

FROM PERCEIVED INJUSTICE AND REWARD CRAVING TO CORRUPT TENDENCIES: MEDIATORY ROLES OF MORAL INTELLIGENCE AMONG SECURITY PERSONNEL

BOLANLE OGUNGBAMILA¹, RICHARD AKINJIDE ADU², BAMIDELE EMMANUEL OSAMIKA³, PETER OLUBIYI TOMOLOJU⁴

¹*Department of Pure and Applied Psychology, Adekunle Ajasin University, Nigeria*

²*Department of Psychology, Osun State University, Nigeria*

³*Institute for the Environment and Sustainability, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, USA*

⁴*Nigeria Institute of Social and Economic Research, Ibadan, Nigeria*

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Abstract

Corrupt tendencies among security personnel remain a major challenge in many developing countries, particularly where public trust in institutions is weak. Previous studies have linked corruption-related behaviors to perceptions of injustice and excessive concern for personal rewards. However, less is known about the protective role of moral intelligence in these relationships. This study examined whether moral intelligence mediates the relationships between perceived organizational injustice, reward craving, and corrupt tendencies among security personnel in Nigeria. Participants were 225 personnel drawn from three public security organizations (105 males, 120 females). Standardized measures of perceived organizational injustice, reward craving, moral intelligence, and corrupt tendencies were administered. Results showed that corrupt tendencies were positively associated with perceived organizational injustice and reward craving, but negatively associated with moral intelligence. Hierarchical regression analyses further indicated that moral intelligence significantly predicted lower corrupt tendencies after controlling for socio-demographic variables. Mediation analyses showed that moral intelligence weakened the positive relationships of perceived injustice and reward craving with corrupt tendencies. The findings suggest that strengthening moral intelligence may reduce corruption vulnerability among security personnel, even under conditions of perceived unfairness and unmet reward expectations. Implications for anti-corruption policy, ethics training, and organizational reform are discussed.

Keywords

corruption, moral competency, justice, reward, security personnel, Nigeria

Introduction

Corruption in the workplace continues to pose serious threats to organizational effectiveness, public trust, and national development. It undermines fairness, weakens institutional legitimacy, reduces productivity, and diverts resources away from collective welfare. In public institutions, particularly security agencies, corruption may be especially damaging because such organizations are entrusted with law enforcement, protection of lives and property, and the maintenance of social order. When corruption occurs within security institutions, the consequences often extend beyond organizational boundaries to affect governance, justice delivery, and citizens' confidence in the state.

Workplace corruption broadly refers to the misuse of entrusted authority, resources, opportunities, or official positions for personal, financial, or social gain at the expense of

organizational or public interest (Nye, 1967; Sampson, 2005). At the individual level, corrupt tendencies refer to psychological inclinations or predispositions to engage in such unethical acts when opportunities arise (Ogungbamila & Udegbe, 2014). Understanding the factors that increase or reduce corrupt tendencies is therefore critical for prevention efforts.

In Nigeria, corruption among public officials and security personnel has remained a persistent concern despite the activities of anti-corruption agencies and legal reforms (Human and Environmental Development Agenda, 2022; Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project [SERAP], 2018; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2024). Allegations of bribery, extortion, selective enforcement, abuse of office, and obstruction of justice have continued to shape public perceptions of some security institutions. Although structural explanations such as weak institutions, poor accountability systems, and inadequate remuneration are important, psychological factors may also provide valuable insight into why corruption persists.

Among the psychological factors relevant to corrupt tendencies are perceptions of injustice, reward craving, and moral intelligence. Employees who believe they are unfairly treated may become resentful and more willing to justify unethical behavior as compensation or retaliation. Likewise, individuals who are excessively preoccupied with rewards may prioritize personal gain over ethical standards. In contrast, employees with strong moral intelligence may be better able to regulate selfish impulses, uphold ethical principles, and resist corruption even under unfavorable organizational conditions.

The present study examined how perceived organizational injustice and reward craving relate to corrupt tendencies among security personnel in Nigeria, and whether moral intelligence serves as a protective mechanism in these relationships. In essence, this study investigated the direct and indirect relationships among perceived organizational injustice, reward craving, moral intelligence, and corrupt tendencies among Nigerian security personnel. By identifying psychological pathways to corruption, the study seeks to contribute to theory development and inform anti-corruption interventions within public institutions.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws primarily from Bandura's social cognitive framework (Bandura, 1986), particularly moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1999) and self-regulation theory (Bandura, 1991). According to these perspectives, individuals develop internal moral standards through socialization. These standards ordinarily guide behavior through self-monitoring, self-sanctions, and emotional responses such as guilt or shame when unethical conduct is contemplated.

However, people may disengage these internal controls through cognitive justifications that make unethical conduct appear acceptable. For example, an employee who feels exploited may rationalize bribery as deserved compensation. Similarly, one who strongly craves rewards may reinterpret corruption as a practical necessity rather than a moral violation. In such cases, self-regulatory restraints become weakened.

Moral intelligence may counteract this process. Individuals high in moral intelligence are more likely to recognize ethical implications, act consistently with moral values, and consider the broader consequences of their actions. As such, moral intelligence may reduce the likelihood that perceived injustice or reward craving translates into corrupt tendencies.

Perceived organizational injustice and corrupt tendencies

Perceived organizational injustice refers to employees' subjective sense that they are treated unfairly in decision-making procedures, interpersonal treatment, or distribution of rewards (Bai et al., 2014). Research has shown that injustice perceptions are associated with

retaliation, deviance counterproductive behavior, and unethical conduct (Olabimtan & Alausa, 2014; Trevin et al., 2024).

When employees believe that rewards are distributed unfairly or that organizational procedures are biased, they may feel justified in reclaiming what they perceive as lost entitlements through corrupt acts. Among public employees in Nigeria, perceived injustice has been linked to workplace deviance and corruption-related tendencies (Balogun, 2017, 2023; Ogungbamila, 2017). Accordingly, the following hypothesis was proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Perceived organizational injustice will be positively associated with corrupt tendencies.

Reward craving and corrupt tendencies

Reward craving has been examined predominantly in the alcohol and drug use and abuse literature, consequently empirical research on its links to corrupt tendencies remains sparse. Although the concept has roots in addiction literature, it also has relevance in organizational settings where individuals may become overly focused on external rewards. Reward craving refers to excessive psychological preoccupation with obtaining compensation, benefits, recognition, or material gain (Ogungbamila, 2021). High levels of concern about reward may trigger corrupt tendencies in security personnel, particularly when the quantity and quality of compensation, as well as the timeliness of its delivery, fall short of their expectations.

Employees who strongly crave rewards may evaluate work relationships primarily through personal returns rather than duty, ethics, or service values. When desired rewards are delayed, inadequate, or absent, such individuals may become more vulnerable to bribery, fraud, or abuse of office (Ogungbamila, 2025). Materialistic values have similarly been linked to unethical intentions and corruption-supportive attitudes (Liang et al., 2016). Thus, the second hypothesis was advanced:

Hypothesis 2: Reward craving will be positively associated with corrupt tendencies.

Moral intelligence and corrupt tendencies

Moral intelligence refers to the capacity to apply ethical principles to goals, values, and behavior. It includes traits such as integrity, responsibility, compassion, and forgiveness (Lennick & Kiel, 2005). Employees high in moral intelligence are more likely to act consistently with ethical values even when tempted by personal gain.

Prior studies suggest that moral intelligence and related constructs are negatively associated with unethical behavior and tolerance for corruption (Cohen & Morse, 2014; Ogungbamila & Ajayi, 2024). Such individuals may be less likely to rationalize misconduct and more likely to prioritize long-term legitimacy over short-term gain. Therefore:

Hypothesis 3: Moral intelligence will be negatively associated with corrupt tendencies.

Moral intelligence as a mediator

Although injustice perceptions and reward craving may increase vulnerability to corruption (Ogungbamila, 2021; Ogungbamila et al., 2024), these relationships may depend partly on employees' moral capacities. Moral intelligence may help individuals reinterpret unfair experiences without retaliation and regulate desires for reward without violating ethical standards.

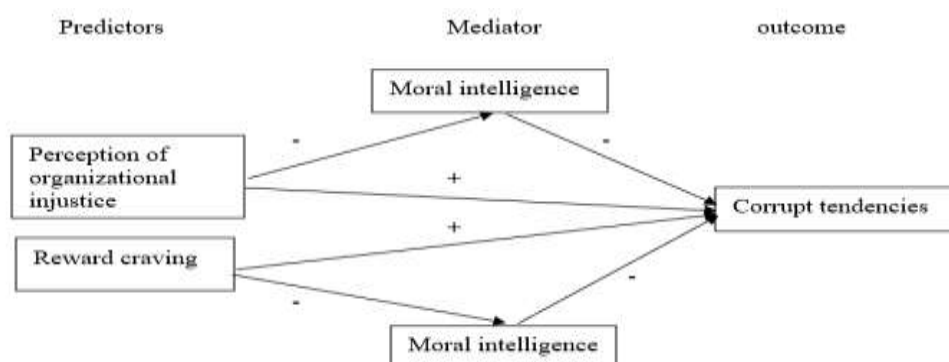
Security personnel with strong moral intelligence may therefore respond to perceived injustice through legitimate channels rather than corruption (Cohen & Morse, 2014). Likewise, they may manage reward desires without abusing official authority. Accordingly,

two mediation hypotheses were proposed:

Hypothesis 4: Moral intelligence will mediate the relationship between perceived organizational injustice and corrupt tendencies.

Hypothesis 5: Moral intelligence will mediate the relationship between reward craving and corrupt tendencies.

Figure 1. Hypothesized Relationships among the Variables



Method

Design and participants

This study adopted a correlational research design. Participants were 225 security personnel drawn from three public security organizations in Nigeria: the Nigerian Police Force ($n = 69$, 30.7%), the Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps ($n = 69$, 30.7%), and the Federal Road Safety Corps ($n = 87$, 38.7%). The sample comprised 105 males (46.7%) and 120 females (53.3%).

Participants ranged in age from 23 to 59 years ($M = 42.75$, $SD = 7.98$). Their mean job tenure was 8.04 years ($SD = 5.10$), with a range of 1 to 43 years of service. Most participants were married ($n = 153$, 68.0%), while 38 (16.9%) were single and 34 (15.1%) were widowed, divorced, or separated.

Regarding educational qualifications, 61 participants (27.1%) held School Certificate qualifications, 65 (28.9%) possessed a National Diploma or Nigeria Certificate in Education, 86 (38.2%) held a Higher National Diploma or bachelor's degree, and 13 (5.8%) had postgraduate qualifications.

Measures

Perceived organizational injustice

Perceived organizational injustice was assessed using a composite 13-item measure derived from established scales assessing three dimensions of organizational justice: interpersonal justice (Colquitt et al., 2001), distributive justice (Price & Mueller, 1986), and procedural justice (Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002). The scale measured the extent to which participants perceived fairness in interpersonal treatment, organizational procedures, and reward allocation relative to work inputs.

Sample items included: "Do people in your workplace treat you in a polite manner?" (interpersonal), "Are you fairly rewarded in your workplace for the amount of effort that you put forth?" (distributive), and "Are the procedures that your organization uses to make decisions fair?" (procedural). Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging

from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*). Reported reliability coefficients for the original subscales were .93 for interpersonal justice (Colquitt et al., 2001), .91 for distributive justice (Price & Mueller, 1986), and .83 for procedural justice (Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002).

For the present study, an overall score was computed to reflect global perceptions of organizational injustice. Previous Nigerian studies reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .77 to .83 for the composite scale (Ogungbamila, 2017; Ogungbamila et al., 2022; Ogungbamila & Udegbe, 2014). In the current sample, Cronbach's alpha was .79. Higher scores indicated stronger perceptions of organizational injustice.

Reward craving

Reward craving was measured using the 20-item Reward Craving Scale (RCS; Ogungbamila, 2021). The instrument assesses excessive concern for rewards, benefits, and compensation in work-related interactions. Sample items included: "I often get preoccupied with the thought of obtaining rewards or benefits when helping others" and "I feel worried when I am over-rewarded for my efforts" (reverse-scored). Items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Extremely so*). Ogungbamila (2021) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .89 among police personnel in Nigeria. In the present study, the scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .79. Higher scores reflected stronger reward craving.

Moral intelligence

Moral intelligence was assessed using the 40-item Moral Competency Inventory (MCI; Lennick & Kiel, 2005). The MCI comprises four 10-item subscales: integrity, responsibility, forgiveness, and compassion. The instrument evaluates the extent to which individuals' thoughts, emotions, and behaviors reflect core moral principles. Sample items included: "When I agree to do something, I always follow through" (integrity), "I pay attention to the development needs of my co-workers" (responsibility), "I am able to forgive and forget even when someone has made a serious mistake" (forgiveness), and "My co-workers would say that I am a compassionate person" (compassion). Responses were recorded on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*In all situations*). Previous studies reported reliability coefficients ranging from .72 to .82 (Ogungbamila & Ajayi, 2024; Toprak & Karakus, 2018). In the present sample, the overall scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .96$). Higher scores indicated higher moral intelligence.

Corrupt tendencies

Corrupt tendencies were measured using the 9-item Corrupt Tendencies Scale (CTS; Ogungbamila & Udegbe, 2014). The scale assesses employees' inclination to obtain financial or non-financial benefits for themselves or significant others at the expense of the organization and its members. Sample items included: "Aiding another employee to divert the organization's funds for personal use" and "Demanding over-reimbursement from the organization." Responses were rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 4 (*Strongly agree*). Previous Nigerian studies reported reliability coefficients around .96 (Ogungbamila, 2017, 2021; Ogungbamila & Udegbe, 2014). In the current study, Cronbach's alpha was .77. Higher scores indicated stronger corrupt tendencies.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the departmental ethics committee in accordance with internationally accepted standards for research involving human participants. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Each participant completed an informed

consent form outlining the purpose of the study, study procedures, and participant rights before data collection commenced.

Procedure

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the commands of the three participating security organizations. Organizational authorities were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study and were assured that participation would not expose personnel or the organizations to physical, psychological, or occupational risk.

Participants were approached in their respective offices and invited to participate voluntarily. They were assured that no identifying personal information would be collected and that their responses would remain anonymous and untraceable.

A total of 270 questionnaires (approximately 90 per organization) were distributed to available office-based personnel, as reaching field staff posed logistical challenges. Participants were drawn from finance, logistics, and general administration units.

Two hundred and fifty-six of the 270 copies of questionnaires distributed, were returned (94.8% return rate). However, 225 questionnaires were fully completed and retained for final analysis. Data collection was completed over a 15-working-day period.

Data Analysis

Categorical variables were coded for analysis. Gender was coded as male = 0 and female = 1. Marital status was coded as single = 1, married = 2, and widowed / divorced / separated = 3. Educational qualification was coded as School Certificate = 1, National Diploma / Nigeria Certificate in Education = 2, Higher National Diploma / bachelor's degree = 3, and postgraduate degree = 4. Security organization was coded as Federal Road Safety Corps = 1, Nigerian Police Force = 2, and Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps = 3.

Descriptive statistics and Pearson product-moment correlations were computed to examine relationships among study variables. A two-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess the independent and combined effects of perceived organizational injustice, reward craving, and moral intelligence on corrupt tendencies. In Step 1, socio-demographic variables were entered as control variables. In Step 2, perceived organizational injustice, reward craving, and moral intelligence were entered.

To test the mediating role of moral intelligence, two sets of mediation analyses based on the procedures outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986) were conducted. For each model: (a) the predictor variable (perceived organizational injustice or reward craving) was regressed on moral intelligence; (b) corrupt tendencies were regressed on moral intelligence; (c) corrupt tendencies were regressed on the predictor variable alone; and (d) corrupt tendencies were regressed on the predictor variable while controlling for moral intelligence.

Results

Relationships among variables

Categorical variables were coded prior to analysis. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to examine the relationships among the study variables, and means and standard deviations were calculated for continuous variables. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and intercorrelations.

Table 1. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Correlations

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	-									
2. Gender	-.08	-								
3. Marital status	.38**	.10	-							
4. Academic qualification	.06	-.22**	.22**	-						
5. Security organization	.15*	-.04	.15*	.07	-					
6. Work experience	.71***	-.02	.36***	.13*	.09	-				
7. Perception of organizational injustice	.14*	.07	.14*	-.15*	.30***	.04	-			
8. Reward craving	.25***	.01	.20**	-.28***	.19**	.01	.54***	-		
9. Moral intelligence	-.20**	-.08	-.09	.22**	-.06	-.09	-.21**	-.43***	-	
10 Corrupt tendencies	.13*	.02	.16*	-.13*	.10	-.02	.31***	.43***	-.53***	-
<i>M</i>	42.75	-	-	-	-	8.04	45.05	61.58	72.22	25.47
<i>SD</i>	7.98	-	-	-	-	5.10	9.05	13.35	19.89	4.67

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. $N = 225$. Gender male was 0; female 1. For marital status single was 1; married was 2; lost spouse to death, divorce, or separation was 3. As regards academic qualification School Certificate = 1; National Diploma or Nigeria Certificate of Education = 2; Higher National Diploma or first degree = 3; postgraduate = 4. Security organization was coded as Federal Road Safety Corps 1; Nigeria Police 2; Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps 3.

As shown in **Table 1**, corrupt tendencies were positively associated with perceived organizational injustice [$r(223) = .31, p < .001$], and reward craving [$r(223) = .43, p < .001$]. In contrast, corrupt tendencies were negatively associated with moral intelligence [$r(223) = -.53, p < .001$]. These findings suggest that security personnel who perceived higher levels of injustice and who reported stronger reward craving were more likely to exhibit corrupt tendencies, whereas those with higher moral intelligence were less likely to do so.

Reward craving was positively related to perceived organizational injustice [$r(223) = .54, p < .001$], and negatively related to moral intelligence [$r(223) = -.43, p < .01$]. Perceived organizational injustice was also negatively related to moral intelligence [$r(223) = -.21, p < .01$]. These results indicate that participants who reported stronger reward craving also tended to feel more unfairly treated and demonstrated lower moral intelligence.

With respect to demographic variables, corrupt tendencies were positively associated with age [$r(223) = .13, p < .05$], and marital status [$r(223) = .16, p < .05$]. However, corrupt tendencies were negatively associated with educational qualification [$r(223) = -.13, p < .05$]. Gender, security organization, and work experience were not significantly related to corrupt tendencies at the bivariate level.

Test of hypotheses

The hypotheses were tested using hierarchical multiple regression and mediation analyses based on the procedures recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986).

Evaluation of hypotheses 1 to 3

Hypotheses 1 to 3 were examined using a two-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis. In Step 1, socio-demographic variables were entered as control variables. In Step 2, perceived organizational injustice, reward craving, and moral intelligence were entered as psychological predictors. **Table 2** summarizes the results.

Table 2. The 2-step Hierarchical Multiple Regression on Corrupt Tendencies

Models	β	t	R	R^2	ΔR^2	F
<i>Model 1 (Socio-demographic variables)</i>	-	-	.30	.09	.09	3.67**
Age	.21*	2.34*				
Gender	-.02	-.32				
Marital status	.19*	2.28*				
Academic qualification	-.17*	-2.18*				
Security organization	.08	1.15				
Work experience	-.23*	-2.41*				
<i>Model 2 (Psychological variables)</i>	-	-	.60	.36	.27	13.46***
Age	.03	.39				
Gender	-.04	-.66				
Marital status	.11	1.43				
Academic qualification	.003	.042				
Security organization	.002	.032				
Work experience	-.13*	-1.57*				
<i>Psychological variables</i>	-	-				
Perception of organizational injustice	.12*	1.53*				
Reward craving	.15*	2.02*				
Moral intelligence	-.44***	-7.18***				

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. $N = 225$. Gender male was 0; female 1. For marital status single was 1; married was 2; lost spouse to death, divorce, or separation was 3. As regards academic qualification School Certificate = 1; National Diploma or Nigeria Certificate of Education = 2; Higher National Diploma or first degree = 3; postgraduate = 4. Security organization was coded as Federal Road Safety Corps 1; Nigeria Police 2; Nigeria Security and Civil Defense Corps 3.

The Step 1 model indicated that socio-demographic variables jointly explained 9% of the variance in corrupt tendencies ($R = .30$, $R^2 = .09$, $F = 3.67$, $p < .01$). At the individual level, corrupt tendencies increased with age ($\beta = .21$, $t = 2.34$, $p < .05$) and marital status ($\beta = .19$, $t = 2.28$, $p < .05$). In contrast, higher educational attainment ($\beta = -.17$, $t = -2.18$, $p < .05$) and longer work experience ($\beta = -.23$, $t = -2.41$, $p < .05$) were associated with lower corrupt tendencies.

A multicollinearity diagnosis was conducted. Tolerance values ranged from .46 to .97, indicating no multicollinearity concerns (Yoo et al., 2014).

When the psychological variables were entered in Step 2, the explained variance increased significantly from 9% to 36% ($R = .60$, $R^2 = .36$, $\Delta R^2 = .27$, $F = 13.46$, $p < .001$). Thus, perceived organizational injustice, reward craving, and moral intelligence jointly accounted for an additional 27% of the variance in corrupt tendencies.

At the individual level, perceived organizational injustice significantly predicted higher corrupt tendencies ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$), supporting hypothesis 1. Reward craving also significantly predicted higher corrupt tendencies ($\beta = .15$, $t = 2.02$, $p < .05$), supporting hypothesis 2. Moral intelligence significantly predicted lower corrupt tendencies ($\beta = -.44$, $t = -7.18$, $p < .001$), thereby supporting hypothesis 3.

Evaluation of hypotheses 4 and 5

Hypotheses 4 and 5 proposed that moral intelligence would mediate the relationships between (a) perceived organizational injustice and corrupt tendencies, and (b) reward craving and corrupt tendencies. These hypotheses were tested using Baron and Kenny's (1986) four-step mediation procedure. Results are presented in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Summary of Mediation Tests on Corrupt Tendencies

Predictors	Direct and Mediated Paths	β	t	SE	R^2	ΔR^2
POI	POI to Moral intelligence (MI)	-.21**	-3.28**	.14		
	MI to Corrupt tendencies	-.53***	-9.41***	.01		
	POI to Corruption tendencies (without MI)	.31***	4.86***	.03	.10	
	POI to Corruption tendencies (with MI)	.21**	3.62**	.03	.04	.06
Reward craving (RC)	Reward craving to Moral intelligence (MI)	-.43***	-7.17***	.09		
	Moral intelligence to Corrupt tendencies	-.53***	-9.41***	.01		
	RC to Corruption tendencies (without MI)	.43***	7.17***	.02	.18	
	RC to Corrupt tendencies (with MI)	.23**	4.10**	.02	.05	.13

Note: ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. $N = 225$. POI = Perception of organizational injustice.

Mediation of perceived organizational injustice

Perceived organizational injustice significantly predicted moral intelligence ($\beta = -.21$, $t = -3.28$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher perceived injustice was associated with lower moral intelligence. Moral intelligence significantly predicted lower corrupt tendencies ($\beta = -.53$, $t = -9.41$, $p < .001$). When moral intelligence was excluded from the model, perceived organizational injustice significantly predicted corrupt tendencies ($\beta = .31$, $t = 4.86$, $R^2 = .10$, $p < .001$).

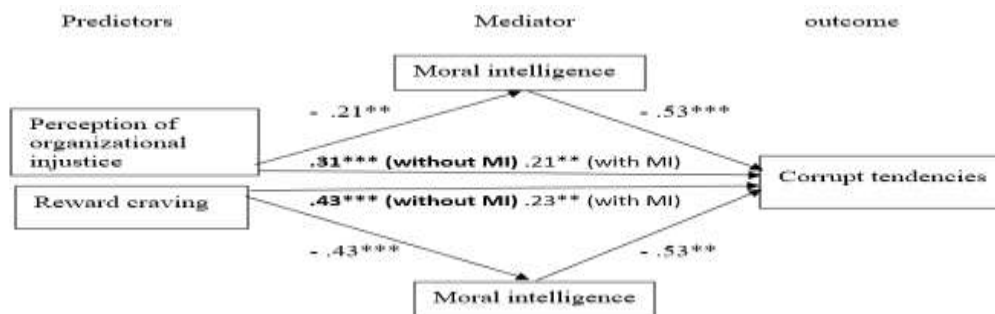
However, after moral intelligence was included, the beta coefficient for perceived organizational injustice decreased from .31 to .21 ($\beta = .21$, $t = 3.62$, $R^2 = .04$, $\Delta R^2 = .06$, $p < .01$). This reduction indicates partial mediation. Thus, moral intelligence weakened the positive relationship between perceived organizational injustice and corrupt tendencies, supporting hypothesis 4.

Mediation of reward craving

Reward craving significantly predicted moral intelligence ($\beta = -.43$, $t = -7.41$, $p < .001$), suggesting that stronger reward craving was associated with lower moral intelligence. Moral intelligence again significantly predicted lower corrupt tendencies ($\beta = -.53$, $t = -9.41$, $p < .001$). When moral intelligence was excluded from the model, reward craving significantly predicted corrupt tendencies ($\beta = .43$, $t = 7.17$, $R^2 = .18$, $p < .001$).

After moral intelligence was added to the model, the beta coefficient for reward craving declined from .43 to .23 ($\beta = .23$, $t = 4.10$, $R^2 = .05$, $\Delta R^2 = .13$, $p < .01$), indicating partial mediation. These findings suggest that moral intelligence substantially reduced the effect of reward craving on corrupt tendencies, thereby supporting hypothesis 5. **Figure 2** illustrates the mediating role of moral intelligence in both models.

Figure 2. Graphical Summary of the Mediating Role of Moral Intelligence



Note: ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. $N = 225$. MI = Moral intelligence

Discussion

The present study examined the relationships among perceived organizational injustice, reward craving, moral intelligence, and corrupt tendencies among security personnel in Nigeria. Specifically, the study investigated whether moral intelligence could buffer the effects of perceived injustice and reward craving on corrupt tendencies. The findings provide important theoretical and practical insights into psychological pathways to corruption within security institutions.

Consistent with expectations, perceived organizational injustice was positively associated with corrupt tendencies. This finding supports previous studies showing that employees who perceive unfair treatment may respond through deviant or unethical workplace behavior (Balogun, 2017, 2023; Ogungbamila, 2017; Ogungbamila & Udegbe, 2014). When security personnel believe that rewards, procedures, or interpersonal treatment are unjust, corruption may be rationalized as compensation, retaliation, or a means of restoring equity.

Reward craving was also positively associated with corrupt tendencies. This suggests that excessive concern for personal gain may predispose employees to unethical conduct when legitimate rewards are perceived as insufficient or delayed. The finding aligns with earlier evidence linking materialistic orientation and reward preoccupation with unethical intentions (Liang *et al.*, 2016; Ogungbamila, 2021). Security personnel who focus heavily on personal returns may become more vulnerable to bribery, extortion, or misuse of official privileges.

As predicted, moral intelligence was strongly and negatively associated with corrupt tendencies. Participants with higher levels of integrity, responsibility, compassion, and forgiveness reported lower tendencies toward corruption. This supports prior studies indicating that moral intelligence promotes ethical decision-making and reduces tolerance for misconduct (Cohen & Morse, 2014; Ogungbamila & Ajayi, 2024).

Most importantly, moral intelligence partially mediated the relationships of perceived organizational injustice and reward craving with corrupt tendencies. These findings suggest that even when employees feel unfairly treated or strongly desire rewards, moral intelligence may reduce the likelihood that such experiences translate into corrupt behavior. Individuals high in moral intelligence may constructively reinterpret unfair experiences, regulate selfish impulses, and prioritize ethical standards over immediate gain.

The results provide support for Bandura's moral disengagement and self-regulation frameworks (Bandura, 1986, 1991, 1999). Perceived injustice and reward craving may facilitate moral disengagement by helping individuals justify unethical conduct. Moral intelligence, however, appears to strengthen internal self-regulatory mechanisms that inhibit

corruption.

Practical implications

The findings have clear managerial implications for public security institutions. First, anti-corruption strategies should move beyond surveillance and punishment to include psychological and ethical capacity-building. Structured ethics training programs focused on integrity, responsibility, fairness, and accountability may strengthen moral intelligence among personnel.

Second, organizations should regularly review reward systems, promotion procedures, and grievance mechanisms to reduce perceptions of injustice. Transparent and equitable systems may lower resentment and decrease rationalizations for corruption. Third, mentoring systems that expose personnel to credible moral role models may reinforce ethical conduct and professional identity.

Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional correlational design does not permit causal inference. Longitudinal studies are needed to establish temporal relationships among the variables. Second, the use of self-report measures may have introduced social desirability bias. Future studies may incorporate peer ratings, behavioral indicators, or experimental designs. Third, the study did not examine other potentially important variables such as moral obligation, organizational climate, leadership ethics, or whistleblowing intentions. Future research should explore how these factors interact with moral intelligence in predicting corruption-related outcomes.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that perceived organizational injustice and reward craving are important psychological predictors of corrupt tendencies among security personnel, whereas moral intelligence serves as a protective factor. By weakening the effects of injustice and reward craving, moral intelligence may play a central role in anti-corruption efforts. Strengthening moral intelligence while improving fairness and reward systems may therefore provide a more sustainable pathway for reducing corruption in public security institutions.

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