages about the fight against corruption may work to heighten concerns about corruption's ill effects.

Figure 3: mean responses to 'Grand Corruption's harm'



Figure 4: mean responses to 'Petty Corruption's harm'
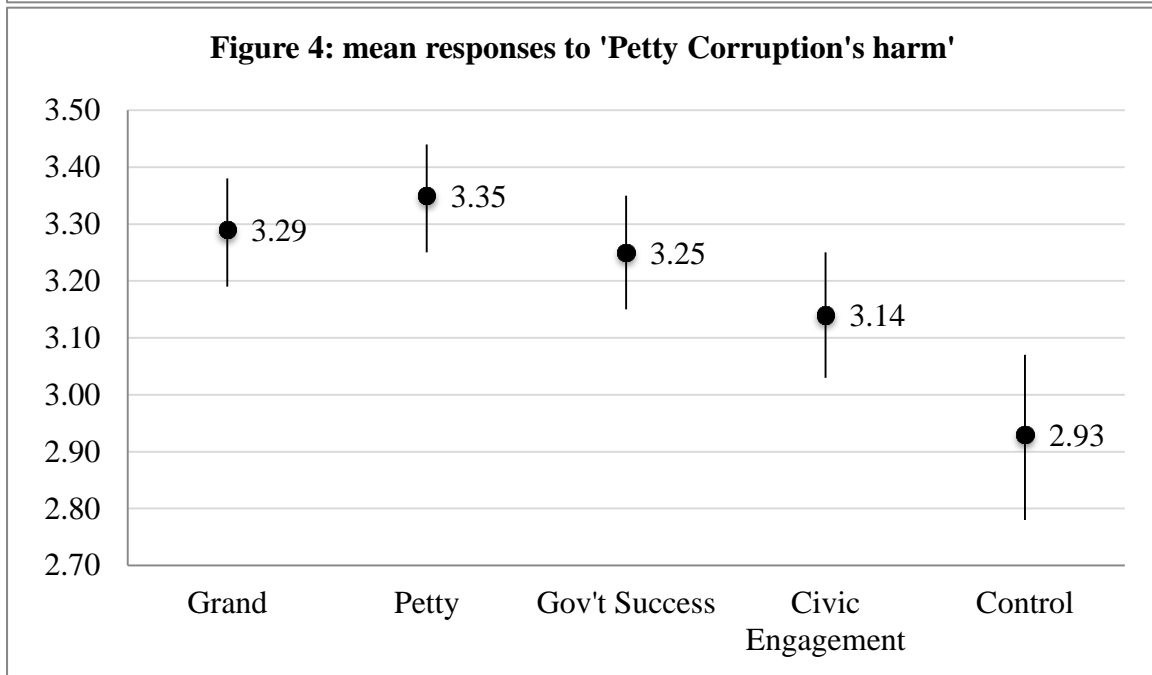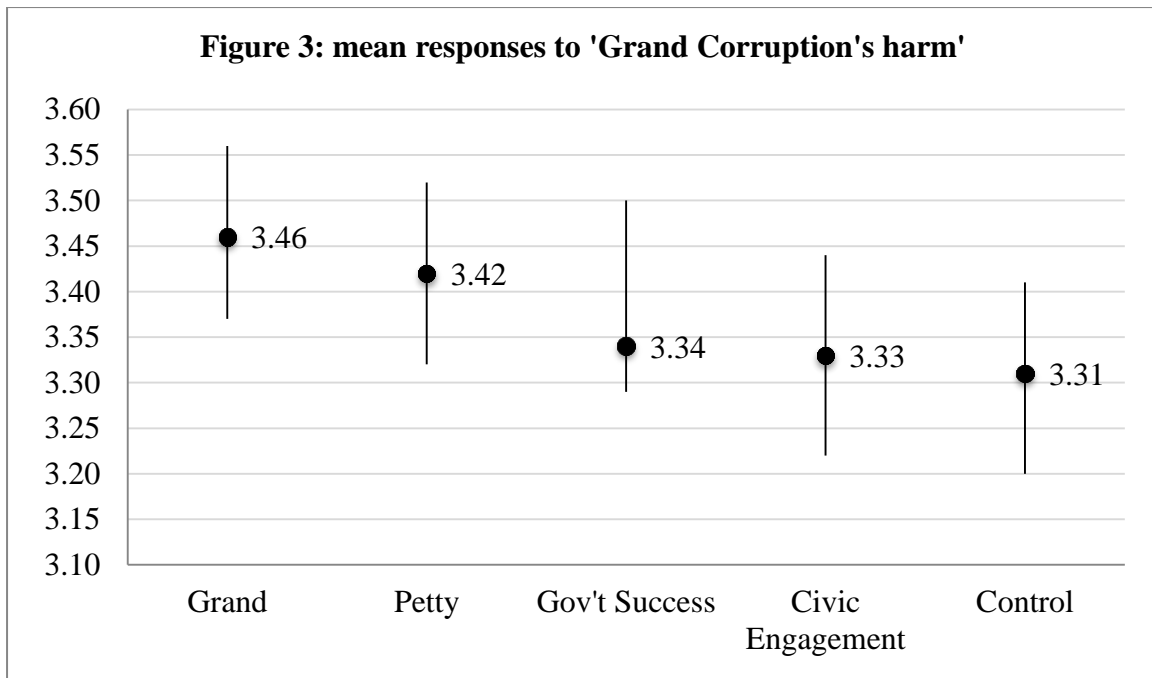
Increasing awareness as reducing pride in government efforts

The messages had differential influences on responses to the two questions referencing the government's fight against corruption. As Figure 5 and the difference in means test results of Table 2 show, all of the messages negatively influence pride in the government's efforts to control corruption. Compared to the *Control* group's mean response, all the treatment groups indicated that they had statistically significantly lower levels of pride in the government's efforts. Equally important to note is that there is no significant difference between the four treatment groups' mean responses to this question. Statistically speaking,

this means that each message had the same (statistically indistinguishable) impact on pride in the government's efforts. The estimated differences in means between the treatment groups and the *Control Group,* were considerably large too; the differences ranged from 0.62 and 0.76 points (on a 4 point scale).

Figure 5: mean responses to 'Pride in Gov'ts Efforts'

Like with the findings related to concern over corruption's consequences, these findings are both expected and unexpected. On the one hand, it is expected that negatively framed messages about the widespread prevalence of corruption (*Grand Corruption* and *Petty Corruption*) will prompt a reduction in pride in the government's efforts; these messages remind people of or bring awareness to the fact that widespread corruption persists, in spite of the government's efforts. On the other hand, however, the results show that positively framed messages had the same impact. Even the treatment that explicitly cites successes that the government has had in fighting corruption worked to significantly reduce pride in the government's efforts. Once again, it may be the case that by mentioning corruption at all, even in a 'positive' tone referencing the fight against corruption, may prime citizens to recall negative feelings about corruption and anticorruption efforts. Put differently, people may hear that the government has been successful or that citizens can be involved in the fight against corruption, and think mostly about the seemingly insurmountable challenges that still exist for the government to eradicate corruption.

Figure 6: mean responses to 'All talk, no action'
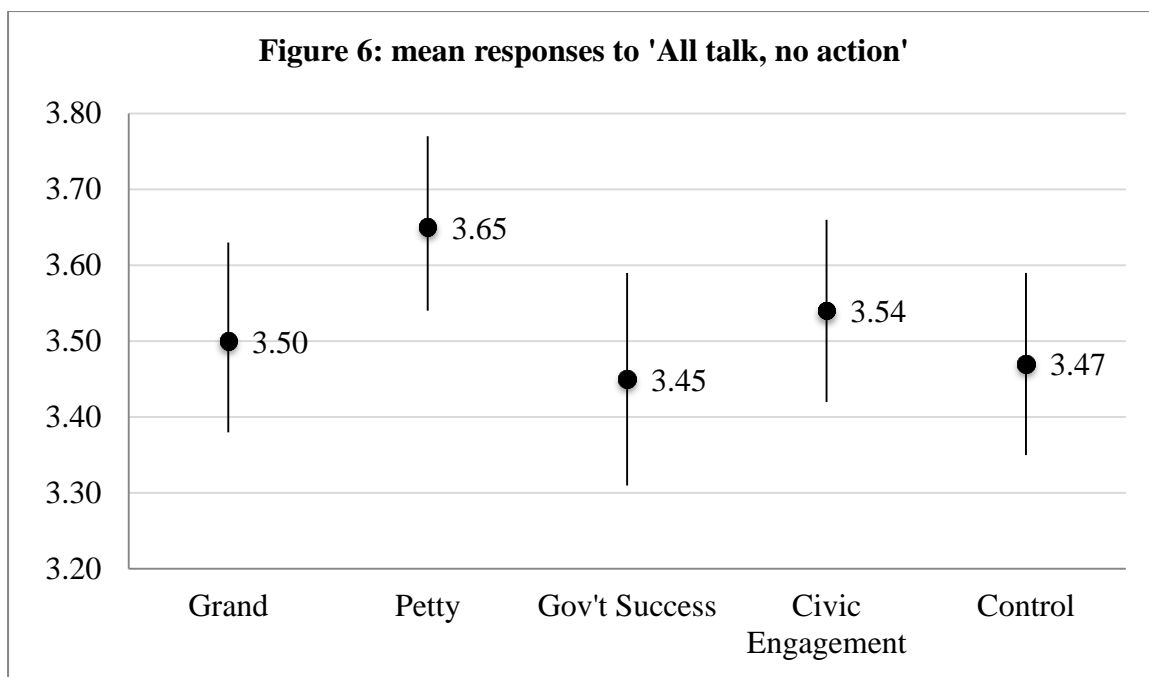
There were less robust effects when testing what influence the messages had on a perception of the government 'being all talk and no action' in the fight against corruption. As table 2 shows and figure 6 show, most treatments failed to have an influence on shaping this perception. There were no significant differences between most of the groups' mean response to this question and with the *Control Group's* mean response. The exception in this case is the *Petty Corruption* treatment; it worked to particularly erode confidence in the government's efforts as being genuine. Those exposed to the *Petty Corruption* treatment were, on average, significantly more likely to agree with the idea that the government is 'all talk and no action' when it came to corruption than those in the *Control Group*. The effect here, too, was modest; the difference in means between the two groups (*Petty Corruption* mean: 3.65, *Control Group* mean: 3.47) was less than a fifth of a point (on a 5 point scale).

*Messages tend to reduce beliefs that the fight is easy to join*

The messages also had differential influences on responses to the two questions on perceptions of civic engagement in the fight against corruption. The difference in means tests indicate that half of the messages work to significantly depress the perception that it is easy for an ordinary person to get involved in the fight against corruption. Compared to the *Control Group's* mean response, the *Petty Corruption* and *Civic Engagement* groups had statistically significantly (less than 0.05 p-value) lower levels of agreement with the idea that it is 'easy to get involved' in the fight against corruption (see also Figure 7). The other two treatment groups'—*Grand Corruption* and *Government Success*—mean response to this

question was less than that of the *Control Group,* but the differences between these treatment groups' mean response and that of the *Control Group* are significant at the p-value <0.10 level. It is particularly important here that there is no significant difference between the four treatment groups' mean responses to this question. This, once again, means that each message had the same (statistically indistinguishable) impact on this perception.

Figure 7: mean responses to 'Easy to Join'
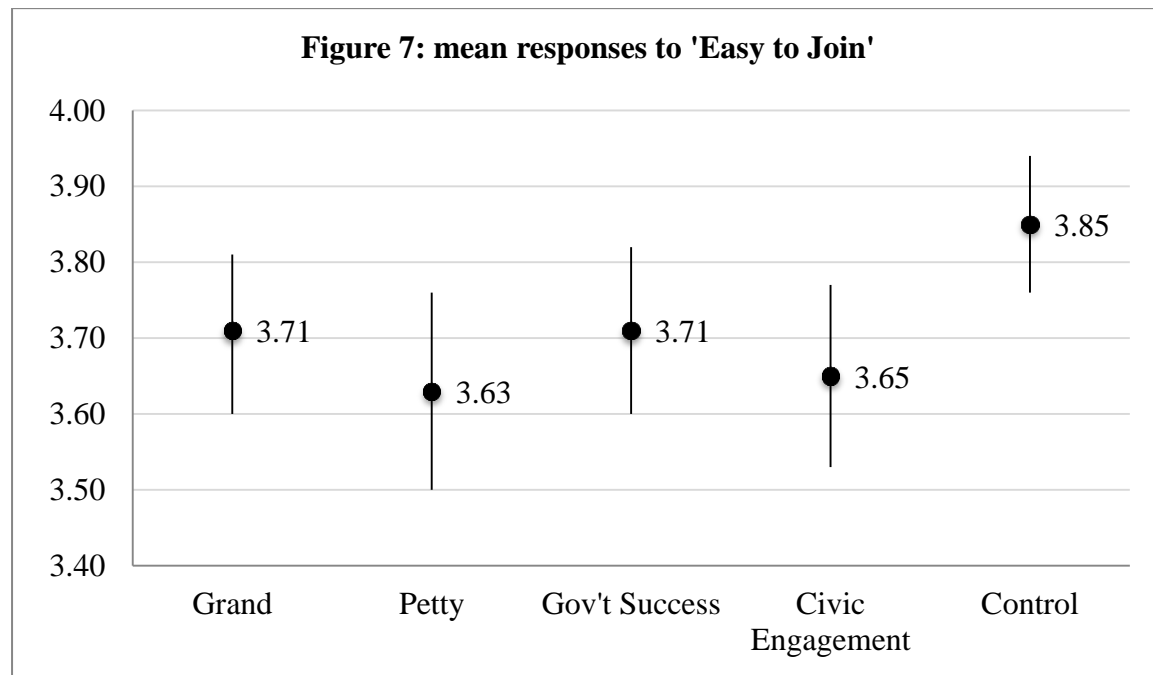
While perhaps it is unsurprising that messages emphasising the prevalence of grand and petty corruption would have a depressive influence on the perceived idea that it is easy to be personally involved in corruption, it is, once again, surprising that the positively toned messages have a negative influence on this perception. Even those that were exposed to the message that emphasises the channels through which people can be involved (*Civic Engagement)* agreed less, on average, with the statement than those who were not exposed to a treatment at all. The fairly robust effect across all of the treatment groups again demonstrates that positively toned messages may have unintended influences on perceptions of the corruption environment.

In contrast to these significant results, all of the messages failed to have a significant influence in shaping perceptions of whether ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption; there were no significant differences recorded between the means of any of the groups, (between treatment groups and the control group and between treatment group pairs) to this question (figure 8).

Figure 8: mean responses to 'Ordinary people make a difference'
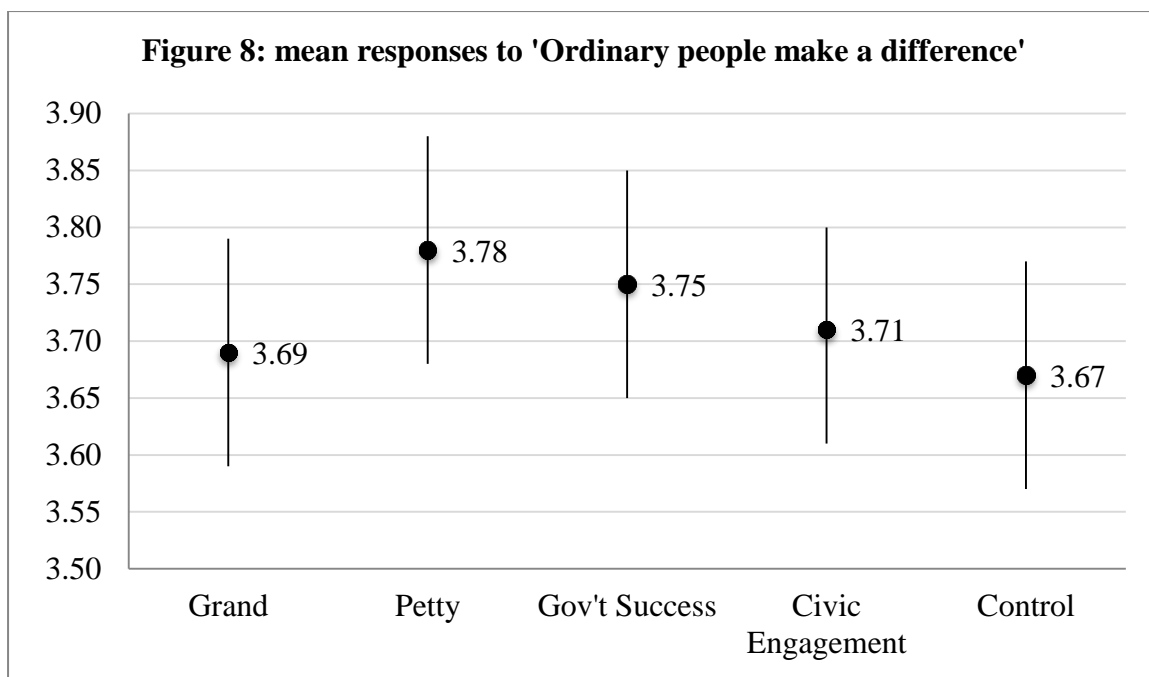
Discussion & Conclusion

The results of this experiment feed into 3 broad lessons. First, perceptions about how corrupt a government seem fairly stable; the results of this study showed that, irrespective of the tone of the message one is exposed to, a new message about the corruption environment is unlikely to re-shape how corrupt one sees their own government. This particular lesson is echoed in the results of Chong et al. (2015) and Hawkins et al. (2015); in their experimental studies, they too found that exposure to messages about corruption and the government did little to sway how corrupt people though the government was. Those hoping that their messages will shape these perceptions should take heed; perceptions of how corrupt the government is are not easily manipulated by awareness raising messages.

Second, reports about the prevalence of grand and petty corruption can work to evoke a 'corruption fatigue'; exposure to the *Grand Corruption* and *Petty Corruption* treatments heightened worries about the ill effects that corruption was having on development, depressed confidence in the government's fight against corruption and reduced the extent to which people thought it was easy for ordinary people to fight corruption. These findings are both intuitive and instructive. These findings show that messages about how widespread corruption is may not fire up the masses, but instead may trigger or build upon a growing sense of 'corruption fatigue' which may work to undermine grassroots anticorruption efforts. Moreover, as these treatments were most similar to news reporting on corruption, these findings also show that anticorruption efforts may be hindered by the ways in which the media covers corruption, as well.

Third, and potentially most interesting, even positively framed messages about the fight against corruption may have some surprising and unintended influences in shaping perceptions about the corruption environment. The *Government Success* and *Civic Engagement* treatments worked to increase worries about corruption's consequences, depress pride in the government's efforts to fight corruption, and also reduced the extent to which people thought it was easy for ordinary people to fight corruption. This is remarkable because, these messages were crafted with the intent to do the opposite: make salient the successes the government has had and inform people about the many channels through which they can get involved. While surprising, these findings, it has been argued, are not necessarily unexplainable. One interpretation is that people may be motivated processors when it comes to information about corruption. This would mean that they have already formed strong opinions about their corruption environment, and instead of reshaping those beliefs, new messages about corruption prompt people to recall those pre-formed opinions. So instead of prompting people to think about success or positive citizen engagement, exposure to even a positively toned message about corruption will bring up feelings and attitudes about the corruption environment that were preformed and, ostensibly, negative. This last lesson deserves particular highlighting. It suggests that even the most benign messages that mention corruption may work to shape perceptions about corruption in unintended ways. Depending on one's aim, this lesson suggests that no message at all may be better than a positive message encouraging anticorruption efforts.

Together, the three lessons are potentially very important to the fight against corruption. While many anticorruption campaigners hope that raising awareness to the problem of pervasive corruption will motivate the public to get involved, the three lessons show that raising awareness may be at best ineffective and at worst, have negative unintended influences on how the corruption environment is perceived. Perceptions are potentially important because actors use them to make decisions. The next step for this research project is to examine the mechanisms through which these messages influence willingness to get involved in the fight against corruption. While this study has shown that most messages seem to have either a significant and negative influence on perceptions of the corruption environment or little impact at all, the next study will investigate what linkages exist between the messages, perceptions, and willingness to act on the ground. It will asses whether perceived consequences of corruption are important to whether people will choose to join in on the fight against corruption, for example. And if so, whether positively toned messages

have a negative influence on that willingness, as they did on the perception that corruption is harmful.

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Appendix 1: Distribution of Responses to Dependent Variable Questions

Distribution of Perceptions of Corruption Levels

Corruption Common: very uncommon 1.2, 2.4, 6.3, 60.9, very common 29.2

Corruption Increased: decreased a lot 2.4, 20.9, 33.1, 22.8, increased a lot 20.8

(% of full sample, y-axis 0 to 70)

Distribution of Worry About Corruption's Harm

Grand Corruption: not at all 2.2, 9.8, 35.3, very worried 52.7

Petty Corruption: not at all 3.8, 13.4, 42.9, very worried 39.9

(% of full sample, y-axis 0 to 60)

Distribution of Perceptions of Government's Efforts

Pride in Gov't: not at all proud 11.0, 32.4, 39.6, very proud 17.0

All talk, No Action: strongly disagree 1.0, 15.5, 24.8, 49.6, strongly agree 9.7

(% of full sample, y-axis 0.0 to 60.0)

Distribution of Perceptions of Civic Engagement