The Road to Bribery and Corruption:
Slippery Slope or Steep Cliff?

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Abstract

Major forms of corruption constitute a strong threat to the functioning of societies. The most frequent description to explain how severe corruption emerges is the slippery slope metaphor – the notion that corruption unfolds gradually. While having widespread theoretical and intuitive appeal, this notion has hardly been tested empirically. We used a recently developed paradigm to test whether severe corrupt acts unfold gradually or abruptly. The results of four experimental studies revealed a higher likelihood of severe corruption when participants directly faced this option (abrupt) compared to when they had previously engaged in minor forms of corruption (gradual). Neither the size of the payoffs, which we kept constant, nor evaluations of the actions could account for these differences. Contrary to widely shared beliefs, sometimes the route to corruption resembles as a steep cliff rather than a slippery slope.

Keywords: corruption, slippery slope, steep cliff, bribery, unethical behavior
The Road to Bribery and Corruption: Slippery Slope or Steep Cliff?

Numerous media report almost daily about new cases of corruption, in various contexts, such as banking, sports, or politics. These scandals raise questions about how severe corruption emerges. Like most popular media, many scientists suggest that severe ethical transgressions such as corruption unfold gradually, a process that is frequently referred to as a “slippery slope” (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Bandura, 1999; Darley, 2005; Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Gino & Bazerman, 2009). The belief is that power holders progressively neglect the interest of others and pursue selfish interests and “slide into” corruption (Kipnis, Castell, Gergen, & Mauch, 1976). While this widespread logic has strong intuitive appeal, there is no experimental research that examines whether such a gradual process indeed presupposes major forms of corruption. With four experimental studies, using a recently developed methodology, we examine the validity of the slippery slope metaphor, and contrast it to a steep cliff metaphor that argues that corruption comes about by people seizing a one-time opportunity of severe corruption.

Slippery Slope versus Steep Cliff

Corruption is a specific instance of unethical behavior, defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gains (Transparency International, 2010). As an explanation why people commit ethical transgressions such as corruption, existing theories suggest that people consistently seek to maximize material self-interest while maintaining a positive self-image (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Mazar et al., 2008a). Extensive research shows that people can commit minor ethical transgressions while remaining their positive moral self-view (cf. Ariely, 2012). Yet, severe ethical transgressions require an update of one’s self-concept (Mazar, et al., 2008a) and are widely believed to be the result of a gradual transformation process – a slippery slope (cf. Darley, 2005). This view implies that people start with minor
corrupt transgressions and use these previous acts as an implicit benchmark to make decisions about new ethical dilemmas (Gino & Bazerman, 2009). Due to several moral disengagement processes like rationalizations (Bandura, 1986, 1999), over time, more and more ethical transgressions can be incorporated into the moral self-concept (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). Corruption becomes “normalized” (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). These lines of reasoning add credence to the widely-shared belief that people gradually engage in more increasingly severe forms of corruption (Darley, 2005).

In opposition to the slippery slope, the steep cliff metaphor describes that people often are somewhat overwhelmed by an unexpected opportunity – a chance that might appear like a “golden opportunity”. Such an abruptly occurring situation characterized by the immediacy of large benefits is extremely tempting (Ariely, 2012). The combination of large and immediate benefits paired with the apparent uniqueness of the opportunity might pave the way for corruption-enhancing justifications. A single severe act might be easier to rationalize than repeated unethical acts (Mazar & Ariely, 2006), in that single behaviors can be easier discounted (“once does not count”). Conversely, repeated challenges to the moral self-concept might be psychologically demanding – especially within a short time span. Thus, although the slippery slope is a widely shared belief within and outside the scientific literature, there are also arguments in support of the steep cliff metaphor.

The present research provides four novel experiments that put both metaphors to a test. Overall, little quantitative research has investigated sequential unethical behavior. Whereas previous studies focus on third-party observers’ acceptance of gradual vs. abrupt unethical acts (Gino & Bazerman, 2009) or on the role of self-control and moral disengagement in the slippery slope of minor cheating acts (Welsh, Ordóñez, Snyder, & Christian, 2014), experimental investigation comparing gradual to abrupt occurrence of corruption is lacking altogether. Recent advances in experimental corruption research methodology (cf. Serra & Wantchekon, 2012) allow a first examination of these different processes, while keeping the
economic costs and benefits constant. In the present research, we used a recently developed corruption game (Köbis, van Prooijen, Righetti, Van Lange, 2015).

Study 1

In Study 1, we tested whether severe corruption is more likely to emerge gradually or abruptly.

Method

The corruption game is a three-player auction game consisting of five rounds. Two competing players receive a budget of 50 credits for each bidding round. In an auction fashion, they make bids (between 0 and 50 credits) for a good of 120 credits. The third player (allocator) administers the good and allocates it to the highest bidder (see Figure 1). The competing players keep the credits that they do not allocate in a bid. The competing player with the highest bid wins the total good. If both competing players offer the same bid, the good is split equally between the two.

Figure 1. Triadic structure of the corruption game in which participants take the role of the potentially corrupt player.
The payoff matrix (see Table 1) depicts all possible outcomes of this bidding process. Allocating 50 credits in the bid is the dominant strategy for both competing players – this option results in a strict Nash equilibrium (Nash, 1950). Only one of the two competing players gets the option to circumvent the fair bidding by bribing the allocator. Across all studies the participant took this role of the potentially corrupt player. After each round, the participants received feedback on who won the prize.

| Table 1 |

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Player 1</th>
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Note. The matrix illustrates the outcomes for each player before the corrupt option is introduced to the game. The range of bidding options for each player are in bold. The outcomes for player 1 are shaded in grey. The dominant strategy for both players is allocating 50 credits.

We translated this basic structure and the credits (numbers multiplied by $1,000) into a real-life scenario. The competing players took the role of CEO of a construction company, and the allocator took the role of a public official. We used several examples, asked the same three test questions in all studies (>84.9% answered correctly) and provided participants with extensive explanations in case they gave a wrong answer. Our faculty’s ethical review board (VCWE) approved of all studies reported in the manuscript.

**Measures and procedures.** In the abrupt condition, participants directly faced the option to invite the public official to a private vacation (“severe bribery”), which ensured corrupt advantages in all rounds of the bidding. In the slippery slope condition, participants first faced the option to invite the public official to a banquet (“partial bribery”), which
ensured advantages in 50% of the biddings. Upon invitation, they could increase the advantage in the bidding process to 100% by additionally inviting the official to vacation (“severe bribery”; see Figure 2). The costs for direct severe bribery and the aggregated costs for both steps of the slippery slope bribery were identical (i.e. $40,000).

Figure 2. An illustration of the step-wise decisions in the slippery slope condition of Study 1.

Participants. Students (N = 86, M_{age} = 21.63, SD_{age} = 6.47, 62.8% female) participated for money (€2.50) or course credits and were randomly assigned to either an abrupt condition, in which severe corruption would occur immediately, or a slippery slope condition, in which the severity of corruption would gradually increase. Since the dependent variable is binary, we calculated the a-priori sample size calculations for binary logistic regressions (for details
see Demidenko, 2007). To achieve a power of at least 1- \( \beta = .8 \) and detectable Odds Ratio of \( OR = 3.0 \), we set the cut-off criterion to 40 participants per cell. Participants that had already begun the study when this threshold was met were still included.\(^1\)

**Post-game measures.** Besides standard demographics (age, gender, education) we assessed how corrupt and fair the participants perceived their behavior to be, measured with one item each (“How corrupt / fair do you think your own actions were?”). Answers were given on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all* corrupt / fair; 7 = *very* corrupt / fair).

**Results**

A binary logistic regression analysis with the condition (Abrupt vs. Slippery Slope) as a predictor and the likelihood of severe corruption as a dependent variable shows a significant differences between the conditions (\( B = 1.57, Wald = 11.35, p = .001, \text{Exp}(B) = 4.82 \)). The results indicate that the odds of abrupt bribery were 4.82 times higher compared to step-wise bribery (see Table 2). Hence, participants were more likely to engage in severe bribery directly compared to step-wise.\(^2\)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Frequencies of Bribery Decisions</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Bribery decision</td>
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<td><strong>Study 1</strong></td>
<td>Abrupt</td>
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<td>Slippery Slope</td>
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<td><strong>Study 2</strong></td>
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<td>Reversed Slippery Slope</td>
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<td><strong>Study 3</strong></td>
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<td>Slippery Slope</td>
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<td>Reversed Slippery Slope</td>
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<td><strong>Study 4</strong></td>
<td>Abrupt</td>
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<td>Slippery Slope</td>
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Note. First step bribery refers to participants who invited the public official to the first instance, but abstained from the second invitation decision. Severe bribery comprises participants who obtained full advantages in the game either abruptly or gradually.

We also tested whether participants perceived inviting the official as corrupt and unfair. We find a significant difference in perceived corruption, $F(2, 83) = 15.37, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .27$, and perceived fairness, $F(2, 83) = 9.87, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .19$, between the different bribery decisions (no bribery vs. partial bribery vs. severe bribery). Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons indicate significant differences between all three choices in perceived corruptness ($ps < .032$). Obtaining full advantages in the game through bribery was perceived as more corrupt ($M = 3.75, SD = 1.52$) than obtaining partial advantages ($M = 2.89, SD = 1.25$) which in turn was perceived as more corrupt than abstaining from bribery altogether ($M = 1.68, SD = 1.05$; see Table 3).

Table 3

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Study 1</th>
<th>Perceived Corruptness</th>
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<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
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<tr>
<td>No bribery</td>
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<td>1.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>First step bribery</td>
<td>2.89$^b$</td>
<td>1.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Severe bribery</td>
<td>3.75$^c$</td>
<td>1.52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td>Perceived Corruptness</td>
<td>Perceived Fairness</td>
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<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
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<tr>
<td>No bribery</td>
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<td>1.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>First step bribery</td>
<td>3.11$^b$</td>
<td>1.97</td>
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<tr>
<td>Severe bribery</td>
<td>4.25$^c$</td>
<td>1.69</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study 4</td>
<td>No bribery</td>
<td>29.50$^a$</td>
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<tr>
<td>First step bribery</td>
<td>59.59$^b$</td>
<td>23.70</td>
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<td>Severe bribery</td>
<td>66.58$^b$</td>
<td>31.32</td>
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Note. The Table depicts the moral evaluation of the behavior in the game. First step bribery refers to participants who invited the public official in the first instance but abstained from the second invitation, severe bribery refers to participants who obtained full advantages in the game either abruptly or gradually.
to participants who obtained full advantages in the game either abruptly or gradually. Means with differing superscripts within columns differ significantly at the $p < .01$ level based on Bonferroni corrected pairwise comparisons.

For perceived fairness we find significant differences between severe bribery and both other choices ($ps < .043$), while the difference between no bribery and partial bribery was not significant ($p = .159$). Severe bribery was perceived as significantly less fair ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.54$) than partial bribery ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.26$) and no bribery ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.33$, also see Table 3). We find no interaction with the condition for both corruptness and fairness ratings (all $ps > .250$) which indicates that participants perceived obtaining full advantages as most corrupt and least fair independent on whether they invited the official directly or after the banquet invitation.

**Discussion**

Results of Study 1 indicate that severe corruption is more likely to occur when presented as a single choice compared to a gradual process. Bribing the public official was perceived as more corrupt and less fair than abstaining from it – independent of the path towards corruption.

**Study 2**

In Study 2, we added a third condition, in which the second corrupt act is less severe than the first one. With this reversed slippery slope condition, we tested whether the repeated engagement or the increasing severity in the slippery slope condition would keep participants from engaging in the second corrupt decision.

**Method**

**Participants.** In total, 244 participants recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk ($M_{age} = 33.52$, $SD_{age} = 10.49$; 58.4% male) were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions (Slippery Slope, Reversed Slippery Slope, Abrupt). Since the second data set was collected online we increased the cell sizes to at least 80 participants per cell. We excluded 16 participants from the analysis because they did not complete all questions.
Measures and procedure. In order to make the slippery slope condition and the reversed slippery slope condition comparable, we adopted the following cost-and-benefit scheme: Inviting the public official to the banquet cost $10,000 and yielded an advantage in 25% of the bidding rounds. Inviting the official to the vacation cost $30,000 game dollar and yielded an advantage in 75% of the bidding rounds. The slippery slope and reversed slippery slope conditions merely differed in the order in which these options were presented. The abrupt condition consisted of one decision (invitation to the vacation) which instantly yielded advantages in all bidding rounds (100%), and cost $40,000. The costs for obtaining full advantages in the bidding were identical across all three conditions. We assessed perceived corruptness and fairness by using the same items as in Study 1.

Results

Replicating the results of the Study 1, we again found a significant group difference in severe bribery between the abrupt and the slippery slope condition, \( B = 1.01, \text{Wald} = 8.66, p = .003, \text{Exp}(B) = 2.76 \). The odds of severe bribery were 2.76 higher when participants directly faced this option compared to when they first engaged in minor forms of corruption (see Table 2). We find no significant difference in the likelihood of severe corruption when comparing the severe with the reversed slippery slope condition nor when comparing both gradual conditions (all \( ps > .112 \)).

The evaluation of participants’ own behavior was again influenced by the decisions made in the game, both for perceived corruptness, \( F(3, 224) = 54.21, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .421 \) and perceived fairness, \( F(3, 224) = 35.59, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .323 \). Participants who abstained from bribery perceived their behavior as less corrupt (\( M = 1.55, SD = 1.02 \)) and more fair (\( M = 4.86, SD = 1.21 \)) than those who obtained full advantages in the game through bribery (\( M_{\text{corruptness}} = 4.25, SD = 1.69; p < .001; M_{\text{fairness}} = 2.66, SD = 1.72; p < .001 \)). No other group differences were significant (\( ps > .210 \)). Again, the way in which full advantages were
obtained did not affect the corruptness and fairness ratings as the interaction between decision and condition was not significant (ps range from .125 to .860).

**Discussion**

The results of Study 2 replicate the finding that severe corruption occurs more frequently when presented abruptly rather than gradually. We find no difference between the abrupt and reversed slippery slope condition, which might be because after committing the more severe form of bribery, the second act appears less problematic. However, the corruptness and fairness rating of the participants’ behavior was not influenced by the different slopes. Independent of the condition, severe corruption was perceived as most corrupt/least fair.

**Study 3**

To increase the stakes of the decisions in the game, and to increase mundane realism, we introduced real incentives for participants to the corrupt decisions in Study 3.

**Method**

**Participants.** In total, 125 participants ($M_{age} = 21.50$, $SD = 5.18$, 76.8% female) participated in the third study. In this laboratory experiment we again aimed for at least 40 participants per cell. We adopted the same experimental design as in Study 2, with the mere addition that participants received a monetary payoff according to their performance in the corruption game. As a bonus, they could earn between €0.10 and €1.20 (see Supplementary Material for the payoff scheme).

**Post-game measures.** In order to expand the scope of the moral evaluation of the participants’ behavior, we included the Multidimensional Scale for Evaluations of Business Ethics (MSEBE; Reidenbach & Robin, 1990; Reidenbach, Robin, & Dawson, 1991), which uses eight items to assess the evaluation of behavior on three different moral dimensions. The ‘moral equity’ subscale assesses broad moral equity concerns with four items (e.g., “just”) and showed high internal reliability ($\alpha = .89$). The ‘relativism’ subscale measures relativistic
moral evaluation, using two items (“culturally acceptable” and “traditionally acceptable”; $\alpha = .75$). The ‘contractualism’ subscale measures deontological moral reasoning and entails two items (e.g., “violates an unwritten contract” and “violates an unspoken promise”) with an acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = .60$). Answers were given on 100-point slider scale.

**Results**

Replicating the results of Studies 1 and 2, the chances of severe corruption differ significantly between the abrupt and the slippery slope condition, $B = 1.65$, $Wald = 10.22$, $p = .001$, $Exp(B) = 5.25$. The odds of severe bribery were 5.25 times higher when participants directly faced this option compared to when they first engaged in minor forms of corruption. In addition to that, we also found a significant difference between the abrupt condition and the reversed slippery slope condition, $B = 1.32$, $Wald = 6.50$, $p = .011$, $Exp(B) = 3.75$, which indicates that the odds of severe bribery were 3.75 times higher in the abrupt condition as compared to the reversed slippery slope condition. The difference between the slippery slope and the reversed slippery slope condition was not significant ($p > .250$).

The evaluation of participants’ own moral behavior differed significantly on two of the three moral dimensions between the different decisions. Dependent on the decision in the game we found significant differences in moral equity, $F(3, 120) = 5.46$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2_p = .12$ and relativism, $F(3, 129) = 3.70$, $p = .014$, $\eta^2_p = .01$. Bonferroni-corrected comparisons indicate that participants who abstained from bribery perceived their behavior as less equity-violating ($M = 30.31$, $SD = 26.62$) and more culturally acceptable ($M = 48.54$, $SD = 26.85$) than those who engaged in severe bribery ($M_{\text{moral equity}} = 52.35$, $SD = 25.67$; $M_{\text{relativism}} = 29.94$, $SD = 24.41$; $p = .001$, all $ps < .001$). No other differences between decisions were significant ($ps > .250$). Deontological moral reasoning as a dependent variable showed no significant difference between the different decisions ($p > .250$).

**Discussion**
The results of the Study 3 with real incentives replicate the steep cliff effect: Severe corruption occurs more frequently as a result of a single opportunity compared to a gradual process. Independent of whether the slope of severity increases or decreases, we find a general reluctance to repeatedly engage in corruption. The moral evaluations of the behavior in the game indicate that bribing was perceived as unethical. More specifically, in this study bribery was perceived rather as a violation of moral equity (“creates injustice”) and relativism (“unacceptable”), than a violation of an unspoken rule.

**Study 4**

The previous three studies did not include a real victim of the corrupt behavior. To capture this realism, we conducted a fourth study in which all roles in the game were taken by participants which meant that bribery would incur monetary costs to another existing participant. Also, in this Study, we quadrupled the incentives given to participants who engaged in corruption.

**Method**

**Participants.** We commissioned the Qualtrics Panels Team to recruit a stratified sample of 400 participants (100 per cell) from a research panel that is nationally representative for the US population to take part in an online experiment ($M_{age} = 44.81, SD = 16.16, 51.2\%$ female).

**Measures and Procedure.** We used the same paradigm as in the previous studies with three modifications. First, all roles in the game were taken by actual participants, which resulted in four conditions ($n = 100$ each) to which participants were randomly assigned. Identical to previous studies, we recruited two groups of potentially corrupt players that faced the decision to engage in bribery either abruptly (Abrupt) or gradually (Slippery Slope) – we did not include a reverse slippery slope condition so as to facilitate the matching procedure. In addition to that, we recruited a group of participants that adopted the role of the fair bidding player who had no opportunity to bribe (Fair Player) – hence the potential victim – and the official (Official, see also Figure 1).
To keep the decisional structure for the potentially corrupt players as identical as possible, we limited the action space of the official player so that s/he always accepted bribes and acted accordingly. We used the strategy method to match the decisions by the potentially corrupt players to the other two groups to determine the final payoffs. Second, we increased the potential monetary gain of corruption so that engaging in corruption would yield up to 6$ paid out in Amazon Gift vouchers (see Supplementary Material for an overview of the payoff scheme).

Post-game measures. We combined the post-game measures used in the previous studies. Hence, we assess perceived corruptness with the one item measure used in studies 1 & 2 while perceived morality was measure with the MSEBE used in Study 3 – consisting of the subscales ‘moral equity’ ($\alpha = .93$), ‘relativism’ ($\alpha = .85$) and ‘contractualism’ ($\alpha = .86$). Answers were given on 100-point slider scale.

Results

In line with Studies 1 through 3, Study 4 revealed that the odds of severe bribery were 1.71 times higher when this option was presented abruptly compared to when it was the result of a gradual process – a marginally significant difference $B = 0.53$, $Wald = 2.88$, $p = .090$, $Exp(B) = 1.71$. Participants again evaluated their own behavior according to the decisions made in the game, showing significant differences for perceived corruptness, $F(3, 197) = 24.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .197$) between those who abstained from bribery and both groups who engaged in it ($ps < .002$). We also find significant group differences for each of the subscales of the MSEBE – moral equity, $F(3, 197) = 13.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .12$, relativism, $F(3, 197) = 4.46$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2_p = .043$ and contractualism $F(3, 197) = 6.29$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2_p = .06$. Participants who abstained from bribery rated their behavior as more moral on all three subscales compared to those who engaged in severe bribery (all $ps < .010$, see also Table 3) – again indicating that participants who engaged in severe corruption perceived their behavior as less moral and more corrupt than those who abstained from it. For all measures, we find neither
significant differences between mild and severe corruption ($ps > .74$) nor an interaction between condition and decision (all $ps > .22$).

Next, because Studies 1 through 4 differed in a number of respects (e.g. procedure, sample), we conducted a meta-analysis to address the generality of findings across the four studies. Using the $\chi^2$-values, we first tested whether the overall odds of severe corruption differed between the slippery slope and the abrupt condition. This analysis compared the slippery slope condition to the abrupt condition, drawing on four studies ($N = 514$), and revealed a significant difference (random effects; point estimate = 0.376, 95% CI [0.22, 0.61], $z = -3.87, p < .0001$). Participants across all studies were significantly more likely to engage in severe corruption in the abrupt condition compared to the slippery slope condition.

Moreover, we compared the abrupt condition with the reverse slippery slope (Studies 2 and 3, overall sample size, $N = 250$), which also revealed a significant difference (point estimate = 0.50, 95% CI [0.27, 0.93], $z = -2.15, p = .003$). And finally, it is noteworthy that the slippery slope condition did not significantly differ from the reverse slippery slope condition in Studies 1 and 2 combined (point estimate = -0.22, 95% CI [-0.49, 0.03], $z = -1.71, p = .08$). Taken together, we conclude that the odds of severe corruption are significantly higher in the abrupt condition compared to the reverse slippery slope condition and the slippery slope condition.

**Discussion**

In Study 4 we again find support (albeit, marginal) for the steep cliff effect. Participants were more likely to engage in severe than in gradual bribery. Across four independent studies evidence suggests that under the present circumstances corruption is more strongly rooted in a single tempting opportunity rather than in a two-step succession of corruption.

**General Discussion**

Contrary to the widespread belief that corruption comes about through a slippery slope, the present studies provide novel evidence suggesting that the path towards severe
corruption might rather be a steep cliff. Across four studies, people were more likely to engage in severe corruption when this option was presented abruptly rather than gradually, even though they did acknowledge the unethicality of severe corruption. In fact, the moral evaluation of severe corruption as well as the (combined) economic costs and benefits did not differ across the different conditions.

Given that most scientists, and laymen alike, believe in the slippery slope analogy, it is important to ask the obvious: How can we account for evidence favoring the steep cliff rather than the slippery slope? One line of reasoning is that the intuitively compelling notion that repeated transgressions lower moral thresholds may not always be true. Rather than a process of habituation and moral disengagement, it is possible that people seek to avoid repetition of corruption because it is expected to be psychologically taxing – especially when the corrupt opportunities occur in short succession (Mazar, Ayal, & Ariely, 2008b). It poses another threat to one’s self-image and therefore even a second more minor form of corruption can be undesirable (Study 3).

When deciding whether to engage in unethical behavior people take both the external costs and benefits and the psychological cost and benefits of the respective act into account (Messick & Bazerman, 1996). Unlike previous studies (Welsh et al., 2014), we kept the economic costs and benefits constant across the different conditions. Thus, our findings point towards a new psychological factor – the sequence of decisions. A single severe act, directly presented at the participants, might be easier to justify causing less tension between being a moral person on the one hand and enjoying the benefits of dishonesty on the other hand (Batson, 2016).

A complementary argument is that a single act requires less intentionality and planning than repeated behaviors (Batson & Powell, 2003). The large benefits might reinforce a selective focus on self-interest, rather than a positive self-image. In contrast to previous work (Welsh et al., 2014), this study looks at bribery, a form of unethical behavior that entails
a collaboration between multiple corrupt agents (Köbis, van Prooijen, Righetti, & Van Lange, 2016; Weisel & Shalvi, 2015). The resulting local social utility (“I also help the other”, Ayal & Gino, 2011), might give rise to reputational concerns regarding the other agents, which then further facilitates these self-serving justifications.

Clearly, future research is needed to examine the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions. For example, how severe corruption emerges under varying punishment regimes requires future research. Yet, given the ubiquity of the belief in the slippery slope, we conclude with two lessons from the present research. One lesson is that people may be more willing to engage in severe, single (and perhaps unexpected) instances of corruption than widely believed— even if they recognize the immorality of these behaviors. Another lesson is that repeated forms of unethical behavior may be more psychologically taxing than most of us tend to believe, especially if the second occasion brings about smaller benefits for self. These findings thus shed light on an unexplored area of sequential corrupt decision-making. Overall, our findings suggest that those who are willing to engage in bribery, seek to obtain the biggest advantage for the lowest moral price. Instead of going through a process of repeatedly engaging in corruption (slippery slope), they rather are opportunistic once (steep cliff).
Author Contributions

N. C. Köbis developed the study concept. All authors contributed to the study design. Testing and data collection were performed by N. C. Köbis N. C. Köbis performed the data analysis and interpretation under the supervision of J. W. van Prooijen, F. Righetti and P.A.M. Van Lange. N. C. Köbis drafted the manuscript, and J. W. van Prooijen, F. Righetti and P.A.M. Van Lange provided critical revisions. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.
References


Footnotes

1 Half of the participants received a time pressure prompt, which had no effect on any of the reported results (all $ps > .125$). All data reported in this manuscript can be accessed via: https://figshare.com/s/dada1b2b415c83d29558

2 In all studies reported in this manuscript the significant main effects of the condition on the likelihood of severe corruption and the main effects for perceived corruptness and perceived fairness remained significant when controlling for gender, age, and education (all $ps < .002$).