Understanding Police Integrity: A Qualitative Study on Why Officers Reject Bribery

Arun Kumar[*]
R Renjini[**]
R Sivakumar[***]
M C Janaki[****]

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[*] Arun Kumar, Research Fellow, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, India (istraživač, Sveučilište Manonmaniam Sundaranar, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, Indija), email: annaiarung@gmail.com.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8659-9147

** R Renjini, Research Scholar, Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education, Krishnankoil, India (istraživač, Akademija za istraživanje i obrazovanje Kalasalingam, Krishnankoil, Indija), email: renjinirfs99@gmail.com.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9298-2675

*** R Sivakumar, Assistant Professor, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, India (docent, Sveučilište Manonmaniam Sundaranar, Tirunelveli, Indija) email: sivakumarmsu@gmail.com.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/ 0009-0003-2257-6270

**** M C Janaki, Associate Professor, Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education, Krishnankoil, India (izvanredni profesor, Akademija za istraživanje i obrazovanje Kalasalingam), email: drjanakimc@gmail.com.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1750-4048

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Police corruption, particularly in the form of bribery, has been widely studied. However, far less attention has been given to officers who consciously reject such practices. This qualitative study explores the motivations and ethical reasoning of 27 long-serving police officers, who consistently refused bribes throughout their careers. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, three core themes were identified: personal values and motivations, professional and organizational influences, and organizational culture and policy measures. Officers cited factors such as inner peace, family legacy, fear of moral compromise, and role modelling by senior leaders as crucial in resisting corruption, emphasizing their role in upholding justice. The findings reveal that ethical behaviour in policing is shaped not only by law and enforcement policies but also by deeply personal, emotional, and systemic factors. This study contributes to the discourse on police integrity by highlighting resistance to misconduct and the cultivation of ethics within challenging institutional environments.

Keywords: police, integrity, bribery, corruption, ethical policing

1. Introduction

Corruption in law enforcement, particularly in the form of bribery, remains a significant challenge in maintaining public trust and upholding justice. While numerous studies have explored the prevalence and impact of police corruption, limited attention has been given to understanding the motivations behind officers' rejection of bribery and their commitment to ethical integrity. Police Integrity and police misconduct are topics of great concern worldwide (Kutnjak Ivković & Haberfeld, 2015) particularly in relation to public trust and institutional legitimacy. The decision to resist or engage in bribery is deeply influenced by individual moral reasoning, organizational culture, emotional resilience (Amagnya, 2023; Singh, 2022), and the psychological pressures inherent in policing roles (Yousaf et al., 2024). It not only distorts the criminal justice process but also erodes the moral fabric and public credibility of the police force (Gillanders et al., 2023). Taking bribe can be considered a generic term

for corruption in the police (Kesić, 2017) and investigating these factors is essential for understanding how ethical policing can be promoted and sustained within law enforcement agencies.

Bribery is a complicated issue with many sides, and it often seems tempting when the benefits look more attractive than the possible consequences (Maduka & Adejumo, 2024). This study aims to explore the factors that influence officers' rejection of bribery, examine the role of professional development and leadership in fostering ethical decision-making and identify policy measures that can strengthen anti-bribery attitudes and reinforce integrity in law enforcement. In India, despite various reforms, bribery continues to be a significant concern, affecting the legitimacy and effectiveness of the police force (Nalla & Nam, 2020) and the study supports the differences in how officers respond at different ranks and roles are strongly influenced by police culture, which needs to be addressed more openly and widely within the system (Westmarland & Rowe, 2016). Police studies are a vital part of academic research, as policing involves many ethical challenges. However, there is still a lack of sufficient research in this area (Miller & Blackler, 2017) and this study contributes by addressing how integrity and ethics are maintained within law enforcement.

Research on police integrity is closely connected to broader scholarship on public service ethics and integrity in governance. Studies on public service motivation emphasize that ethical behaviour among public officials is often driven by intrinsic values, moral commitment, and a sense of duty rather than external rewards or sanctions (Perry & Wise, 1990). Similarly, integrity-based approaches to governance highlight the role of organizational culture, leadership, and institutional frameworks in sustaining ethical conduct within public institutions (Huberts, 2014; Maesschalck & Bertok, 2009; OECD, 2005). Situating the present study within the scope of this literature allows for a deeper understanding of why some officers consistently reject bribery despite operating within challenging institutional environments.

Guided by perspectives on police integrity and organizational ethics, this study examines ethical decision-making in policing beyond mere compliance with formal rules and sanctions. Drawing on integrity-based and organizational-ethics frameworks, the analysis emphasizes the role of personal moral values, professional socialization, leadership influence, and institutional culture in shaping ethical conduct among police officers. Accordingly, the study seeks to examine the personal, professional, and

organizational factors that influence police officers to consistently reject bribery, to understand how leadership practices and organizational culture shape ethical decision-making among long-serving officers, and to identify institutional and policy-level measures that can support and strengthen integrity-oriented behaviour within law enforcement agencies.

2. Methodology

Research Design and Setting. This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the factors that influenced police officers to reject bribery and maintain ethical integrity in their professional duties. Given the topic's sensitivity, manual thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and themes in the officers' responses. This approach allowed for in-depth insights into the ethical decision-making processes of experienced personnel. Data was collected in Tirunelveli City, Tamil Nadu, where the researcher engaged directly with participants outside formal institutional settings to promote openness and trust.

Selection Criteria. Participants were eligible for inclusion in the study if they had completed a minimum of 20 years of service in the police force, ensuring prolonged exposure to ethical challenges and decision-making situations inherent in policing roles. The selection of participants was intentionally selective, focusing on long-serving officers who were informally recognised within their professional circles for consistently rejecting bribery. This recognition was grounded in colleagues' experiences of working with these officers, rather than in self-reported claims of integrity. This criterion was adopted to enable the collection of reflective accounts of integrity-based decision-making grounded in sustained professional experience. While this selective approach limits the generalisability of the findings, it facilitated an in-depth exploration of ethical resistance among officers with demonstrated integrity, allowing the study to focus on how ethical behaviour is maintained within challenging institutional environments.

Participants and Sampling. A total of 27 police officers participated in the study, comprising two Sub-Inspectors (SI) and 25 Special Sub-Inspectors (SSI). Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Initial participants were identified based on their informal reputation for ethical conduct within local policing circles, either through personal familiarity or professional referrals. These participants subsequently referred other officers with similar reputations, facilitating the snowball sampling process.

Purposive sampling was simultaneously employed to ensure variation in rank, years of service, and duty assignments, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of integrity-oriented behaviour across policing roles. Although 36 officers were approached, only 27 consented to participate. Interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participants, with eight officers requiring follow-up meetings due to scheduling constraints. Care was taken to minimise disruption to participants' rest periods; many interviews were conducted after long shifts, during which signs of fatigue, such as sleepy eyes and frequent phone interruptions, were observed**.**

Data Collection and Procedure. The researcher approached participants individually, outside of their office environment, to maintain confidentiality and comfort. Each participant was introduced to the study as part of an educational research project. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing flexibility in exploring personal narratives while covering key themes. The data collection process was carried out for 56 working days. Interviews lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes, depending on the availability and willingness of each participant. Since Tamil was the native language of the participants, the interviews were conducted in Tamil, ensuring clarity and comfort in expression. The recorded responses were later transcribed and translated into English while maintaining verbatim accuracy. The demographic data of the participants is given below in the Table 1.

Table 1: *Demographics of the participants*

Variable	Category	Number of participants
Gender	Male	27
Age range (in years)	30-54	-
Rank	SI	2
	SSI	25
Years of service	20	1
	21	1
	22	3
	23	5
	24	5
	25	4
	26	6
	27	2
Total	27	

Source: Authors.

Data Analysis. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method, following a systematic approach of coding, categorization, and theme development. The transcribed interviews were carefully reviewed, and key patterns were identified using the process of coding. Through thematic analysis, eight subthemes were identified, which were then grouped into three major themes, providing deeper insights into the factors influencing police officers' rejection of bribery and commitment to ethical integrity and it is shown in Table 2. In the Results section, direct quotations from participants are presented to illustrate key findings. Each quotation is associated with a specific participant, identified by a unique code that includes their rank and years of service. The code structure consists of the letter "P" for Participant, followed by their rank (e.g., "SSI" for Special Sub Inspectors and "SI" for Sub Inspectors) and their years of service (Example: P1/SSI/23 refers to Participant 1, a Special Sub Inspector with 23 years of service, while P9/SI/26 refers to Participant 9, a Sub Inspector with 26 years of service).

Table 2: *Thematic analysis of transcribed data from interviews with 27 Police officers*

Meaning Unit	Code	Subthemes	Themes
I may ride an old bike, wear simple clothes and avoid expensive restaurants, but I sleep peacefully at night. No guilt. No fear. Just peace.	Satisfaction	Personal Integrity and Self-Respect	Personal Factors and Motivations
One day, my son and daughter will ask, "Dad, are you an honest policeman?" I never want to hesitate before answering.	Future	Family and Legacy	
How can I ask God for my children's happiness if I earn through dishonesty? A corrupt officer is always looking over his shoulder. Will I get caught? Will someone expose me? That is not peace. That is a prison.	Moral/ Spiritual	Fear of Consequences	
The moment I take a bribe, I lose my freedom. I am no longer a police officer, I am their dog.	Fulfilment	Psychological and Emotional Well-being	
I see officers trapped in bribery because their lifestyle demands it. Once they start, they cannot stop. I do not want to live with that burden.	Livelihood	Financial Stability and Lifestyle	Professional and Organizational Influences
This uniform is a symbol of justice. I will not stain it. Every morning when I wear it, I should feel pride, not shame	Honest	Professional Ethics and Leadership	
The government and the system are inefficient, and I cannot change that. But I will not make things worse by becoming part of the problem.	Reform	Systemic Issues and Solutions	

DSP Sir, said to me at the time, "I have never taken a rupee, so when corruption scandals happen, I sleep peacefully."	Guidance	Lessons from Senior Officers	Organizational Culture and Policy Measures

Source: Authors.

Ethical Considerations. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their rights as participants. Oral consent was obtained before data collection, as the researcher felt that requesting written consent might create discomfort or suspicion among participants, given the sensitivity of the subject and their professional roles. Participation was entirely voluntary, and confidentiality was assured throughout the research process. No formal institutional clearance was sought from the police department, as the data was collected informally through personal networks and participants' willingness to share their perspectives.

3. Results

The Results section presents the themes derived from the interview data and is limited to descriptive reporting of participants' accounts and emergent patterns. Three major themes were identified from the analyses of the interview transcripts, namely (i) Personal values and motivations, (ii) Professional and Organizational Influences and (iii) Organizational Culture and Policy Measures, with eight subthemes: (i) Personal Integrity and Self-Respect, (ii) Family and Legacy, (iii) Fear of Consequences, (iv) Psychological and Emotional Well-being, (v) Financial Stability and Lifestyle, (vi) Professional Ethics and Leadership, (vii) Systemic Issues and Solutions and (viii) Lessons from Senior Officers. The major themes provided broad conceptual insights, while the subthemes captured specific aspects of officers' experiences, including personal values, institutional culture, and leadership influence.

3.1. Personal Values and Motivations

Personal Integrity and Self-Respect. A strong sense of integrity helps officers stay true to their duty and resist pressures that could lead them to act unethically. Accepting a bribe even once can make them dependent on corruption, reducing their ability to make independent decisions and harming both their self-respect and their role as fair law enforcers. Self-re-

spect is important in decision-making because officers with strong values take pride in their honesty and commitment to upholding the law without personal compromise. Participants viewed integrity as a consistent guiding value in their work.

> If I take money once, I can't say "No" next time. I become their doll, not an independent policeman and also a single lie leads to another. One bribe will turn into ten before I realize it (P1/SSI/23).
>
> Being a police officer isn't just a job. My uniform is a symbol of justice. I won't stain it. I worked years to earn this. Why would I throw it away for some cash? (P8/SSI/24).

Officers who uphold integrity experience a deep sense of inner peace, knowing they have fulfilled their duties without compromising their values. Ethical decision-making allows them to avoid the fear, guilt and secrecy that often accompany corruption. Maintaining honesty not only preserves their professional reputation but also provides personal satisfaction and mental peace.

> I may ride an old bike, wear simple clothes, and avoid expensive restaurants, but I sleep peacefully at night. What's the point of extra money if I can't even sleep peacefully? I don't want to waste my peaceful sleep. Simplicity is power. At the end of the day, I sleep peacefully. No fear, no guilt, no secrets (P13/SI/24).

Family and Legacy. For many officers, ethical integrity extends beyond their professional lives and deeply influences their sense of responsibility toward their families and future generations. They believe that engaging in corruption can have long-term consequences not just for themselves but for their loved ones as well. They fear that money earned through corruption could bring misfortune or disrupt their happiness.

> If I build my house with corrupt money, maybe one day, my child will fall sick, or my happiness will be taken away in another form. I want my children to have clean luck, not the weight of my dirty earnings on their destiny (P4/SSI/21).

Ethical choices are often seen as a reflection of family values and upbringing. They believe that accepting bribes would not only betray their own integrity but also dishonour the sacrifices their parents made. Deep-rooted family principles shape their commitment to honesty, making corruption feel like a personal and moral failure rather than just a legal wrongdoing. They worry that if they get caught, their family will suffer the shame, financial loss and emotional pain. The fear of damaging their family's hon-

our and future keeps them committed to staying honest, even when faced with tempting situations.

> My father worked 14 hours a day, counting every rupee. If I take a bribe, I insult his struggle. If I become corrupt, it means I disrespected everything my family stood for. My father never allowed me to steal a single rupee from the cashbox…how can I now accept money that isn't mine? (P19/SSI/22).
> I may think bribery only affects me, but the real victims are my loved ones. If I get caught, my family will bear the shame. If I lose my job, my children will suffer the consequences. If I die, my legacy will not be of a hero, but of a fallen officer. Bribe money can buy luxuries, but it can't buy back a destroyed name (P8/SSI/24).

Fear of Consequences. The fear of consequences goes beyond legal punishment; it is deeply tied to moral and spiritual beliefs. They see corruption as something that not only threatens their career but also their personal integrity and spiritual peace. Some believe that accepting bribes would make them unworthy of seeking blessings for their loved ones. Religious and moral beliefs were commonly mentioned as reasons for rejecting bribery.

> If I take dirty money, my prayers become meaningless. How can I ask God for my children's happiness if I earn through dishonesty? I don't fear the law, I fear what comes after this life (P7/SSI/26).

Bribery is often seen as a dangerous path that leads to a cycle of deception, control, and fear. Accepting a bribe is not a one-time act but the beginning of endless obligations to those who are involved in corruption. It strips them of their independence, making them answerable not to the law but to those who have paid them off. Participants described fear of entrapment, reputational damage, and ongoing anxiety as key reasons for avoiding involvement in corrupt practices.

> A bribe is never just one lie, it's a chain of endless lies. The moment I take a bribe, I lose my freedom. I no longer work for the law; I work for the person who bribed me and I have seen people take bribes and end up in scandals, in jail, or even worse, living in constant worries (P22/SSI/25).

Psychological and Emotional Well-being. Officers go through deep emotional struggles when dealing with bribery, as it affects how they see themselves and their mental well-being. At first, taking a bribe may cause guilt, but over time, it can start to feel normal and even meaningless, and corruption can slowly take away a person's sense of right and wrong, making them feel powerless.

> The first time you take a bribe, you feel guilty. The second time, it feels normal. The third time, it feels like nothing. Even if no one knows, I will know. And that's enough to make me feel small and weak (P10/SSI/23).

Police officers want to leave behind a legacy of honesty, knowing that their choices will impact not only their own peace of mind, but also how they are remembered by their loved ones.

> When I die, I don't want my wife to hide my past I want her to be proud of it (P4/SSI/21).

Policing is not just a job but a fundamental part of an officer's identity, shaping their self-worth and emotional well-being. Besides, accepting a bribe is not merely a legal or professional failure; it triggers deep psychological distress, leading to guilt, self-doubt and a loss of personal integrity. Participants frequently referred to fear of losing their moral identity and living with long-term regret when explaining their avoidance of corrupt practices.

> Being a police officer isn't just a job, it's who I am. The moment I take a bribe, I betray everything I stood for: my training, my duty, my own sense of self-respect. If I lose my integrity, I lose my soul. No amount of money can buy it back (P3/SSI/20).

3.2. Professional and Organizational Influences

Financial Stability and Lifestyle. Financial stability is a crucial factor influencing an officer's decision to reject bribery. Officers recognize that accepting bribes can create an unsustainable lifestyle, where temporary wealth leads to long-term financial instability. They also emphasize the unpredictability of illicit income, contrasting it with the stability of an honest salary. Moreover, financial discipline and contentment play a key role in resisting corruption.

> If I start bringing in extra money, my wife and kids will get used to a lifestyle beyond my legal salary. What happens when the bribes stop? They will feel deprived. I would rather teach them contentment than temporary luxury (P3/SSI/20).
>
> Once I start taking bribes, my needs will expand. I'll want a bigger house, a new car, luxurious vacations, things I never even cared about before. I don't want to fall into that trap (P2/SSI/24).
>
> One bribe today, another tomorrow, this is not stable. I earn enough to feed my family and educate my children. I don't need a lavish lifestyle. The money you earn from corruption brings more problems in one way or another (P27/SSI/26).

Professional Ethics and Leadership. A police officer's honesty is closely linked to their ability to lead, and a leader who stays truthful gains respect and can make decisions without pressure. Taking bribes weakens an officer's authority because it creates obligations to others. Officers referred to the actions of senior officers as examples that influenced their understanding of honesty and professional conduct.

> I realized one thing from my first Inspector: if I take a bribe, I lose the right to command my men. An officer who bends once will keep bending. He never touched a single rupee beyond his salary, not even a festival "gift". Whenever some one tried, he'd throw or give the money back and say "If I take this today, I'll have to listen to you tomorrow. And I only answer to the law." Watching him, I understood that honesty wasn't just about principles; it gave him authority (P5/SSI/26).

Strong leadership in law enforcement is built on integrity and ethical conduct. Police officers who remain honest gain the respect of their peers and subordinates, fostering a culture of trust and accountability. A leader's actions set the tone for their team. When they reject corruption, they create an environment where ethical behaviour is the norm, not the exception. True leadership is not just about enforcing discipline but about eliminating the need for corruption.

> People may fear a corrupt officer, but they respect an honest one. I want my colleagues, juniors and children to look at me with admiration, not suspicion (P19/SSI/22).
>
> A man takes a bribe when he feels he has no other option. Our job is to make sure they have one. It wasn't just about stopping corruption - it was about removing the excuse for it (P18/SSI/25).

Systemic Issues and Solutions. Systemic corruption within force is often a reflection of deeper structural issues rather than individual moral failures. Lower-ranked officers face strict punishment for small bribes, while higher officials involved in large-scale corruption often go unpunished. This unfairness creates frustration among honest officers. A better way to fight corruption would be to focus on investigating people with unexplained wealth instead of only punishing minor cases.

> A constable takes ₹200 and we suspend him, shame him, and destroy his career. Meanwhile, the guy sitting in the air-conditioned chamber signing million-dollar deals is getting awarded for efficient leadership. How about reverse policing? Let's stop bothering with the ₹200 bribe and instead audit with ED to the guy who own bungalow on a government salary (P9/SI/26).

Encouraging integrity in law enforcement requires more than just punishments for corruption, it also needs rewards for honesty. Officers who stay ethical for years should receive benefits like better housing and preferred transfers. When honesty is valued and rewarded, it becomes a more attractive path than corruption, motivating officers to uphold their ethical standards.

> If an officer stays honest for 10 years, reward him with priority transfers, better housing. Make honesty the shortcut to success (P9/SI/26).

Bribery is often seen as a quick fix, but in reality, it only deepens systemic issues rather than solving them. Corruption may offer temporary benefits to individuals, but it does nothing to address the root causes of inefficiency and injustice. Some officers stated that accepting bribes does not contribute to meaningful improvements within the policing system.

> If bribery actually solved the system's problems, maybe I'd consider it. But it doesn't (P17/SSI/23).

3.3. Organizational Culture and Policy Measures

Lessons from Senior Officers. Senior officers play an important role in guiding junior officers to stay honest. They teach that taking a bribe is not just about money, it means losing control and freedom. They also believe that officers often take bribes because they feel they have no choice, so the real solution is to give them better options. Their advice is a strong reminder that bribe money may not last, but the harm it causes stays forever.

> My DSP sir, said to me at the time, "If a man offers you money, he is not being generous, he 's buying you." He had seen officers take bribes for years, thinking it was just extra income (P23/SSI/22).
> My SI Sir used to say, "A man takes a bribe when he feels he has no other option. Our job is to make sure they have one", and "Bribe money is temporary, but the damage is permanent" (P20/SSI/27).

Senior officers emphasize that financial struggles should not justify corruption. Instead of accepting bribes, they encourage officers to push for fair salaries and better benefits. Some leaders take proactive steps, like creating welfare funds, to support their team during hardships.

> My Superior once said, "If officers feel underpaid, they should fight for better salaries, not take bribes." He created a welfare fund for the staff working with us. If someone struggled financially, they could apply for assistance instead of resorting to corruption (P1/SSI/23).

4. Interpretative Synthesis of Findings and Discussion

The findings show that officers' rejection of bribery is strongly shaped by organisational culture within the police institution. Participants consistently referred to the influence of supervisors, senior officers, and peer expectations in guiding ethical conduct. Ethical behaviour was described as something learned and reinforced through everyday interactions, role modelling, and informal norms rather than through formal rules alone. This indicates that integrity-oriented behaviour is embedded in a shared organisational culture where officers internalise expectations about honesty, professional reputation, and acceptable conduct over time.

At the same time, the findings point to the role of integrity systems and accountability mechanisms in sustaining ethical resistance. Officers' concerns about disciplinary action, reputational damage, and unequal punishment reflect how formal and informal integrity systems operate together. While formal rules and sanctions were acknowledged, participants placed greater emphasis on consistent enforcement and fair accountability. Perceived inconsistencies in disciplinary practices were seen as weakening trust in the system, whereas transparent and predictable accountability strengthened officers' commitment to ethical behaviour. These findings demonstrate that integrity in policing depends on the interaction between organisational culture, functioning integrity systems, and credible accountability, rather than on individual morality alone.

This section interprets the findings presented above by situating them within existing literature on police integrity, ethical leadership, and organizational ethics, and by highlighting their theoretical and practical implications. This study offers a profound insight into the inner world of police officers who consciously reject bribery. These themes collectively provide a deeper understanding of the factors influencing police officers' rejection of bribery and their adherence to ethical integrity. Participants expressed that accepting bribes not only compromises their professional integrity but also leads to internal conflicts, feelings of guilt, and a diminished sense of self-worth. This aligns with research indicating that moral injuries, psychological distress resulting from actions that violate one's moral or ethical code, can have lasting effects on law enforcement personnel (Lentz & Chaires, 2007). Such internal struggles highlight the necessity for support systems within police departments to address the emotional toll of ethical dilemmas (Dempsey, Eskander & Dubljevic, 2023).

Ethics is used to refer to certain specific types of behaviour, usually related to a profession (Edelbacher & Kutnjak Ivković, 2004). Officers consistently described integrity as a core part of their identity, one that influences how they see themselves, sleep at night, and wish to be remembered. Corruption often stems not just from personal ethics but from deeper issues within the institution, like poor leadership, lack of challenges, and lack of support for integrity (Hough et al., 2016; Porter & Warrender, 2009; Punch, 2000). In contrast, the role of professional leadership and institutional support also emerged as a powerful influence here. Participants often recalled senior officers who demonstrated ethical consistency and inspired their teams through action, not just instruction. Brown and Treviòo (2006) describe this as ethical leadership when a leader's values and behaviour create a trickle-down effect on subordinate conduct.

When integrity is modelled from the top, it sets a standard that becomes hard to ignore. Yet, participants pointed out systemic inconsistencies, where lower-level officers are penalized for minor corruption, while senior officials often go unchallenged. This issue reflects the superficial nature of some anti-corruption measures (Punch, 2000). Supporting ethical behaviour in policing involves fostering a culture that prioritizes emotional well-being, financial stability, and psychological support, not just enforcing rules (Caldero, 2014). Bribery and corruption have become major public concerns in many countries (Myint, 2000), largely due to media exposure of misconduct by public officials (Bernardi & Vassill, 2004), making the investigation of police integrity crucial, a focus that this study directly addresses.

Within policing, recent advances in police integrity research emphasize the importance of examining ethical resistance, leadership influence, and the systemic conditions that enable integrity-oriented behaviour (Kutnjak Ivković & Haberfeld, 2015; Westmarland, 2025). The findings of the present study resonate strongly with these contemporary police integrity frameworks, which argue that ethical conduct is sustained not merely through rules, surveillance, or deterrence mechanisms, but through ethical leadership, organisational support, and shared professional values (Harfield & Macvean, 2025). Officers' narratives highlighting inner peace, family legacy, moral identity, and role modelling by senior officers reflect integrity-based governance perspectives that conceptualise ethical behaviour as embedded in both individual motivation and institutional context (Huberts, 2014). Together, these findings reinforce the argument that strengthening police integrity requires integrated approaches that simultaneously address personal values, leadership practices, and organiza-

tional culture, rather than relying solely on punitive or compliance-based strategies.

Every bribe is harmful because it goes against the law and fairness (David-Barrett, 2014). However, the officers in this study not only rejected bribes, but they upheld a higher vision of what policing can be. This supports the view that true effectiveness in policing involves not only doing the right thing but doing it for the right reasons, guided by solid evidence that challenges traditional practices and encourages evidence-based reform (Neyroud, 2019). By listening to these officers, the study has gained not only insight but direction towards building an ethical law enforcement culture that thrives on pride, not fear and ultimately, this study serves as a tribute to those officers who choose integrity not for recognition, but for peace of mind, family honour and a legacy they can be proud of.

One major limitation of this study was the limited availability of police officers, primarily due to their demanding duty schedules. As law enforcement professionals, participants had to balance their responsibilities with their involvement in the study, which made it challenging to engage them in lengthy discussions. Although semi-structured interviews were used to gather valuable insights, the time constraints often limited the depth of the conversations and prevented officers from fully exploring their perspectives. Additionally, given that the officers were still active in service, some may have been cautious in their responses, particularly when discussing sensitive topics related to ethics and corruption. These professional concerns may have influenced the level of openness and frankness in their answers. Another limitation is snowball sampling, which may have introduced bias into the study. As most of the officers were already known to each other within a hierarchical structure (junior, senior, super senior, and so on), this sampling method might have led to a lack of diversity in perspectives. Officers may have been more likely to refer individuals who shared similar viewpoints or experiences, potentially limiting the range of insights on the ethical decision-making process. Despite these challenges, the study captured essential viewpoints on ethical decision-making within law enforcement.

5. Conclusion

This study offers a rare glimpse into the minds of police officers who choose integrity over bribery, even when the system around them makes it difficult.

Through their voices, it becomes clear that ethical policing is rooted in personal values, emotional resilience, and a deep sense of responsibility to family, society, and self. Their reflections highlight that resisting corruption is not a simple choice, it is a daily struggle shaped by upbringing, leadership, and systemic pressures. Yet, their commitment proves that honest policing is not only possible, but already quietly thriving within the force.

This understanding does not only shift attention away from punishment and rules alone, but redirects it towards the conditions that help integrity survive. Supportive leadership, fair treatment within the organization, and strong role models have emerged as quiet but powerful influences on ethical behaviour. When officers feel respected and see honesty rewarded, resisting bribery becomes less about fear and more about personal pride and professional identity. By focusing on why officers remain honest, this study offers a hopeful message that integrity is already present within the police system and can be strengthened by nurturing the values, leadership, and organizational practices that sustain it.

Recognizing and strengthening these integrity-driven practices can help build more trustworthy policing systems and restore public confidence. Ultimately, understanding why officers choose honesty is just as important as understanding why corruption occurs.

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UNDERSTANDING POLICE INTEGRITY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON WHY OFFICERS REJECT BRIBERY

Summary

This study explores an often-overlooked aspect of policing, the reasons why officers reject bribery. While much research has focused on police corruption, this qualitative investigation shifts attention to the motivations behind ethical resistance. Conducted among 27 long-serving police officers (2 Sub-Inspectors and 25 Special Sub-Inspectors) in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, the study employed semi-structured, face-to-face interviews in the native Tamil language, later translated for analysis. Thematic analysis revealed three core themes: personal values and motivations, professional and organizational influences, and organizational culture and policy measures. Officers emphasized inner peace, fear of moral decline, strong family upbringing, and inspiration from ethical senior officers as major factors behind their refusal to engage in bribery. They highlighted that integrity is not maintained solely through law enforcement mechanisms but through personal conviction, positive leadership examples, and supportive organizational environments. Systemic issues, such as unequal punishment structures and lack of institutional encouragement for ethical behaviour, were also recognized as challenges. By focusing on resistance to bribery rather than misconduct, this study contributes a fresh perspective to the discourse on police ethics and governance. It emphasizes that promoting integrity within policing requires not just strict laws but fostering a culture where honesty is valued and rewarded. The findings offer insights for policymakers, leadership trainers, and public administration scholars aiming to strengthen ethical standards in law enforcement agencies.

Keywords: *police, integrity, bribery, corruption, ethical policing*

RAZUMIJEVANJE POLICIJSKOG INTEGRITETA: KVALITATIVNA STUDIJA O RAZLOZIMA ZBOG KOJIH POLICIJSKI SLUŽBENICI ODBIJAJU MITO

Sažetak

U radu se istražuje često zanemaren aspekt policijskog djelovanja – razlozi zbog kojih policijski službenici odbijaju mito. Dok je velik dio dosadašnjih istraživanja bio usmjeren na policijsku korupciju, ovo kvalitativno istraživanje usmjerava pozornost na motive etičkog otpora koruptivnom ponašanju. Istraživanje je provedeno među 27 policijskih službenika s dugogodišnjim iskustvom (dva inspektora i 25 posebnih inspektora) u Tirunelveliju, u indijskoj saveznoj državi Tamil Nadu. Primijenjeni su polustrukturirani intervjui koji su provedeni uživo na tamilskom jeziku kao materinskom jeziku ispitanika, a potom prevedeni za potrebe analize. Tematskom analizom utvrđene su tri temeljne teme: osobne vrijednosti i motivi, profesionalni i organizacijski utjecaji te organizacijska kultura i javnopolitičke mjere. Policijski službenici kao glavne razloge odbijanja mita istaknuli su unutarnji mir, strah od moralnog posrnuća, obiteljski odgoj i slijeđenje etičnih nadređenih policijskih službenika. Naglasili su da se integritet ne održava isključivo mehanizmima provedbe zakona, nego i osobnim uvjerenjima, pozitivnim primjerima rukovođenja i poticajnim organizacijskim okruženjem. Kao izazovi prepoznati su sistemski problemi, poput nejednake primjene sankcija i nedostatka institucionalnog poticanja etičnog ponašanja. Usmjeravajući se na odbijanje mita umjesto na protupravno ili neetično postupanje, rad donosi novu perspektivu u raspravu o policijskoj etici i upravljanju. Naglašava se da promicanje integriteta u policiji zahtijeva ne samo stroge zakone nego i razvoj kulture u kojoj se poštenje cijeni i nagrađuje. Rezultati pružaju korisne spoznaje donositeljima javnih politika, osobama zaduženima za osposobljavanje rukovodećeg kadra te znanstvenicima u području javne uprave koji nastoje ojačati etičke standarde u tijelima za provedbu zakona.

Ključne riječi: *policija, integritet, mito, korupcija, etično postupanje*