

# Corruption in Korean Organizations: Prevention Measures from Cultural Perspectives

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## 한국 조직의 부패: 문화적 관점에서의 예방책

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**Abstract** This study examines the status of major corruption in the public and private sectors in Korea. This study adopts the secondary data analysis method, and uses ‘The Status of Corruption in Korean Society’ released by Ipsos in March 2019. The annual difference analysis is conducted to examine the trend of major corruption, and the results are as follows. First, in the public sector, the number of conspicuous crimes, such as bribery, has decreased, but intelligent crimes that are not easily detected, such as abuse of authority, are increasing. In the private sector, embezzlement was on the decline, but breach of trust remained at a certain level. Second, from 2003 to 2017, the average annual change rate of major corruption in the public sector was 8.0%, while the private sector was 1.8%. Third, the public sector has seen a slight increase in corruption except in 2015, but the private sector has been declining since 2014. This study is different as it makes academic contributions by offering three anti-corruption measures; changing the culture of high power distance, changing the culture of low corruption perception, and abolishing the culture of impunity. Empirical studies using primary data that separate the two groups are required.

**Key Words** : Corruption, Corruption Perception Index, Power Distance, Culture of Impunity, Transparency International

요약 본 연구는 한국의 공공부문 및 민간부문 주요 부패 현황을 살펴보았다. 연구방법은 2차 자료 분석 방법을 채택하였으며, 분석 자료는 입소스(Ipsos)에서 2019년 3월 발표한 ‘한국사회 부패현황’을 사용하였다. 두 집단의 주요 부패 추이를 살펴보기 위해 연도별 차이분석을 실시하였으며, 주요 결과는 다음과 같다. 첫째, 공공 부문에서는 뇌물과 같이 눈에 띄는 범죄의 수는 감소하지만, 직권남용처럼 쉽게 감지되지 않는 지능적 범죄는 증가하고 있었다. 민간부문에서는 횡령은 점점 감소하고 있었지만, 업무상 배임은 일정 수준을 유지하고 있었다. 둘째, 2003년부터 2017년까지 공공부문의 주요 부패 연간증감률 평균은 8.0%인데 반해, 민간부문은 1.8%로 나타났다. 셋째, 공공부문은 2015년을 제외하고 부패가 조금씩 증가하고 있지만, 민간부문은 2014년 이후 점차 감소하고 있었다. 본 연구는 높은 권력간격 문화의 개선, 낮은 부패인식 문화의 개선, 무처벌 문화의 폐지와 같은 문화적 측면을 고려한 세 가지 예방조치를 제시함으로써 학술적 기여도와 차별성이 있다. 향후 1차 자료를 통한 실증연구나 두 집단을 분리한 개별적 연구가 요구되어진다.

주제어 : 부패, 부패인식지수, 권력간격, 무처벌 문화, 국제투명성기구

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## 1. Introduction

In the history of modern economic development, the economic success of Korea ('Korea' as shorthand from now on) was considered a possible role model to be followed by other newly industrializing economies[1]. Korea is normally known as a high technology country that successfully overcame the financial crisis and became one of the top 10 economies in the world[2]. However, Korea is also notorious among OECD countries for its wide-spread corruption[3]. As corruption is rampant across Korean societies in these days, it is hard to say that corruption in Korea is caused by only one reason because it is due to complex reasons such as historical, cultural, social, political, etc.

According to the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) announced by the Transparency International in 2018, Korea ranked 45th together with Cabo Verde and Dominica, receiving 57 points[4]. Korea's CPI is very poor compared to its economic level of around 10th in the world economy, remaining at the bottom of the OECD countries.

Addressing the above background, this study aims to examine the current state of corruption within Korean organizations and presents precautionary measures to prevent corruption. In particular, this study recommends the following three measures by considering Korea's cultural traits; changing the culture of high power distance, changing the culture of low corruption perception, and abolishing the culture of impunity.

This study is original and different as it makes some academic and practical contributions and implications. First, from academic perspective, although there have been a number of different disciplinary literatures (i.e. criminology, sociology and law) on corruption in Korea, most previous studies focused on examining the current status, trend, and types of corruption. This study,

however, examines the fundamental reasons of occurring corruption in Korean organizations by examining Korea's unique cultural traits. Second, from practical viewpoint, this study provides some practical contributions and implications for government officials, politicians, business people, and even ordinary people, reminding them the seriousness of corruption.

## 2. Theoretical Background and Literature Review

To establish a research framework, this section presents theoretical background by holistically examining previous and existing literatures on corruption.

Corruption has always been with us because it is not new[1]. It is very difficult to define corruption in any systematic manner as there are many factors contributing to corruption[5]. In addition, there is no single, comprehensive and universally accepted definition of corruption because attempts to define it have faced legal and political problems[6]. To explain the nature of corruption, many scholars have referred to various taxonomies such as market versus parochial corruption[7], bureaucratic versus political corruption[8], petty versus grand corruption[9], and low-level versus systemic corruption[10].

Despite various controversies over the definition and taxonomy of corruption, what is defined and classified by Transparency International is most commonly accepted. According to Transparency International, corruption can be defined as 'the abuse of entrusted power for private gain'. Corruption can be classified as grand, petty and political, depending on the amounts of money lost and the sector where it occurs. Grand corruption consists of acts committed at a high level of government that distort policies or the central functioning of

the state. Petty corruption refers to everyday abuse of entrusted power by low- and mid-level public officials in their interactions with ordinary citizens. Political corruption is a manipulation of policies, institutions and rules of procedure in the allocation of resources and financing by political decision makers[11]. Among various corruptions, political corruption is most common one which appears in the political system in various types and ways. Political corruption includes bribery, extortion, embezzlement, favoritism, nepotism, cronyism, patronage, vote-buying, etc.[12].

Another taxonomy of corruption is public-sector corruption and private-sector corruption. Public corruption occurs when government officials leverage their ability to arbitrarily modify the policies or procedures that govern the distribution of the state's goods, services and resources[13]. Permits, approvals, licenses, customs clearances, regulatory rulings, tax concessions, judicial decisions and procurement contracts are a few of the many government-controlled goods and services[14], where public corruption can be easily occurred. Gutmann and Lucas (2018) extended their concept of corruption by highlighting four segments of the private-sector corruption including businesses, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious bodies and the media[15]. Common examples of private-sector corruption in business organization are commercial bribery, kickbacks, fraud, collusion and inside trading[16,17].

There have been a number of studies explaining the causes of corruption across different disciplines including law, sociology, criminology, psychology and management. Previous literatures argue that a culture which tolerates corruption is easily perpetuated in the organization through socialization of the new members who join the organization, thus perpetuating corrupt practices[18,19]. When new

employees observe that corrupt behaviors are not sanctioned in an organization, they may engage in those behaviors for private gain or need[20]. Existing literatures concern about the risk of socialization of corruption within the organizations. When organizations are corrupt, they tend to socialize employees into this practice. Socialization into corruption means that the process by which systems teach employees how to accept and then perform corrupt practices[18]. Further to the socialization, Anand *et al* (2004) stressed the concept of rationalization of corruption within organizations. Rationalizations are mental strategies that allow employees to view their corrupt acts as justified. Employees may collectively use rationalizations to neutralize any regrets or negative feelings that emanate from their participation in unethical acts[21].

Taken together, there are three pillars that contribute to the normalization of corruption within organizations: (1)institutionalization, the process by which corrupt practices are enacted as a matter of routine, (2)socialization, the process by which newcomers are taught to perform and accept the corrupt practices, and (3)rationalization, the process by which individuals who engage in corrupt acts use socially constructed accounts to legitimate the acts in their own eyes[19].

Based on the above backgrounds, this study 1)investigates the current state of corruption within Korean organizations, 2)examines major causes of corruption, and 3)presents precautionary measures.

### 3. Method and Data Collection

As for research method, this study adopts the analysis of secondary materials. Despite some limitations, secondary analysis offers numerous benefits to researchers carrying out a research

projects – saving cost and time, providing high quality of data, giving an opportunity for longitudinal analysis, etc.[22].

Data for this study are derived from secondary materials. The main data sources are journal articles, books and research reports released by research institutes. To establish research frameworks, I holistically examined a number of documents on corruption and its relevant areas by investigating a large volume of previous literatures. Data have also come from statistical data and archival reports issued by international organizations such as Ipsos and Transparency International.

#### 4. The Analysis of Corruption in Korea

##### 4.1 Public-sector Corruption

In the corruption perception survey of public officials conducted by the Anti-corruption and Civil Rights Commission, Koreans gave 3.94 out of 10 in 2012, 3.46 in 2013, 2.63 in 2014 and 3.28 in 2015, respectively[23]. This result implies that the Korean people evaluate government officials very negatively by giving only a three-point range out of 10 points.

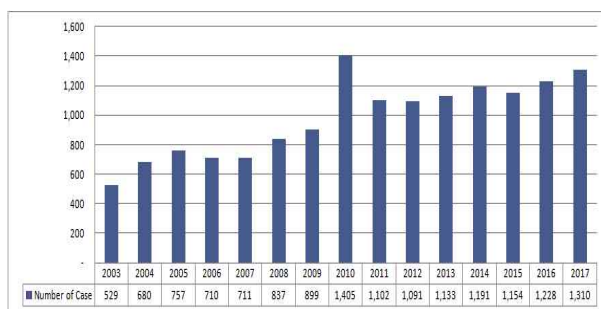


Fig. 1. Public-sector Corruption  
Source : Ipsos (2019)

The Figure 1 shows the status of major corruption (i.e. negligence of duty, abuse of authority and bribery) in public-sector from 2003 to 2017. The number of corruption cases in 2003

was 529, and the number gradually increased over time, reaching 1,405 in 2010.

One notable thing is that the number of corruption cases has been above 1,000 since 2010. The sharp increase of corruption in 2010 seems to be due to the development of the anti-corruption law-making campaign at that time. As a result, those that were not subject to punishment were subject to punishment after the enactment of the law.

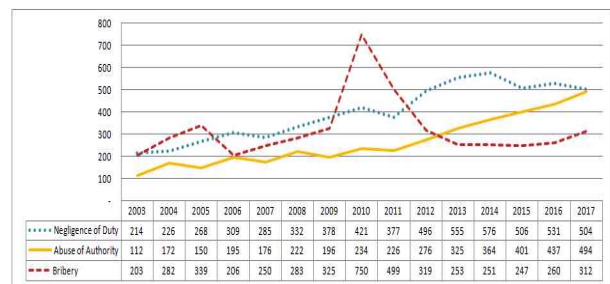


Fig. 2. Public-sector Corruption by Cases  
Source : Ipsos (2019)

More specifically, the Figure 2 shows the public-sector corruption by cases including negligence of duty, abuse of authority and bribery from 2003 to 2017. The cases of bribery has been on the rise from 2003 to 2010, but has been on the decline ever since. On the other hand, the cases of negligence of duty and abuse of authority are increasing year after year. This implies that the corrupt behavior of civil servants has changed into increasingly unnoticed covert behavior because these crimes are not easily detected in people's eyes.

The data released by the Korean Institute of Criminology in 2019 support this fact. According to the criminal analysis result of public officials from 2003 to 2017, the number of corruption cases has increased by about twofold over the past decade. By type of crime, bribery is gradually decreasing, while dereliction of duty and abuse of authority continue to increase[24].

In total, this data reveals that corruption crimes are structured in Korea's public society,

and those corruption crimes are increasingly turning into intellectual crimes rather than decreasing. While the number of clearly visible crimes such as bribery decreases, the increase in crimes that are not easily detected, such as abuse of authority and dereliction of duty, proves that the Korea's public societies are corrupt.

#### 4.2 Private-sector Corruption

In Korea, private corruption is far more serious than public corruption. As of 2017, the number of private corruption cases (i.e. 8,878) were almost six times more than those of public corruption (i.e. 1,310). The Figure 3 shows the status of major corruption (i.e. embezzlement and breach of trust) in private-sector from 2003 to 2017.

The number of corruption cases have increased over time, and then peaked at 21,927 in 2010. Since then, there has been a tendency to decrease, but there are still nearly 10,000 corruption cases each year. Same as the public sector, the sudden increase of private sector corruption in 2010 was due to the active anti-corruption legislation.

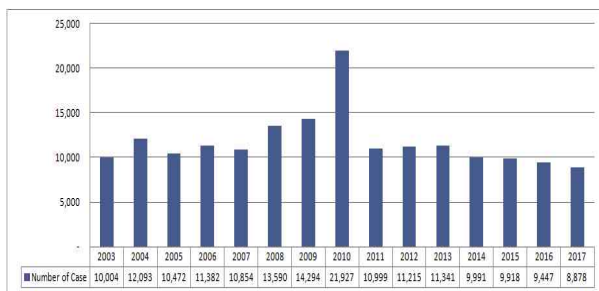


Fig. 3. Private-sector Corruption  
Source : Ipsos (2019)

The Figure 4 shows the private-sector corruption by cases including breach of trust and embezzlement. Except for 2010, embezzlement is much more common than breach of trust. Specifically, the number of embezzlements that occurred from 2003 to 2017 was 127,344, which

is about 2.5 times more than the 49,061 cases of breach of trust that occurred during the same period.

On the other hand, embezzlement tends to decrease gradually, while breach of trust remains constant. This is because companies have made great efforts internally to prevent embezzlement-related corruption. However, like corruption in public-sector, private corruption tends to become an inconspicuous intelligent crime.

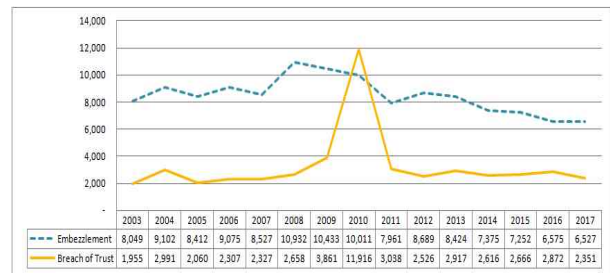


Fig. 4. Private-sector Corruption by Cases  
Source : Ipsos (2019)

#### 4.3 The Analysis of Annual Difference

To examine the changes in corruption, this study conducted an annual difference analysis. As shown in the table 1, from 2003 to 2017, the average number of major corruption cases in the public sector was 982, while the private sector was 11,760. Although corruption in the private sector has occurred about 12 times more than in the public sector, it is meaningless to compare the total number of corruption cases due to the differences in corruption types, organizational form and scale between the two groups.

However, the annual rate of change provides many implications. In the case of year-on-year rate of change, the average in the public sector was 8.0%, while the private sector was 1.8%. Since the necessity of enacting the 'Improper Solicitation and Graft Act' raised by Kim Young-ran, a chairman of the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission in 2011, corruption has been on the decline in both public and private sectors. One notable thing is that the

private sector has been steadily decreasing from 2014 to 2017, while the public sector has been increasing slightly except in 2015.

In conclusion, public organizations seem to be more resistant to changes in the environment than private ones. It, therefore, is necessary to establish appropriate laws to improve organizational inertia and reduce corruption that have been structured for a long time, but above all, improving organizational culture will be a fundamental solution.

Table 1. Annual Difference Analysis

	Public	Change(%)*	Private	Change(%)
2003	529		10,004	
2004	680	28.5	12,093	20.9
2005	757	11.3	10,472	-13.4
2006	710	-6.2	11,382	8.7
2007	711	0.1	10,854	-4.6
2008	837	17.7	13,590	25.2
2009	899	7.4	14,294	5.2
2010	1,405	56.3	21,927	53.4
2011	1,102	-21.6	10,999	-49.8
2012	1,091	-1.0	11,215	2.0
2013	1,133	3.8	11,341	1.1
2014	1,191	5.1	9,991	-11.9
2015	1,154	-3.1	9,918	-0.7
2016	1,228	6.4	9,447	-4.7
2017	1,310	6.7	8,878	-6.0
Average	982	8.0	11,760	1.8

\* Year-on-year rate of increase and decrease

#### 4.4 Discussion and Recommendation

Based on the above analysis, this section discusses major causes of Korea's corruption and recommends some precautionary measures to prevent or reduce corruption in Korean organizations.

Three prevention measures are 1)changing the culture of high power distance, 2)changing the culture of low corruption perception, and 3)abolishing the culture of impunity. The reason of choosing the above measures are because of major corruption incidents in recent years tended to be caused by these three cultural traits. For instance, many firm-level corruption cases

are closely related to high power distance between employers and employees.

The repeated public-sector corruption are likely to be caused by the culture of impunity. Other daily corruption incidents conducted by politician, business people or ordinary people are closely related to the culture of low corruption perception.

##### 4.4.1 Changing the Culture of High Power Distance

Some cross-cultural literatures argue the relationship between power distance and corruption. Power distance refers to the extent to which the less powerful people of organizations accept that power is unequally distributed. Some studies emphasized that corruption is significantly related to power distance. In other words, higher power distance culture likely to be more corrupt than low power distance culture[25-27]. From this perspective, corruption in Korea appears to be deeply connected to the culture of high power distance.

One of the notable features of Korea's organizational culture is high power distance between superiors and subordinates. In Korean organizations, a lot of decisions are made by top-down system because bosses have far greater power than their subordinates. Decision-making, in particular financial decision-making, is centralized and tightly controlled by top executives in most organizations[28]. In this respect, as Hofstede (1984) argued, Korea is one of the high power distance countries[29].

Furthermore, the general perceptions of Korea's organizational culture are family-oriented, educational connections, blood relationships, top-down decision-making, Confucianism, and hierarchy[1]. Endorsed by this ethical norm, most interpersonal relationships are defined in terms of social status of gender, age and position in society[30]. These cultural trait can make the power distance between

superiors and subordinates even further, allowing the organization to be vulnerable to corruption.

Due to such cultural traits, owners, top executives or high-level managers often exploit, abuse or overuse their power and authority to subordinates or less-powered employees. They, then, tend to implicitly believe that weak employees will accept or tolerate their corrupted behavior, which causes the repeated corruption.

To prevent corruption, a free communication culture within the organization should be established. Unlike Korea, most Western organizations have low power distance culture, which allow the free flow of opinions, or ideas within organization members. Such free communication culture has the advantage of monitoring or controlling corruption in organization.

The importance of communication culture has also been emphasized in another paper. In order to enhance the organizational performance, it is necessary to communicate smoothly among the organizational members[31].

#### 4.4.2 Changing the Culture of Low Corruption Perception

Transparency International announces the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) every year, which is the most reliable data that shows the public's perception of corruption in each country. The CPI, which ranks 180 countries by their perceived levels of public-sector corruption based on expert groups and business people, adopts a scale of 0 to 100; the higher the score, the less corruption.

The table 2 shows '2018 CPI of Major Countries' which used 13 surveys and expert assessments to measure public sector corruption in 180 countries and territories. As shown in the table, Korea ranked as 45th, scoring 57, in 2018. Notably, Korea's CPI is very low in comparison with its economic level and position in the world economy. This implies that although Korea have achieved a remarkable economic growth and

Table 2. 2018 CPI of Major Countries

Ranking	Country	Point (0~100)			
		2018	2017	2016	2015
1	Denmark	<b>88</b>	88	90	91
2	New Zealand	<b>87</b>	89	90	91
3	Finland	<b>85</b>	85	89	90
3	Singapore	<b>85</b>	84	84	85
3	Sweden	<b>85</b>	84	88	89
3	Switzerland	<b>85</b>	85	86	86
11	Germany	<b>80</b>	81	81	81
11	UK	<b>80</b>	82	81	81
18	Japan	<b>73</b>	73	72	75
22	USA	<b>71</b>	75	74	76
45	Cabo Verde	<b>57</b>	55	59	55
<b>45</b>	<b>Korea</b>	<b>57</b>	54	53	54
45	Dominica	<b>57</b>	57	59	N/A
87	China	<b>39</b>	41	40	37

Source : Transparency International (2018), CPI 2018.

influence in the international market, the overall perception of corruption is still poor compared to other developed countries.

Another feature of Korea's organizational culture is collectivism rather than individualism. Under the traditional collectivism culture, corporate members emphasize the importance of organizational common goals instead of their personal goals or interests. It intimates that top managers often don't think seriously about corruption or sometimes ignore them to achieve organizational goals. This culture may make top managers perceive that corruption is inevitable to some extent in order to achieve the goals of the organization.

In order to prevent corruption in Korean society, politicians, businessmen and all other people must strengthen their awareness of corruption up to global standard level. However, some people tend not to recognize corruption as corruption, but rather justify it. The reason is probably due to the existing value system. For an organization to be successful, it depends on how much the organization's members aware and sympathize with the value rather than the content itself[32].

#### 4.4.3 Abolishing the Culture of Impunity

It is general understanding that Korea's legal punishment for corruption is weaker than other advanced countries. In particular, there have been arguments that legal punishments for corporate crimes are relatively weak compared to other crimes. Historically, corporate crimes or corruption have been tolerated to some extent with lighter penalties or no punishment compared to ordinary people. The culture of impunity (i. e. exemption from punishment or escape from fines) for certain classes, including politicians, senior government officials and business owners, has accelerated the generation of continued corruption in Korean society.

According to Howe (2018), the Korean government has been criticized not only for allowing the culture of impunity to develop, but even for actively colluding with unscrupulous business elites, covering up their misdeeds, and pardoning them if they are convicted[33]. As a result, there have been numerous cases in which Korean business owners were not punished or received minor penalties despite their involvement in various corporate-level corruption, including bribery, fraud, embezzlement, cronyism, window-dressing settlement, etc.

Another Korea's socio-cultural factor affecting corruption is '*Gapjil*' and '*Mu Jeon You Jae You Jeon Mu Jae*', both are not well-known in the West. '*Gapjil*' is a kind of bully culture, meaning the abuse of power and position. The culture of '*Mu Jeon You Jae You Jeon Mu Jae*', meaning the guilty are the moneyless, and the guiltless are the moneyed, also plays one of the main roles in generating corruption in Korean society[2]. Because of the above socio-cultural perceptions that are laid down throughout Korean society, many Koreans think that business owners are subject to weaker legal penalties than ordinary people, even if they are involved in corruption cases.

Therefore, the following measures are required

in order to reduce or prevent organizational corruption. First, it is necessary to abolish a culture of impunity that varies the level of punishment according to status of people. Second, the level of punishment for crimes or corruption that damage the organization must be strengthened to an international standard level, regardless of people's status.

## 5. Conclusion

Substantial data and information about corruption and Korea's corruption have been examined through the literatures and the secondary data. Based on the results, some theoretical and practical implications may be derived as follows. This study also notes some limitations, and recommends future research directions.

### 5.1 Implications

First, for theoretical implications, changing the culture of high power distance within organizations can be an important means of preventing corruption. Consistent with previous literature on the relationship between high power distance and corruption, this study concludes that there is a correlation between the two factors in Korean organizations. As Hofstede(1984) argued, Korea is known as one of the high power distance countries, and most of the decisions are made by some powerful people instead of sufficient discussion among organization members. This implies that the culture of high power distance between top managers and the subordinate is naturally accepted by people because this culture is already embedded within Korean organizations. Consequently, top managers tend to be easily exposed to the temptation of corruption. Supporting Husted's (1999) and Davis & Ruhe's



(2003) argument of the relationship between high power distance and corruption, this study also confirms that corruption in Korean organizations is closely related to the culture of high power gap.

Changing the culture of low corruption perception is also to be considered within organization. Although many Korean companies have been emphasizing ethical management, the recent negative issues that are happening frequently make them wonder whether they are fulfilling basic social responsibilities[34]. According to Choi and Koo's (2017) research on factors affecting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Korea, FDI increased when the investing country's CPI was high. In other words, the amount of FDI increased as the investing country was more integrity[35].

The culture of impunity for powerful people should also be abolished. According to '2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices' released by the US Department of State, Korean officials sometimes engaged in corrupt practices with impunity, and there were numerous reports on government reports[36].

Second, for practical implications, this study provides practical implications and contributions for Korean society. For public officials, the result of this study reminds them that the principle of zero tolerance to corruption is the most basic factor in improving Korea's national competitiveness in the global market. Thus, all government officials should do their best in their duties with the mindset of serving the people. For business people, this study emphasizes that ethical management without corruption is a shortcut for companies to constantly create, develop and sustain competitive advantage.

## 5.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions

There have been some limitations during this study, and I provide the following proposals for future research. First, a methodological limitation

of this study needs to be considered for future studies. As this is an exploratory research, I am mainly dependent on secondary data to examine the present situation of Korea's corruption. For follow-up studies, other methodologies based on various data sources (e.g. primary data through field survey) would be recommended. Second, this study investigates Korea's corruption in the public-sector and private-sector simultaneously. However, if we look at it more specifically, corruption in the public and private sectors may differ in terms of causes, characteristics, and trends. In the future, research that separates the public from the private sector is recommended.

Despite some limitations, this study provides meaningful implications on how to reduce or prevent corruption in Korean organizations in the future.

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