

**UNDERSTANDING SYSTEMIC CORRUPTION
WITHIN THE INDONESIAN NATIONAL POLICE**

by

ERICK SITEPU

A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Social Policy, Sociology and Criminology
School of Social Policy and Society
College of Social Sciences
University of Birmingham
December 2025

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to critically examine how power relations within the Indonesian National Police (Polri, hereafter INP) actively constitute, reproduce, and stabilise a hegemonic and systemic order of corruption, in which corrupt practices are not simply tolerated but are organised, distributed, and legitimised through dominant norms, reciprocal obligations, and mutually reinforcing interests that bind actors across the institution. The study develops a normative–critical approach to understand how such corruption persists despite public pressure, reform demands, and anti-corruption discourses, focusing on three interrelated dimensions: first, how police officers define and make sense of corruption in everyday practice; second, how structural pressures enable and normalise corrupt practices; and third, how these practices are rationalised in ways that justify, downplay, or deny their continued existence.

In pursuing these aims, the study critiques criminology and zemiology as dominant paradigms. Criminology's legalistic and power-bound orientation reduces corruption to individual deviance, obscuring its systemic character and reinforcing its normalisation. Zemiology expands the analytical terrain but lacks a consistent normative foundation to explain how corruption is defined, negotiated, and contested within broader relations of power. Addressing these limitations, the study draws on lived experience to reconceptualise corruption as a systemic and relational logic of social ordering, produced through hierarchical power relations that privilege dominant groups while exploiting, misrecognizing, and commodifying subordinate and marginalised populations—processes that constitute the very logic of corruption as the distortion and degradation of social relations and human well-being.

The concept of systemic corruption is therefore deployed to reveal how practices initiated and structured by institutional elites are continuously reproduced through the compliance, tolerance, and participation of lower-ranking members, while simultaneously securing wider social consent through processes of normalisation. In this sense, corruption endures not only as an institutional practice but also as part of a hegemonic social order. To capture the complexity of these dynamics, the study integrates four theoretical tools—hegemonic masculinity, differential association, strain theory, and techniques of neutralisation—to account for both the structural conditions and the individual-level responses to corruption, while demonstrating how such dynamics reproduce and entrench configurations of power across intersecting dimensions of class, gender, and race.

Keywords: Corruption; Police; Systemic; Indonesia.

DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to my Lead Supervisor, Dr Emma D. Watkins, for her patience, unwavering support, and exceptional academic guidance throughout my PhD journey. I am truly grateful for her time and understanding, particularly during challenging moments. Without her invaluable support, this thesis would not have been possible.

I am also sincerely grateful to my Co-Supervisor, Professor Simon Adrian Pemberton, for his insightful guidance and brilliant thinking, which greatly contributed to the development of the concept of systemic corruption in this thesis. It has been a privilege to learn from him, as his work has had a significant influence on my research area in social policy and criminology.

I would also like to extend my deep gratitude to Professor Mark Monaghan, my Co-Supervisor during the first year of my PhD, for giving me the opportunity to pursue my doctoral studies and for his belief in my potential.

I would like to thank my examiners, Dr Daniel J. Mitchell and Dr Paul Bleakley, and the Chairperson, Professor Will P. Leggett, for their thoughtful feedback and insights, which have helped strengthen this thesis.

I am deeply grateful to my family for their tireless support, unconditional love, and countless sacrifices throughout this journey. This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my late father, who was a victim of systemic corruption involving elites within the Indonesian police and political institutions. I hope that this work may, in some small way, help to restore your name and honour. May you rest in peace, Dad.

I would also like to acknowledge the support of the Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP) scholarship in enabling this project.

Finally, I express my heartfelt appreciation to the courageous police officers who participated in this study. Your willingness to share your experiences has been both humbling and deeply meaningful. I hope that your voices will deepen understanding of this issue and, in doing so, help protect others.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

Corruption represents one of Indonesia's most systemic problems, infecting all sectors and penetrating every layer of the state apparatus. It is no longer merely the result of individual misconduct but instead embedded within state structures historically aligned with the economic and political interests of ruling regimes (King, 2000, p. 604–605). Within this context, corruption operates as a mechanism of domination—allowing powerful groups to consolidate control by rendering the lower classes dependent and disempowered.

Many exercises of authority that harm the public—such as granting advantages in recruitment (nepotism), engaging in illicit cooperation for mutual gain (collusion), and diverting public funds to serve political interests—systematically evade legal accountability, either because they leave no clear financial trace or because they fall outside narrow and selectively enforced legal definitions. Although ethically indefensible, these practices persist within public institutions, where corruption is not treated as deviance but has become normalised as a shared social norm (Znoj, 2017, p. 61). This normalisation is reinforced by collective power networks, making corruption difficult to expose due to limited evidence and entrenched hierarchical loyalty that shields dominant actors from scrutiny (Butt et al., 2023, p. 265). In such conditions, official definitions of corruption remain useful but ultimately inadequate, as they criminalise individual acts while ignoring the structural roots of corruption itself.

The present study arises from concerns that dominant discourses—across international policy, public debate, and mainstream academia—strip corruption of its systemic nature and conceal its role in sustaining structural domination and inequality. These prevailing approaches are largely legalistic and formalistic, trapped within a narrow and reductionist normative framework (Beetham, 2015, p. 42). This reductionism is reflected in how corruption is commonly defined—placing excessive emphasis on individual morality, portraying perpetrators as isolated actors, and viewing corruption as merely a personal failure (Box, 1984, p. 94). Within this perspective, corruption is understood as nothing more than a breach of state law, an abuse of authority, or an act that harms the state for personal gain.

Such a narrow definition not only oversimplifies the complexity of corruption as a manifestation of systemic power relations but also neglects its hegemonic dimension—where dominant groups shape institutional norms and values to universalise their interests and marginalise others—ultimately normalising power relations that legitimise such advantage as an ordinary aspect of the social order (Miller, 2015, p. 60). Consequently, corruption is overlooked as a structural feature of hierarchical power relations—embedded in material and ideological conditions that not only sustain but also normalise it as routine or even necessary within the system's logic (Bittle and Frauley, 2023, p. 91).

Even more problematic, official understandings of corruption are often mobilised to conceal deeper structural abuses, thereby preserving the dominance of powerful blocs. By spotlighting the misconduct of marginal actors, such narratives deflect attention from structural wrongdoing by dominant figures, all under the guise of a supposedly universal yet deeply biased consensus (Vergara, 2020, p. 6, 8).

It, in fact, is the real corruption—one that escapes recognition because it is enacted or disguised by powerful actors who control public discourse or social policy. Behind these narratives lie hegemonic practices that harm the public—privatising resources, centralising power, and silencing dissent (Whyte, 2015, pp. 5, 8-9).

In the global context, as Whyte (2015, p. 28) notes, Global North countries have historically used this hegemonic view of corruption to stigmatise the Global South as its primary source. The narrative casts the North as a model of good governance, while portraying the South as morally and politically backward, still striving toward “progress.” It is subsequently employed to justify the Global North’s hegemonic expansion into the Global South, typically through political and economic interventions presented as governance reforms, structural adjustments, or anti-corruption initiatives—strategically driven by global actors.

Indonesia exemplifies systemic corruption, where neoliberal reforms enabled oligarchs to capture state institutions and dominate political and economic spheres (Robertson-Snape, 1999; Robison and Hadiz, 2005; Aspinall, 2013). In this dynamic, the regime repurposes state institutions to entrench elite power and restrict civil liberties, driving democratic decline and the erosion of accountability under elite control (Mietzner, 2025). Grassroots communities are often extorted through illicit fees for police services that should be free (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020, p. 105). When they resist hegemonic policies—such as privatisation, commercialisation, or discriminatory regulations—they frequently face police repression (Human Rights Watch, 2025). The state thus operates not as a guardian of rights, but as an instrument of coercion serving oligarchic interests.

This situation illustrates how the global order, dominated by hegemonic blocs, paradoxically reproduces structural corruption in developing countries, including Indonesia. In effect, the state transforms from a protector of democracy and public interest into an accomplice of global hegemony—pressuring citizens to conform to hegemonic order while instilling masculine ideals of competition, domination, and control over the weak (Connell, 1995, p. 73, 199).

In hegemonic institutions such as the Indonesian National Police (INP)—the focus of this study—mainstream approaches to corruption are deeply inadequate for capturing the complex power dynamics at play. Informal power practices—such as selective access to resources, monetisation of authority, bias toward elite interests, and the marginalisation of opposition or vulnerable groups—are routinely overlooked and allowed to persist (Amnesty International, 2009).

This oversight persists largely because definitions of corruption are shaped by those in power, who frame it in ways that align with their hegemonic interests—emphasising individual intent, overt transactions, tangible evidence, and quantifiable material loss. Such an approach implicitly positions state actors and their networks as the primary victims, while ignoring the weak and marginalised groups who bear the direct and indirect consequences of their oppressive hegemonic policies (Hillyard and Tombs, 2007). These narrow definitions are even weaponised by dominant elites to selectively target and criminalise petty corruption involving lower-level officials or marginalised actors who deviate from the prevailing corrupt order.

These individuals are scapegoated to divert public attention from the power structures and collective networks that organise corruption from within (Dick and Mulholland, 2016, p. 47). Meanwhile, ordinary citizens caught in corrupt practices and publicly exposed are turned into symbolic targets in the police's anti-corruption efforts—used to maintain the illusion of justice and reform, while the root causes remain unaddressed.

In other words, the dominant definition of corruption not only overlooks routine discretionary practices within the police but also dismisses the public harmed by them, especially those deemed 'non-compliant' with formally defined notions of corruption. The ongoing struggle resonates in public surveys that consistently rank the police among Indonesia's most corrupt institutions. Nationally, the 2025 Public Perception Survey ranked the police second-lowest in trust, just above the House of Representatives (Nababan, 2025), while the 2024 Integrity Assessment by the Corruption Eradication Commission recorded the police as the most corruption-prone national institution (Corruption Eradication Commission, 2024).

Internationally, the 2025 Police Corruption Index ranks Indonesia's police as the 18th most corrupt globally, based on Index Mundi survey data (Iman, 2025). This corrupt image has directly contributed to Indonesia's persistently low Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) score, which has consistently placed the country in the lower half of 180 nations since 1995. The score inevitably reinforces the global perception that corruption in Indonesia is no longer merely a matter of individual wrongdoing but a manifestation of systemic, deeply embedded institutional failure (Transparency International, 2025).

Beyond rankings, these surveys reflect public frustration with unequal treatment, unfair access, legal uncertainty, and routine police abuses—ironically normalised but not formally recognised as corruption. The Global Corruption Barometer Asia (Vrushni, 2020) revealed that nearly one-third of Indonesians had to resort to bribery or personal connections to receive fair and equal treatment from the police—significantly higher than the Asian average of one in five. These findings reveal a gap between official portrayals of corruption and the lived realities of those subject to an undemocratic and unaccountable policing system.

At the heart of this gap lies a dominant narrative that reduces corruption to individual moral failure, enabling those in power to mask the structural harm inflicted on the powerless as a means of securing their compliance. Silenced by fear, trauma, and helplessness—these communities are rendered invisible beneath layers of statistics and rankings. In such an environment, it is hardly surprising that many opt for compliance, silence, or apathy, adapting to a corrupt order that has become a systemic feature of policing (Pertiwi, 2022, p. 164; Wulandari et al., 2024).

Consequently, anti-corruption efforts will remain focused on low-level offenders, leaving the structural roots that enable corruption untouched. No matter how many officers are prosecuted, corruption will recur in the same cycles—sacrificing powerless individuals while the hegemonic system stays intact. Without redefining corruption as a socially mediated harmful practice, anti-corruption efforts are destined to be superficial—mere window dressing—and fail to deliver transformative change.

1.2 Research Purposes

The current study responds to the need to critically challenge conventional perspectives that trivialise corruption as mere individual deviance. Such views often neglect the structural or systemic dimensions that allow corruption to take root within social institutions. In light of this, this study aims to develop an alternative definition that reflects corruption's deep entanglement with broader power structures.

To achieve this aim, the study will provide empirical evidence showing that corruption within the INP is systemic, structured, and institutionalised—not merely individual misconduct. Rather than focusing solely on identifying who commits corruption, the study shifts its attention to how and why the power structure within the INP systematically produces conditions in which corrupt practices are taken for granted—even virtuous—despite their harmful impact on marginalised groups. In doing so, the study explores both the material conditions that necessitate such practices and the ideological justifications that legitimise them within the INP's daily operations. In doing so, this study will explore both the material conditions that give rise to the need for discretionary—and often harmful—practices within the police, and the ideological conditions that offer moral justification, legitimising such practices in the everyday institutional life of the INP.

1.3 Research Questions

Based on this objective, the study formulates three key research questions to investigate further the structural conditions that sustain corrupt practices within the police force:

(1) How do police define corruption?

The primary focus is not on individual perceptions but on how officers' views on corruption reflect institutional hegemonic norms. This approach enables an examination of how the power structures within the INP operate ideologically to internalise and control the meaning of corruption, framing specific discretionary uses of authority as legitimate or acceptable to maintain institutional stability. From this structural standpoint, the study will demonstrate that the definition of corruption is neither objective nor autonomous. Instead, it is a construct shaped by dominant power relations that shape the collective consciousness of what is "right" within the institution, ultimately preserving the status quo.

(2) What pressures push police into corruption?

The primary focus is not on individual pressure alone, but on the structural conditions that produce it. This perspective allows for a critical analysis of how INP's power system is organised, shaping material and relational conditions that generate a perceived need for harmful discretionary practices. How police personnel respond to these needs will help reveal whether corruption is an anomaly or a systemic adaptation—one in which power structures actively exert pressure, and individuals, in turn, adaptively reproduce it to help sustain institutional dominance.

(3) How do police rationalise corruption?

The focus is not merely on seeking moral justifications at the individual level, but on uncovering how the power structure within the INP, through ideological mechanisms, continuously reproduces a set of hegemonic values, discourses, and narratives. These ideological tools shape perceptions of discretionary authority, making corruption appear normal, reasonable, inevitable, or even expected within INP's daily power dynamics. The analysis of institutional ideology is key to understanding that moral justifications for corruption are not simply personalised moral failings, but part of a systemic logic sustaining the institution's survival and continuity.

1.4 Research Limitations

The study focuses deliberately on the Global South, and more specifically on the INP, due to both analytical and pragmatic considerations.

Firstly, the study intentionally focuses on the Global South context, contributing to the growing call for alternative perspectives in corruption research, which Western theoretical frameworks have historically dominated (Carrington et al., 2018, p. 3). Investigating corruption in Indonesia is thus both substantively and epistemologically significant. By grounding its understanding of corruption in locally specific social dynamics and power relations, this study challenges claims to universality made by dominant theories, which, in fact, are deeply contextual and not necessarily applicable to the realities of non-Western societies with distinct political, economic, and cultural structures (Findlay, 2018, p. 384). However, its non-comparative nature limits the ability to capture cross-national variations in corruption.

Secondly, this study selects the INP as its empirical focus to examine systemic corruption, as it is currently one of the most powerful institutions in the country, yet also among those receiving the highest volume of public complaints—its extensive authority placing it in direct and constant interaction with the public. Constitutionally tasked with maintaining domestic order—a key condition for achieving the just, prosperous, and civilised society envisioned in the nation’s founding ideals (Republic of Indonesia, Law No. 2 of 2002)—the INP occupies a vital yet contested role. However, its broad authority has come under growing public scrutiny, with critics citing excessive power and lack of accountability—raising doubts about its legitimacy within a democratic order (Martiar, 2025; Rahmawati and Napitupulu, 2025). While this focus offers valuable insight into how corruption operates within powerful state institutions, the findings may not be easily generalisable to institutions beyond the police, given their differing structural configurations and levels of authority.

1.5 Thesis Chapter Outline

Taking the above limitations into account, the study structures its content into eight interrelated chapters, each contributing to a coherent and critical analysis.

Chapter Two explores the evolving definition of corruption, organised into two key sections. The first section critiques classical, positivist, critical criminology, and zemiology for neglecting the systemic nature of corruption. The second section highlights the urgency of developing an alternative theoretical framework for analysing systemic corruption, using the Indonesian police as a case study to illustrate this necessity.

Chapter Three outlines the theoretical framework for analyzing systemic corruption in the INP, divided into four interrelated sections. It applies Messerschmidt's hegemonic masculinity to reveal how dominant male ideologies sustain corruption; Sutherland's differential association to show how corrupt values are internalized; Agnew's general strain theory to examine structural pressures; and Sykes and Matza's techniques of neutralisation to explain how corruption is morally rationalized.

Chapter Four sets out the critical methodology used to capture and analyse police officers' experiences of systemic corruption. This chapter is divided into five sections: critical realism as philosophical grounding, research design, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations. These sections go beyond simply outlining technical procedures—they also affirm the researcher's epistemological stance in challenging dominant narratives that often conceal or normalise corrupt practices.

Chapter Five is dedicated to answering the first research question, drawing on two theoretical frameworks—hegemonic masculinity and differential association theory. The analysis questions the neutrality of corruption's definition, revealing it as a construct that serves the interests of those in power.

Chapter Six answers the second research question, applying general strain theory to show how frustration, insecurity, and hardship fuel police corruption and reinforce institutional control. Thus, the analysis in this chapter aims to confirm whether lower-ranking officers are systematically sacrificed, and whether their suffering is used as an institutional tool to preserve the power of dominant elites—both within the INP and externally, through national political-economic alliances that shape governance.

Chapter Seven addresses the third research question through the lens of neutralisation techniques. It contends that the rationalisation of corruption operates not merely at the individual level, but rather as a systemic ideological strategy to reinforce dominance and suppress potential resistance.

Chapter Eight concludes the thesis by summarising the key findings that demonstrate how systemic corruption operates as a hegemonic practice. This final chapter not only presents conclusions but also highlights the theoretical and political implications of the study—including how police institutions have long been reduced to instruments of elite domination. In addition, the chapter offers recommendations for advancing future research on systemic corruption, particularly by challenging conventional approaches that tend to normalise or depoliticise corruption.

CHAPTER 2: A CRITIQUE OF CORRUPTION

DEFINITIONS

2.1 Introduction

Mainstream definitions of corruption have never been truly objective, as they are shaped by prevailing power dynamics that serve dominant political and economic interests (Hilyard et al., 2004, p. 9). Consequently, such definitions frequently exclude the social dimensions central to understanding corruption as a systemic phenomenon. This chapter critically examines the evolution of corruption definitions, arguing that each reflects distinct assumptions about its origins. Although legalistic and individualistic views—reducing corruption to personal misconduct—remain dominant, emerging alternative perspectives increasingly challenge this narrow lens by framing corruption as a manifestation of structural conditions.

The existing definition of corruption warrants critical interrogation, as it has profoundly shaped how corruption is conceptualised and addressed within powerful institutions such as the Indonesian National Police (INP). Rooted in formalistic or legalistic assumptions, this narrow framework individualises blame and masks the entrenched power relations within the institution. As a result, powerless actors are often scapegoated, while hegemonic systems behind corrupt policies remain immune. Although the "system" is frequently invoked as the underlying cause of corruption, mainstream discourse seldom interrogates who sustains this system and through what mechanisms. This discursive gap, in effect, contributes to the preservation of the status quo (Butt et al., 2024).

In this context, it is essential to critically re-evaluate how the scientific study of corruption—particularly within criminology—is defined, which approaches shape this view, and why they fail to address the systemic nature of corruption, such as that embedded within the INP. A critical stance is necessary to unpack definitions that present themselves as neutral, yet function to obscure institutional hierarchies and relations of domination.

By redefining corruption through its power-laden foundations, space is opened for more transformative inquiry into the structures that sustain it. To that end, this chapter interrogates classical, positivist, and critical criminological approaches, alongside zemiology as a contrasting lens, to highlight their limitations in offering a critical and contextual understanding of corruption.

As part of tracing the historical development of corruption discourse, subsections 2.2 to 2.5 examine how these various—and at times conflicting—theoretical traditions have sought to define corruption. These competing perspectives have shaped how its roots are conceptualised, often through overlapping yet analytically distinct terms such as institutional, social, relational, or structural.

The chapter concludes by advancing an alternative framework rooted in hegemonic power, using the case of the Indonesian police to show how corruption originates from—and is reproduced through—everyday structures of authority and domination.

2.2 The Classical Criminology View on Corruption

Approaches to corruption in Western thought have, from the outset, demonstrated a strong epistemological bias, particularly in their tendency to position rationality as the moral basis for defining crime. This bias is reflected in the inclination to frame deviant actors as fully autonomous moral agents, especially when their behaviour deviates from a social order already deemed legitimate and just (Hillyard and Tombs, 2004, p. 25; Tombs, 2004, p. 176).

In other words, rationality is not merely positioned as the benchmark for right or wrong conduct but also operates as an ideological instrument that legitimises truth claims emerging from dominant power structures (Foucault, 1977). Within this framework, epistemic rationalism embeds individualistic logic into daily life, framing corruption as a rational response—especially in systems valuing reason, logic, efficiency, and predictability over tradition, emotion, and faith. As a result, early efforts to trace the origins of corruption tended to become trapped in individual violations of formal norms or social contracts, while the structural roots of corruption were not prioritised.

Classical and neoclassical criminology interpret corruption through the perspective of dominant groups who present themselves as moral and rational authorities. Corruption is thereby perceived as a personal deviation—a conscious, rational decision by an individual who strays from the ideal social order defined by the ruling elite. By presuming that all individuals possess free will, these approaches fail to interrogate how systemic structures may themselves cultivate, reinforce, or even exploit corrupt practices to preserve upper-class interests.

Classical criminologists such as Plato (427–347 BCE) and Aristotle (384–322 BCE) located the threat of corruption primarily among the lower classes. Plato perceived democracy as a space that grants excessive freedom to the masses, ultimately nurturing self-interest and corrupting society's moral soul. His view, though critical of the elite, tends to be repressive of popular participation, blaming liberty itself for moral decay. Aristotle reinforced this view by assuming that in radical democracy, the emotionally impoverished masses represent a major threat to the dominant social order or public ethics. Both thinkers reflect an elitist bias, associating corruption with the loss of elite control over the masses, rather than viewing it because of systemic inequality.

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), while more realistic in recognising that elites may deliberately design corrupt systems to maintain power, still placed his hope on virtuous, intelligent leaders to rescue the state. This perspective maintains an elitist logic, relying on the actions of a few elite figures to bring about transformation rather than empowering grassroots movements (Vergara, 2020, pp. 16-17).

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) deepens this bias by equating disobedience to the state with chaos, leaving no room to imagine that the state itself could be a perpetrator of corruption. He positioned state power as absolute (a leviathan), thereby framing public resistance or criticism of the state as moral corruption against the state (Hopkins Burke, 2009, p. 22; Vergara, 2020, p. 63). Thinkers such as Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) began to address structural aspects—such as institutional design and the general will—but remained grounded in the idea of a rational order shaped by elites.

Montesquieu saw corruption as a deviation from an ideal structure yet did not provide space for the people as agents of change. Rousseau, meanwhile, obscured the reality of class conflict through his abstract concept of the general will, which, in practice, could be manipulated by dominant groups to silence opposition under the guise of acting against the collective interest (Friedrich, 1989, pp. 18-20).

Corruption came to be seen as the individual misuse of public office for personal gain, driven by a free choice to deviate from formal rules or social contracts (Weber, 1922, 1972; Heidenheimer and Johnston, 2005; Nye, 1967, as cited in Rubinstein and von Maravic, 2006, p. 33). This individualised view ignores how dominant power structures shape such norms, obscuring corruption as a systemic effect of hierarchical social relations. Consequently, corruption discourse—by reducing rational agency to individual actors—has focused on punishing offenders, rather than exposing how those who control structural conditions enable, facilitate, or even benefit from them.

In neoclassical criminology, bias against lower social groups persists, though it is now cloaked in scientific language about rationality and situational factors. Cohen and Felson (1979), for instance, conceptualise corruption as an opportunistic crime arising when a motivated offender encounters a suitable target in the absence of a capable guardian. However, they fail to distinguish between elites who engage in corruption due to privileged access to power and people experiencing poverty who may engage in corruption out of necessity for survival. The underlying assumption is that all individuals possess equal access to opportunities and supervision—an assumption that clearly disregards structural inequality.

Cornish and Clarke (1986) extended this perspective by reducing corruption to a rational cost-benefit calculation made by individuals, without considering how systemic arrangements protect elite corruption. Meanwhile, Marquette and Peiffer (2015) acknowledge that social norms and group expectations influence corrupt behaviour, yet they stop short of interrogating how those very norms are shaped and controlled by dominant groups within an already corrupted system.

Thus, both classical and neoclassical approaches align epistemologically with the interests of dominant social groups. They fail to understand corruption as a symptom of power asymmetry, in which elites not only design systems that enable corruption but also redefine morality to legitimise it. Within this framework, lower-class groups are consistently viewed with suspicion as threats to order, whereas elite-driven corruption often escapes scrutiny, disguised as guardians of unity, sovereignty, purity, or sanctity. Such approaches not only fail to explain structural corruption but also risk reinforcing hegemonic values that harm marginalised groups under the guise of objective scientific narratives.

From a critical standpoint, classical and neoclassical criminology have proven inadequate in conceptualising corruption as a systemic phenomenon. By reducing it to an individual criminal violation, assumed to be the outcome of a rational cost–benefit calculation, they disregard the socio-political structures that enable and normalise corrupt behaviours. In doing so, they obscure the ontological nature of corruption as a structural symptom embedded within broader power dynamics (Foucault, 1980; Hopkins Burke, 2009, p. 33).

Through the researcher's lens, if the discourse of power erases the ontological dimension of corruption, then corruption can no longer be understood as an objective fact with an independent ontological existence, but rather as a construction shaped by power relations. Within this logic, hegemonic actors possessing ontological authority to define what constitutes corruption and who qualifies as a corruptor are treated as neutral and rational, positioned as if outside the web of power relations.

However, this privileged position allows them to instrumentalise the concept of corruption ideologically, legitimising self-serving policies under the guise of moral rationality. Ultimately, the logic of cost–benefit rationality serves to naturalise domination, masking systemic corruption as lawful governance and suppressing dissent as deviance.

By overlooking hierarchical social structures, corruption discourses rooted in classical logic fail not only to account for unequal access to power but also to conceal the disproportionate harm inflicted by dominant groups on the powerless. In doing so, classical criminology does not simply misrepresent corruption—it reinforces the very power relations it purports to examine.

It is therefore crucial to recognise that the philosophical legacy of classical criminology is far from scientifically neutral; instead, it is deeply embedded in specific ideological assumptions. This legacy has significantly influenced the foundation for the positivist approach to corruption, which will be critically examined in the following subsection.

2.3 The Positivist Criminology View on Corruption

Positivist criminology—whether biological, psychological, or sociological—redefined corruption not as the result of free will, but as the consequence of internal predispositions or external pressures. In doing so, it ceased to view morally corrupt individuals as autonomous agents and instead positioned them as passive subjects shaped by forces beyond their control (Hopkins Burke, 2009, p. 63).

Although this perspective begins to acknowledge social structures as drivers of corruption, it remains rooted in structural determinism—focusing on how social structures push individuals towards corrupt acts, rather than interrogating who designs these structures, who benefits from them, who is harmed, and how power structures actively function as agents deliberately configured to enable individual corruption. This approach treats dominant value consensus and its resulting social arrangements as neutral and objective, viewing corruption merely as a failure of structures to regulate individuals (Durkheim, 1933 [1893]; Parsons, 1951). As a result, it tends to take dominant definitions of corruption for granted, which in turn conceals a deeper epistemological issue: the depoliticisation of corruption and the erasure of its power-laden dimensions.

Rooted in the empiricist tradition of Auguste Comte (1798–1857), the discourse on corruption has always been shaped by a particular vision of social order—one that pathologises deviance while leaving the structures of dominance unexamined. As Lilly et al. (2019, p. 69) contend, the emergence of positivist criminology did not reflect a genuine pursuit of understanding crime but instead served to legitimise the interests of dominant groups under the guise of science.

It provided a bureaucratic, expert-driven framework for pathologising dissent and rationalising control over populations marked as deviant. Consequently, the positivist discourse on corruption functioned less as a tool for knowledge and more as a disciplinary apparatus—reproducing hegemonic power while cloaked in the language of scientific rationality. This ideological function becomes clearer when each branch of positivism is examined in detail.

From a biological perspective, which gained prominence through the work of Cesare Lombroso (1885), corruption was viewed as an inherited defect—an expression of atavism or primitive traits that had failed to evolve in line with modern civilisation. Malicious intent was understood as stemming from genetic abnormalities, marking the corrupt as biologically deviant and inherently predisposed to criminality.

Similarly, the psychological approach, particularly influenced by Freud (1920) and Farrington (1992), constructed corruption as a manifestation of internal dysfunctions such as emotional instability, personality disorders, or mental abnormality. Here, corruption was categorised as a motivational issue, associated with personal traits such as selfishness, low empathy, and antisocial tendencies—seen as predisposing individuals to power abuse and warranting disciplinary correction (Coleman, 1987, p. 413).

Criticism of this approach has come from various directions, particularly from structural and critical perspectives, which argue that the excessive focus on *mens rea* only serves to reinforce the dominance of the hegemonic system. By reducing corruption to a matter of individual moral or biological defect, this approach effectively absolves the social structures that create the incentives or opportunities for corruption from collective responsibility or critical scrutiny (Garland, 2001).

Consequently, dominant institutions—particularly those historically criticised for facilitating corrupt practices, such as policing organisations—can continue to operate within permissive structural environments while maintaining their public image as guardians of morality (Lily, 2019, p. 70). In this sense, the individualisation of corruption pathologises deviance while leaving the structures of power that sustain it fundamentally unexamined.

Lacking visible pathology, corrupt elites shape top-down definitions of corruption, deflecting attention from systemic abuse to minor cases and blaming individual moral failings (Lynch, 2000, p. 147; Brooks, 2016, p. 190). Ultimately, by placing *mens rea* at the moral foundation of the corruption definition, this approach utterly fails to detect systemic corruption that operates through structural arrangements, institutionalised power relations, collective responsibilities, systemic pressures, passive intent or neglect, and rational calculations made within opportunities created by the system itself (Box, 1983).

Sociological positivism emerged in response to biological and psychological determinism, reframing corruption as a product of broader social conditions. Influenced by the ideas of Émile Durkheim and Herbert Spencer in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this approach shifted the analytical focus from individual pathology to social dysfunction. A key contribution to this tradition came from Edwin Sutherland (1940), who, through his concept of white-collar crime, introduced a new dimension to the understanding of corruption. He demonstrated that corruption is not limited to the lower socio-economic class but also occurs among high-status individuals within formal institutions.

Corruption is not random but emerges from organised systems with defined values, hierarchies, and structures, shifting the focus from individual anomaly to a systemic phenomenon—embedded in the routine functioning of economic and political institutions. Sutherland argued that corruption can thrive in highly organised institutional settings where internal norms may conflict with dominant societal values.

In contrast, social disorganisation theory developed by the Chicago School—particularly Shaw and McKay (1931)—locates the roots of corruption in socially disordered and uncontrolled environments, typically associated with marginalised communities where dominant social norms are weakened. Despite these differences, both perspectives frame corruption as organised crime and white-collar crime—shaped not by chance, but by established institutional or social structures with established systems, norms, and actors typically occupying positions of authority (Buscaglia and Van Dijk, 2003; Huisman and Vande Walle, 2010, pp. 116-117).

Robert Merton's (1938) strain theory presents deviance as an adaptation to the tension between socially prescribed goals and unequal access to legitimate means, yet it fails to interrogate the origins of these contradictions, leaving underlying power relations unexamined (Taylor et al., 1973). By assuming social goals reflect a universal consensus, the theory obscures the interests of dominant groups and once again positions the lower classes as dysfunctional (Lemert, 1972; Pfohl, 1985). From a functionalist view, corruption is seen as a response to the gap between formal law and social practice, but this risks legitimising it as a necessary adaptive mechanism. Police operating within this tension often rationalise corrupt practices as situational responses, yet this also reflects how institutional structures and cultures enable and normalise the misuse of authority for material gain (Roebuck and Barker, 1974).

The depoliticising tendency is evident in Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) self-control theory, which frames deviance largely as a consequence of an individual's inability to resist immediate temptation. Although the theory acknowledges the role of early socialisation, it ultimately reduces corruption to a personal failing while overlooking the structural conditions that shape behaviour. As a result, police corruption is often interpreted simply as a manifestation of low self-control, which drives officers to seek immediate gratification without considering the long-term consequences of their actions (Donner and Jennings, 2014).

Crucially, it assumes institutions of socialisation are both equally accessible and inherently egalitarian, while overlooking how social hierarchies shaped by class, race, and gender unequally structure, constrain, and distribute these very processes (Currie, 1985; Tittle, 1991; Miller and Burack, 1993). In doing so, the theory pathologises marginalised populations while naturalising the advantages of the privileged—thereby reinforcing dominant narratives of moral superiority and legitimising broader systems of social control (Jones, 2006).

Taken together, these strands of positivist criminology not only fail to interrogate power but actively obscure it. Rather than questioning who defines corruption and in whose interest such definitions operate, they offer uncritical, scientific endorsements of labels already constructed by dominant groups. Despite their claims to neutrality, positivist approaches advance a narrow, technocratic, and depoliticised understanding of corruption—one that conceals the systemic injustices embedded within the very structures it refuses to confront. Even where sociological positivism acknowledges the role of structure, it has been criticised for its tendency towards overgeneralisation and reductionism (Pantazis, 2004, p. 215).

Consequently, the failure of individual integrity or weak commitment to social norms is often used to explain police corruption (Donner and Maskály, 2023, p. 205), reducing agency and framing it as a technical issue rather than a matter of power relations, while also treating dominant social structures as natural and desirable, despite being the product of historical conflict and exclusion.

Even where systemic factors are acknowledged, corruption is typically narrowed to internal organisational problems—such as administrative dysfunction—often alongside a tendency to attribute blame solely to ‘police culture’ (Prenzler, 2009, p. 20; Westmarland, 2025). This sustains the assumption that corruption can be addressed through internal reform alone. As such, this study reinforces the critical view that corruption discourse within positivist criminology is not neutral, but shaped by the interests and logic of dominant power structures (Reiman, 2004; Scruton, 2002; Hillyard et al., 2004).

This tendency reveals a deeper ideological function within positivist criminology, where corruption is once again reduced to individual moral failure. By portraying individuals as passive subjects shaped by forces beyond their control, such explanation divert attention away from the structural configurations of power that enable corrupt practices to persist (Carrington and Hogg, 2002, p. 10; 259).

Echoing classical criminology, subordinated communities are depicted as lacking moral discipline or civic virtue, while the systemic corruption of dominant elites is shielded by institutional legitimacy, legal abstraction, and discursive invisibility. In doing so, positivist discourse not only obscures elite complicity but also reinforces the very hierarchies that reproduce corruption—all under the guise of scientific objectivity.

2.4 The Critical Criminology View on Corruption

Critical criminology emerged in response to classical and positivist models, rejecting their overly individualistic and deterministic definitions of corruption that ignore the power relations or structural conditions sustaining it (Downes & Rock, 2007, pp. 233–234). From this perspective, corruption is not simply a matter of individual misconduct but a consequence of dominant political-economic structures that generate systemic inequality and protect those in positions of power. It is fundamentally associated with unequal access to political authority and economic resources.

Accordingly, critical criminology conceptualises corruption as a crime of the powerful embedded within state structures legitimised by law and political authority. These systems function to shield elites from accountability while simultaneously criminalising and regulating marginalised populations (Pearce, 1976). In this view, social norms and control are not neutral but ideological tools shaped by the interests of dominant groups—whether defined by class, race, or gender—to preserve existing hierarchies.

Consequently, formal definitions of corruption reflect these power dynamics by capturing only a narrow range of legally defined abuses (Chambliss and Seidman, 1971, p. 33). In contrast, harmful elite practices in the exercise of power often escape sanction, while the law is selectively enforced against the poor and dissenters, reinforcing its role as a mechanism of political control (Reiman, 1979, p. 198). Critical criminology thus challenges mainstream thought by revealing that what is labelled as corruption is not necessarily what causes the most harm, but instead what threatens the interests of the ruling political powers (Carrington and Hogg, 2002, p. 3).

Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Max Weber (1864-1920) laid the groundwork for understanding corruption as rooted in power imbalance between dominant and subordinate groups. In this view, corruption arises from structural exploitation, in which bureaucracy—though seemingly neutral—functions as a tool of the ruling class to control subordinate groups for its own interests. This concept is criticised for reducing social conflict to class struggle, despite society comprising diverse groups, suggesting that conflict can stem from culture, identity, religion, or gender, not just class.

As a corrective, Thorsten Sellin's (1938) cultural conflict theory sees corruption as arising from clashes between dominant laws and marginalised community values. Like his predecessors, Sellin's emphasis on cultural conflict is reductionist, overlooking how power dictates which norms dominate and suppresses others—yet this very power defines corruption, legitimising elite behaviour while stigmatising that of the subordinate (Lea and Young, 1984).

Building on this, Howard Becker (1963) shifts the focus to the power behind labelling deviance, showing how dominant groups define corruption while avoiding such labels themselves. This creates a paradox where minor offences by the less powerful are punished, while systemic abuses are overlooked (Pearce, 1976; Tombs and Whyte, 2003). Police operate within this contradiction, which blurs and renders moral boundaries increasingly flexible, encouraging the normalisation of minor deviant practices through everyday interactions and peer influence. Deviance often begins with small acts perceived as acceptable, reinforced through workplace interactions. Over time, these behaviours are rationalised, leading officers to redefine their moral limits. In this way, police corruption emerges not as an inherent trait, but as a gradual process of “becoming” through a moral career (Sherman, 1974).

However, this approach has been criticised for overlooking the deeper power dynamics underlying the labelling process (Gouldner, 1968; Taylor et al., 1973). It fails to address how broader systems of domination—structured around class, race, and gender—grant elites the institutional power to define, enforce, and obscure corruption in ways that protect their interests while further marginalising subordinate groups. From the perspective of conflict and radical traditions rooted in Marxist thought, labelling theory therefore remains limited, as it overlooks the structural foundations of power behind definitions of corruption. These perspectives instead shift attention to who controls such definitions and how they serve dominant interests.

In conflict theory, as developed by George Vold (1958), Austin Turk (1969), and Richard Quinney (1970), society is viewed as a battleground where dominant and subordinate groups compete for power and resources. Social order, in this context, is not the result of shared consensus, but of the dominant group's capacity to impose its interests on others. This imbalance is evident in how corruption is defined: dominant groups construct definitions that criminalise the actions of the subordinate, while minimising or excluding their own practices from scrutiny.

From this perspective, corruption is conceptualised as an occupational crime, reflecting how elites exploit institutional authority to maintain and reinforce their dominance. It highlights how powerful institutions legitimise elite interests while extending control over subordinate groups through systemic and often lawful means. Corruption is thus reframed as a clash of moral codes between dominant and marginalised groups, where acts labelled as “corrupt” by state law may not be seen as wrong within other community value systems (Clinard dan Quinney, 1973).

In contrast, radical theories—developed by scholars such as Ian Taylor, Paul Walton, and Jock Young (1973)—examine the structural foundations of conflict, viewing corruption not merely as a strategy of the powerful, but as an inherent feature of the power structure itself, where corrupt practices are normalised as mechanisms for sustaining and expanding elite control. While both perspectives emphasise power relations, radical criminology goes further by challenging the legitimacy of the hegemonic social order. It argues that dominant groups actively construct and preserve this order through control over state institutions, legal systems, and public discourse.

Within this framework, individuals are increasingly recognised not as passive products of structure, but as rational agents whose choices—though deliberate—are shaped and limited by their structural conditions. Rather than merely engaging in group conflicts, individuals are situated within power hierarchies—either reproducing dominant power or resisting it from below. Crucially, these hierarchies are maintained not only through economic control but also through ideological dominance (Bohm, 1982). The ruling class shapes moral meaning, using symbolic power to define corruption in ways that justify their dominance and deflect scrutiny.

From this perspective, corruption is not defined neutrally but shaped by political interests that help preserve existing power structures. The state is not merely an arena of power struggles but an active agent that protects elite corruption. Together with corporations, it systematically abuses authority to extract resources and uphold an order that serves dominant interests. Conversely, subordinate groups—structurally disadvantaged—are subjected to disproportionate regulation, becoming the primary victims of systemic exploitation.

Under radical criminology, the concept of corruption expands to include state-corporate and state crimes, revealing how political and economic power operate systemically. As a state-corporate crime, corruption involves state–corporate collusion to shape policies that legally reinforce elite power at the expense of the public good (Kramer et al., 2002). As a state crime, corruption involves human rights violations by state actors—targeting marginalised groups, vulnerable populations, and even less powerful nations—to maintain control and advance the agendas of both the state and its dominant elites (Chambliss, 1989; Green and Ward, 2004).

Taken together, these perspectives reveal corruption as a mechanism of domination, through which powerful groups manipulate regulatory systems to sustain privilege and marginalise subordinate populations. From this standpoint, corruption is not merely the outcome of conflicting interests or individual moral failure, but a central strategy through which dominant political and economic actors reproduce their control. Accordingly, the dominant construction of corruption is deeply ideological functioning not to uncover the various abuses of power committed for their own benefit, but to conceal them behind claims of legality and moral authority.

This framework was further developed by scholars such as Stanley Cohen (1973), Stuart Hall (1978), Jeffrey Reiman (1979), Phil Scraton (1985), Steven Box (1987), and Paul Gilroy (1987), conceptualised corruption as a structural expression of power. They explored how overlapping systems of domination—operating not only through class, but also through race and gender—produce and normalise corrupt practices within state and institutional settings. While social structures impose constraints, individuals and groups retain agency, often expressed through symbolic resistance (Cohen, 1988; Pantazis, 2000; Sim, 2003).

Within this perspective, individuals are largely understood as subjects shaped by systems that reproduce dominant interests through capitalist exploitation, racial hierarchy, and gender inequality. However, critics argue that its strong emphasis on macro-level structures tends to overlook how corruption is experienced, negotiated, and reproduced within everyday social interactions (Lea and Young, 1984).

By privileging a top-down analysis of elite-driven corruption, this perspective risks neglecting the micro-level dynamics through which corruption operates in daily life. Practices such as petty corruption or culturally embedded informal exchanges—often involving lower-level actors operating within systemic constraints—can have immediate and disproportionate effects on vulnerable groups who depend heavily on public institutions for access to basic services.

Yet radical criminology often centres offenders as victims of state labelling, thereby neglecting the suffering of actual victims—those who bear the everyday consequences of corruption, particularly those occupying subordinate positions within hierarchical power relations (Matthews and Young, 1986). It results in a troubling contradiction: in prioritising critique of elite corruption, it risks overlooking everyday harms that remain unlabeled as corruption. In doing so, it may inadvertently reproduce the very silences it seeks to challenge.

Building on this foundation, left realism offers a complementary but distinct approach. While methodologically different from left idealism, it similarly recognises the intersection of class, gender, and race in shaping systemic corruption. Developed by Ian Taylor (1981), Roger Matthews (1988), Jock Young (1971), and John Lea (2010), it adopts a pragmatic, empirical focus on the lived experiences of harm within powerless communities.

By exposing how capitalist, patriarchal, and racial structures disproportionately impact women, minorities, and the poor, left realism challenges dominant narratives that often ignore the unequal burdens of corruption. From this perspective, systemic corruption is viewed through the lens of its impact on victims—focusing on how corrupt systems produce and intensify social inequality, and on who bears the brunt of these injustices. It challenges the tendency to frame offenders solely as victims of a corrupt system, arguing instead for greater attention to those most affected by such structures—real victims whose rights, security, and access to justice dominant groups undermine through self-serving policies and practices.

As a result, corruption inflicts real and disproportionate harm on working-class and marginalised communities. In this framework, state authority functions less as a vehicle for public service and more as a mechanism for preserving elite control. Systemic corruption is thus understood not simply as an abstract ideological construct, but as a concrete source of material harm (Carrington and Hogg, 2002, pp. 3, 6; Slapper and Tombs, 1999, p. 3).

The left realist approach to corruption has come under increasing scrutiny due to its conceptual limitations. Although often presented as emancipatory, it primarily focuses on visible, legally recognised victims, such as financial losses to the state or administrative inefficiencies, while neglecting those harmed in less visible or unacknowledged ways (Avi Boukli and Kotzé, 2018, p. 1; Tombs, 2018, p. 22). It uncritically accepts official definitions of corruption without examining who benefits and who suffers. In doing so, left realism simply follows left idealism, treating systemic corruption as little more than elite misconduct.

Consequently, harms rooted in hierarchical structures—such as public policies that disadvantage communities, unequal allocation of resources, or chronic poverty—are frequently overlooked (Copson, 2018, p. 147). The approach relies on dominant narratives, sidestepping how power shapes and legitimises corruption—ironically, revealing systemic corruption in the process (van Swaaningen, 1997, 1999). Many harms from bureaucratic practices escape corruption labels due to narrow offence definitions, lack of clear victims, or being framed as negligence, not intent.

For critics of left realism, this is precisely where systemic corruption lies: harm becomes structured and pervasive throughout the social order. Corruption thus stems from a broader hegemonic system, in which social structures promote behaviours that benefit elites while disadvantaging others, including those who act without fully recognising the consequences (Hall and Winlow, 2018, p. 118-119).

In general, under critical criminology, the definition of corruption remains largely constrained by a formal, power-oriented paradigm. This narrow framing means the field often overlooks state-sanctioned or elite practices that, while legally permissible, inflict significant systemic harm. Despite claiming to offer critical insight, the field ultimately replicates mainstream approaches by reducing complex, diffuse, and long-term harms to those immediately visible and measurable (Kotze, 2018, p. 98).

In doing so, it deflects scrutiny from systemic corruption, leaving hegemonic structures that generate widespread harm largely unchallenged. As a result, much like positivist approaches, critical criminology fails to recognise corruption beyond the boundaries defined by law, inadvertently reinforcing the very power structures it purports to critique (Tombs, 2018, pp. 20–21).

2.5 The Zemiology Views on Corruption

Zemiology reconceptualises corruption not merely as deviance—particularly among the powerful—but as a pervasive and systemic social harm, even when neither legally defined as a crime nor criminalised by the state (Brisman and South, 2018, p. 208). Rather than viewing systemic corruption solely through the lens of how power defines crime or criminalises the marginalised—a tendency within critical criminology that often overlooks the lived experiences of victims—zemiology offers a deeper structural critique by exposing how power structures themselves actively produce and sustain the conditions in which harm becomes normalised, obscured, and shielded from legal accountability (Copson, 2018, p. 37).

Such structural conditions generate both pressures and incentives for individuals to engage in socially harmful behaviour—not out of malicious intent, but as a rational response to systemic corruption or deep-rooted inequality, often undertaken in pursuit of economic opportunity or upward social mobility. Frequently, individuals perceive themselves as having no viable alternative for survival or advancement, compelled to conform to a corrupt system due to structural constraints such as poverty, unmet basic needs, or institutional incentives that render other choices implausible (Lloyd, 2018a, p. 247).

Within this context, neither the legality of the act nor the actor's intent remains the central concern; instead, what becomes critical is the failure to acknowledge or address the social harm inflicted upon others (Canning and Tombs, 2021, p. 27, 59). Within this framework, zemiology argues that social structures heavily constrain individual agency (Hillyard et al., 2004b, p. 271).

Accordingly, it argues that accountability must be directed, first and foremost, towards the dominant systems of power that generate and maintain harmful conditions—rather than focusing solely on individual culpability, as remains characteristic of much critical criminological analysis (Tombs, 2018, p. 23). In this regard, social structures do not simply permit corruption—they actively entrench and legitimise it by institutionalising norms that serve dominant elites. This structural alignment entrenches privilege while systematically marginalising disadvantaged communities, whose access to essential resources is persistently denied. Consequently, the fundamental needs of these populations are not simply neglected but are routinely undermined through systemic exclusion and structural indifference (Tifft and Sullivan, 2001).

Zemiology, therefore, broadens the concept of corruption to include social harms produced by power structures—often legitimised, normalised, and justified—that, if scrutinised, would threaten the comfort and interests of dominant groups (Hall and Winlow, 2018, p. 119; Canning, 2018, p. 196). In this view, corruption is no longer limited to intentional misconduct but includes social or institutional practices by powerful actors that, through negligence or indifference, effectively deprive the broader population, particularly vulnerable groups, of access to resources and rights to which they are legitimately entitled. Although such practices may be legal or fall outside the narrow scope of state-defined corruption, they frequently go unchallenged due to their routinisation within dominant institutional frameworks (Canning and Tombs, 2021, p. 73; Hillyard and Tombs, 2004, p. 22).

From this perspective, corruption emerges as a systemic condition—embedded in, and perpetuated by, the very social structures that generate, conceal, and normalise harm. Responsibility, therefore, does not lie solely with individual actors, but extends to all participants in these systems, who collectively contribute to the reproduction of harm (Reiman 2006, p. 364). However, by completely abandoning the state's legal framework, Zemiology's definition of corruption lacks a clear moral basis for objectively evaluating structural practices and policies (Maruna, 2013; Hughes, 2007). Consequently, what qualifies as systemic corruption becomes highly relative, overly broad, and ill-defined—potentially including all harm, inequality, or injustice beyond legal definitions. Ultimately, it risks embedding power-driven bias in how harm is framed and interpreted (Yar, 2012a, p. 59; Raymen, 2019, p. 135).

In seeking a moral foundation for evaluating practices that may be legally sanctioned yet socially harmful, Herman and Julia Schwendinger (1975; 2013) advocate a human rights framework capable of exposing the power relations underpinning social domination. In this critical view, systemic corruption arises when dominant power structures normalise the denial of fundamental rights, enabling harm through the imposition of legal and moral standards. It refers to entrenched practices—marked by exploitation, inequality, and exclusion—that violate rights but evade legal recognition as corruption. However, this moral foundation has drawn criticism for its universalist and Western-centric orientation, grounded in individualism, rationalism, and patriarchal norms (Green & Ward, 2004, p. 7; Sjoberg et al., 2001, p. 18; Kennedy, 2002, p. 124). Such a framework tends to marginalise non-Western moral systems and fails to engage with the deep forms of social suffering produced through histories of colonial violence (Benhabib, 1992; Smith, 2002).

Colonialism did not merely neglect the rights of vulnerable groups—it actively erased them through masculinist practices such as corporal punishment and systemic exclusion, particularly targeting children and other subordinated populations (Watkins, 2020). As a result, dominant discourses shaped by this legacy often lack the critical capacity to confront hegemonic masculinity, which continues to operate through intersecting structural, relational, symbolic, and historical dimensions.

To address this limitation, Majid Yar (2012, p. 59) shifted the focus towards the loss of social recognition of basic human dignity—such as love, rights, and respect—which form the foundation for complete human existence and integrity. By categorising who receives or is denied recognition in particular social spaces, Yar (2012, p. 57) argues that the victims’ experiences—being intersubjective, contextual, and relational—can serve as the basis for a moral framework that challenges hegemonic power structures and is therefore effective in exposing hidden practices of hegemonic masculinity embedded within social relations. Within this definition, systemic corruption occurs when hegemonic power structures fail to recognise the needs essential to human integrity and wellbeing, selectively denying the dignity and needs of groups perceived as deviating from dominant masculine norms.

However, Yar’s approach has been criticised for relying excessively on subjectivity and moral relativism (Lasslett, 2010; Hall, 2012; Garside, 2013). Without a consistent moral standard, the concept risks becoming vague and open to political manipulation, as what counts as a “need” may vary across societies. At the same time, Yar proposes a universal list of fundamental human needs, implicitly treating them as fixed and independent of social and historical conditions. This inconsistency creates a conceptual tension within his framework (Garside, 2013, p. 256).

By failing to recognise the dignity of certain groups, the needs-based approach risks overlooking how dominant structures do not merely fail to recognise certain needs but actively construct, limit, and distort them. As such, it inadequately addresses how systemic corruption operates through the very shaping of what is socially understood as a legitimate need. Consequently, without more objective standards of recognition, the definition of corruption becomes negotiable and politically malleable, which can legitimise hegemonic practices—such as masculinist domination—that often mask themselves behind local cultural norms or apparent social consensus, yet operate in deeply exclusionary ways (Tombs, 2018, p. 24; Raymen, 2022).

Pemberton (2015, p. 24) seeks to bridge the tension between universalism and relativism by proposing human needs as an objective and stable moral foundation. He emphasises the importance of analysing the social context of harm, arguing that harm is socially produced when it is generated, maintained, or neglected by dominant power structures. In contrast to Yar, Pemberton (2007) explicitly acknowledges that human needs cannot be separated from the social, historical, and material conditions that shape them. Social structures always mediate needs, and harm arises when these structures fail to meet, ignore, or obstruct their fulfilment.

Pemberton (2015, p. 3) further highlights that hegemonic societies often present structural harms as natural or inevitable, recognising them as socially constructed to serve the powerful. Thus, what is regarded as a "basic need" is, in essence, a product of historical and political construction within specific social contexts. For Pemberton (2004, p. 40), basic human needs are neither relative nor merely the product of dominant social constructions; rather, they are essential elements inherent to human existence, irrespective of social class, gender, or race.

In the context of systemic corruption, a social system operating through the state may be considered corrupt when it fails—or actively contributes—to producing and legitimising social arrangements that systematically compromise the fulfilment of basic human needs, particularly where access to self-actualisation and social participation is obstructed (Pemberton, 2015, p. 3, 42). In other words, any hegemonic arrangement that restricts powerless groups from accessing the resources necessary to flourish and reach their full potential may constitute systemic corruption—even if not formally recognized as such (Cain and Howe, 2008).

Nonetheless, this approach has been criticised for failing to clearly define human flourishing—the ultimate aims individuals seek to achieve once their basic needs are satisfied—thereby rendering the concept vague and open to multiple interpretations (Lasslett, 2010). When flourishing remains undefined, it becomes unclear what is genuinely required for individuals to develop fully as human beings. In this context, human needs risk being reduced to merely instrumental conditions that enable individuals to pursue personal desires, without ethical guidance on whether such pursuits contribute to collective wellbeing. Consequently, the identification and fulfilment of basic human needs may become vulnerable to reductionist assumptions, misrepresentation, or ideological bias (Raymen, 2023, p. 19).

The broader implication is that, in the absence of an inclusive definition grounded in the lived experiences of oppressed communities, human flourishing risks functioning as an instrument of power—a normative framework that determines who is considered to be flourishing, who is not, and who is deemed deserving or undeserving of access to essential social resources. In such cases, dominant groups may appropriate the concept to legitimise and sustain their hegemonic position.

These power dynamics often marginalise the needs and values of disadvantaged groups, as those in positions of power recognise only their own priorities as the common good. Consequently, the basic needs of marginalised groups may remain unacknowledged and deprioritised, simply because they do not align with a narrowly constructed and overly individualistic model of flourishing (Raymen, 2023, p. 20). At the same time, the structural conditions that restrict these groups' opportunities frequently escape critical scrutiny, as such hegemonic practices are rarely recognised—or even perceived—as manifestations of systemic corruption.

Thomas Raymen (2019; 2022, p. 20) proposes human flourishing as a moral framework for assessing structural corruption, focusing on how power structures support or restrict meaningful life across physical, emotional, and social dimensions. Echoing Lasslett (2010), he argues that human flourishing—as the aspirational end of fulfilling basic needs—is shaped not by universal ethical principles but by ideologies that construct normative ideals of what it means to be human. These ideologies—rooted in class, gender, or race—are never neutral but arise through interest-driven hegemonisation that makes them appear natural and inevitable.

To preserve a desired social order, these power structures define what counts a good life, and this in turn shapes the needs that individuals must fulfil to attain such a life. This process narrows the meaning of human flourishing to reflect dominant ideals, marginalising alternative ways of living and being. For Raymen, this is where systemic corruption manifests: when power naturalises its ideological values as common sense, aligning individual aspirations with hegemonic interests. As a result, harmful and unequal practices become legitimised under the guise of human development (Raymen, 2022, pp. 92, 106).

However, this approach has been criticised as philosophically complex and lacking practical applicability. Its focus on moral character risks privileging an individualistic lens that obscures the role of social structures in shaping and constraining human character (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2022, p. 235).

Billingham and Irwin-Rogers (2022, pp. 41, 43, 52) attempt to address this limitation by proposing a more pragmatic and universal framework based on human needs and subjective well-being, which are seen as more measurable indicators of compromised flourishing. They argue that people across societies share similar understandings of what it means to flourish, thereby enabling consensus on universal values for evaluating systemic corruption without relying on value relativism. Integrating Raymen's concept of human flourishing with Pemberton's theory of basic needs, this perspective sees systemic corruption as arising when power structures actively create conditions that prevent individuals from meeting their basic needs and achieving emotional well-being essential for genuine human flourishing.

This approach has also been criticised for risking the inclusion of relatively minor harms or personal grievances, as it risks treating any limitation of well-being as corruption. At the core lies a critical question: who defines basic needs and the ideal life—and which groups benefit or lose out? In hegemonically governed societies, such definitions are shaped by dominant ideological structures that claim universality while marginalising alternative visions of flourishing. In other words, the basic needs that are met reflect the hegemonic version of need, and the ideal of flourishing that is pursued is likewise shaped by dominant values. Without critical awareness of the origins of such claims—of who defines, controls, or represents their meaning—any attempt to pursue their supposed good risks inadvertently reinforcing the dominant order.

At its most acute, when hegemonic power defines dominant values as just and ideal, then the very existence of systemic corruption is effectively erased from public consciousness. In such a scenario, systemic corruption may never be acknowledged as a problem, as it has already been naturalised into the hegemonic values and legitimised as the unquestionable common good.

Based on the researcher's evaluation, zemiology offers strong potential to expose hidden dimensions of corruption overlooked by mainstream and critical criminology, particularly through its focus on social harm and power relations. However, its analytical value is strengthened when combined with hegemonic masculinity to reveal how power shape norms, policies, and practices embedded within society. A critical approach is therefore essential to understand systemic corruption, as seemingly universal moral claims often reflect dominant values and should not be accepted without examining their underlying social, political, and ideological origins.

Although moral judgement is important, it is shaped through social processes in which experiences of injustice and inequality are negotiated. As such, claims of universality can serve as a critical lens to expose dominant assumptions and open space for excluded voices (Gill, 2003, p. 10).

In other words, systemic corruption cannot be understood solely through abstract moral frameworks but must be examined in terms of who defines morality and the power relations behind it. Universal moral claims often reflect hegemonic perspectives—positioned as ideal or objective. Consequently, the social suffering, lived experiences, or alternative voices of subordinated groups—who are victims of structural abuse of power but fall outside the universal definitions of systemic corruption—are often delegitimised and reduced to relative cultural expressions.

2.6 Defining Systemic Corruption: The Indonesian Police Case

The critique above underscores that criminological and zemiological frameworks are not epistemologically neutral but remain anchored in Western-centric assumptions, shaped by the historical and institutional trajectories of Western states, while insufficiently engaging with colonialism and global inequality (Kitossa, 2020; Wright, 2023). This bias reflects entrenched asymmetries in the global production of knowledge, where Western perspectives are normalised as universal and authoritative, marginalising those from the Global South (Carrington et al., 2018; Moosavi, 2019; Watson et al., 2025). Consequently, Western-derived frameworks not only dominate the analysis of corruption but also delimit its very definition, effectively determining what is recognised—and what is excluded—as a “problem” of corruption.

Although zemiology positions itself as a critique of criminology by expanding the scope of analysis, it remains shaped by similar epistemological roots, as reflected in its conceptualisations, theoretical orientations, and empirical grounding, which continue to be predominantly informed by Global North contexts (Connell, 2007; Canning and Tombs, 2021). Rather than eliminating bias, this shift reconfigures the form of bias, as the construction of “harm” itself is not grounded in any universal consensus but remains influenced by Western normative assumptions.

Within this framework, both approaches exhibit clear limitations in accounting for corruption as a systemic phenomenon, particularly in the Global South, including Indonesia, where corruption is deeply embedded in historical trajectories, political-economic structures, and informal power relations that are inadequately captured by Western-derived theories (Kupatadze, 2023; Ciocchini and Greener, 2023).

These limitations not only shape how corruption is conceptualised within academic discourse but also delimit whose voices and experiences are recognised as legitimate in the production of knowledge. As a result, social realities beyond Western frameworks are systematically underrepresented or relegated to the status of “additional cases”, where they are marginalised, simplified, or reduced within analyses that fail to capture their complexity (Aliverti et al., 2021; Odilla and Tsimonis, 2024).

The consequence is that dominant groups construct prevailing understandings of corruption in ways that reflect their own interests, while subordinated perspectives are excluded (Wacquant, 2009). In turn, corruption is problematically reduced to individual deviance rather than situated within broader configurations of power through which social hierarchies and inequality is produced and normalised. Such reduction obscures the role of actors in dominant structural positions, while rendering those in weaker positions more visible, more vulnerable to enforcement, and less able to resist or contest these dynamics (Roberts, 1993; Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 74).

In many contexts, corruption operates not as an aberration but as a systemic mechanism for the reproduction of power, wherein networks of power, elite alliances, and informal relations regulate resource distribution while simultaneously sustaining dominance through processes of normalisation and consensus-building, rendering such practices widely accepted as a “normal” feature of broader political-economic dynamics (Andvig and Fjeldstad, 2008). These structural and relational dimensions remain insufficiently captured within existing analytical frameworks, thereby obscuring the systemic character of corruption and reinforcing its misrepresentation as individual deviance rather than as a structural phenomenon embedded in power relations. This study seeks to address this gap.

Drawing on the lived experiences of subordinate INP actors, this study demonstrates how hegemonic institutional values actively normalise and legitimise corruption within police culture, embedding it within dominant power structures where harms—often unrecognised as corruption—are reproduced through entrenched norms of inequality, hierarchy, loyalty, and control. These dynamics are reinforced in the Global South, where hegemonic masculine power relations are more deeply entrenched and spaces for contestation are limited, while in Indonesia authoritarian configurations further suppress resistance by instrumentalising state institutions for domination (Connell, 2016; Robinson, 2009). Within such conditions, the INP hierarchy reproduces these power relations, enabling dominant actors to impose their interests as universal norms through symbolic and material power, while systematically delegitimising the needs and aspirations of subordinate groups.

As a consequence, what is defined as ‘basic needs’ is constructed by the institutional mainstream and imposed as objective, forcing lower-ranking personnel to conform while their own notions of fairness and access are subordinated to elite-defined standards of need and justice. This process reflects a monopolisation of meaning, in which dominant actors assert exclusive authority over what counts as legitimate values, including the definition of corruption itself (Neocleous, 2000).

In turn, definitions of corruption become controlled by senior police elites and aligned with broader political interests, operating as coercive instruments against vulnerable groups, particularly when they resist imposed corrupt arrangements (Punch, 2009). Systemic corruption within the INP thus reveals how dominant power relations universalise their narrow interests as moral truth, while silencing and marginalising the experiences and knowledge of subordinate groups.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter is specifically dedicated to critically evaluating the various discursive constructions of systemic corruption within criminological and zemiological literature.

The first section critiques classical and neo-classical criminological approaches, which reproduce a reductionist understanding of corruption—framing it merely as deviant individual behaviour based on violations of legal norms and failures of rationality. As such, these approaches fall short in providing adequate analytical tools to understand corruption as a structured and institutionalised socio-political practice.

The second section critically examines positivist approaches in criminology, which depict corruption as the result of individual pathology—whether rooted in biological, psychological, or sociological determinism. Despite claiming scientific objectivity based on empiricism, positivism has, from the outset, been laden with ideological biases that serve hegemonic interests rather than exposing the root causes of systemic corruption.

The third section argues that critical criminology successfully shifts the analytical focus from individual morality to structures of power, revealing how definitions of corruption are constructed by hegemonic actors to maintain dominance. However, it retains key weaknesses: it tends to remain trapped within dominant moral frameworks, overly concentrates on class and economic issues, and fails to grasp intersectional dimensions such as gender, race, and coloniality that shape the lived experience of corruption.

The fourth section highlights Zemiology as a breakthrough in its focus on the suffering of subordinated groups and its attention to systemic social harm overlooked by mainstream criminology. Nevertheless, this approach lacks a stable moral framework and tends to neglect ideological dimensions such as hegemonic masculinity, thus failing to uncover the ideological underpinnings of systemic corruption.

The fifth section addresses the conceptual gap that this study seeks to fill—namely, the lack of attention to the symbolic dimension of power, particularly hegemonic masculinity, in analyses of systemic corruption. All four approaches tend to adopt overly reductionist perspectives—whether moralistic, rationalistic, positivistic, deterministic, structuralistic, or indifferent to normalised forms of social harm, thereby neglecting the power dimension inherent in systemic corruption. This overall evaluation paves the way for developing an alternative theoretical framework that is more contextual and sensitive to the dynamics of power within the Indonesian police institution.

CHAPTER 3: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING POLICE CORRUPTION

3.1. Introduction

Chapter Two shows that most definitions of corruption rest on normative frameworks that require critique. Both criminology and zemiology are reductionist in different ways: the former overlooks structures and history, while the latter universalises harm and oversimplifies power relations. Chapter Three therefore takes a different theoretical position—not just looking at where systemic corruption comes from but also showing how the police as an institution operates through power relations that have already been institutionalised in corrupt ways.

The first section explores how social structures produce hegemonic masculinity as a dominant norm, laying the groundwork for the first research question by critically linking these norms to corrupt practices. This analysis is supported by differential association theory, which explains how dominant social powers embed corrupt values through routine social interactions. The third section outlines general strain theory, which is used to address the second research question, showing how individual pressure stems from social systems that ideologically prioritise dominant interests over the needs of those lower in the hierarchy.

The final section is devoted to neutralisation techniques theory, which illustrates how hegemonic pressures generate ideological justifications that normalise and legitimise corrupt practices, often at the expense of the wider community.

3.2 Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity theory helps explain how power systems—structured by gender, race, and class—normalise practices that serve dominant groups while subordinating the vulnerable. Within this framework, corruption is seen as a structural process through which the powerful govern the less powerful for their own interests.

The theory of hegemonic masculinity, as formulated by James W. Messerschmidt (1997, p. 3), starts from the assumption that dominant masculinity is not a biological trait or an abstract idea, but a social and historical construction institutionalised to maintain power relations. In other words, human consciousness—especially regarding gender or masculine identity—does not arise purely from individual free will but is shaped by social structures that regulate or limit their lives, including how they think, feel, and behave. Still, there remains a limited space for agency in shaping or responding to that very structure.

This social structure encompasses gender-based power relations (patriarchy), class or economic-based power relations (capitalism), and race-based power relations (the dominant racial system) within an intersectional framework. These systems interact simultaneously and support one another in shaping collective consciousness, rather than operating in isolation (Messerschmidt, 1997, pp. 4–5). It means that within hierarchically structured power relations, dominant groups in the social structure—whether based on gender, class, or race—can impose their ideas or values as universal truths or standards, while simultaneously marginalising the ideas or values of opposing groups.

Put simply, social structure is not passive or neutral; rather, it actively produces or shapes the consciousness of the dominated to align with the interests of dominant power. It can be done, for example, by promoting certain forms of masculinity as ideal, superior, or normal, while stigmatising other forms of masculinity as deviant or abnormal (Messerschmidt, 1997, p. 6).

Messerschmidt carefully explains that social structure not only shapes individual consciousness but also serves as a site of power struggles or conflicts among various social interests entangled in class, masculinity, and race. Therefore, power structures are essentially relational and open to change—not static or absolute—offering individuals the possibility not only to mimic gender or masculine structures, but also to actively shape, negotiate, or even resist hegemonic masculinity through structured and meaningful actions or discourse, albeit still within the limits of the existing structure (Giddens, 1976; 1984).

Here, Messerschmidt critiques certain strands of Marxism and feminism for being overly deterministic or gender-blind, overlooking the dialectical relationship between structure and agency. He argues that criminology often treats structure as fully determining behaviour, ignoring individual meaning-making and the diverse experiences of marginalised communities. Marxism tends to present class conflict without gender nuance, while socialist feminism often generalises men as oppressors. Yet both perspectives overlook the fact that not all men hold hegemonic power—many are themselves oppressed based on class, race, or non-hegemonic masculinities (Messerschmidt, 2018, pp. 13–14).

Messerschmidt emphasises individual agency as key to understanding complex social dynamics. While social structures shape boundaries and opportunities, they are not deterministic. Individuals—especially from grassroots backgrounds—negotiate their masculine identities within these limits, either aligning with or resisting hegemonic norms. This negotiation involves navigating class, gender, and race. Critically conscious individuals don't simply comply—they strategically justify, challenge, or reshape the structures that govern them through collective action (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 117).

To understand how power operates in a more complex way, Messerschmidt (2018, p. 26) follows and develops the thinking of Raewyn W. Connell (1987, 1995), particularly in applying Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony—which was initially used to analyse class relations—into the study of hegemonic masculinity. Gramsci (2000) first introduced the concept of hegemony as the mechanism by which the dominant class maintains its leadership by presenting its interests as if they were the general or universal interest.

This domination endures not just through coercion but through the active consent of society—especially from subordinate groups. In Gramsci (2000, p. 147)'s view, hegemony functions within a historical bloc: an organic unity of economic, political, and ideological structures that stabilise power. Since the dominant class cannot rule absolutely, it uses ideology to form alliances across social groups. The state, in turn, institutionalises this dominant ideology, shaping “common sense” and moral norms that appear natural, reasonable, even ideal.

Connell (1995) adopts this logic and shifts it from the realm of class to that of gender relations—specifically, relations among different forms of masculinity. Parallel to how one social class may dominate others, within an unequal society, one form of masculinity or gender can dominate other forms. In Connell's framework (1995, p. 77), hegemonic masculinity is not simply a trait of individual men; rather, it is part of a hegemonic social structure that upholds patriarchy—a system that legitimises the domination of men over women, as well as over other men who are considered subordinate.

In a gender and masculine order structured hierarchically, hegemonic masculinity occupies the dominant or top position and is legitimised as the ideal masculine image in society. As a result, other or alternative masculinities are not only positioned as subordinate or marginal within the gender hierarchy but are also oppressed or excluded from legitimacy—unless they conform to the value system of the dominant masculine group.

Within historically evolving masculine relations, Connell (1995, p. 69) notes that dominant masculinity—supported by the dominant class structure—tends to compromise and build ideological alliances with other masculinities—subordinate, marginalised, or complicit—to reinforce patriarchal domination. Through these alliances, the hegemonic social system succeeds, at least temporarily, in gaining consensus from most men who, although not enjoying full hegemonic status, still benefit from the patriarchal order. This consensus helps neutralise potential resistance, both from non-hegemonic masculinities and from non-conventional feminism.

Messerschmidt (2018, p. 109) adopts and expands Connell's framework on masculine relational structures but challenges its assumption that power structures are fixed or static, arguing instead that they are dynamic, situational, and reflexive. As previously discussed, Messerschmidt argues that while social structures shape action, action can also transform those very structures.

Referring to West and Zimmerman (1987), Messerschmidt (2018, p. 113) highlights that gender performance is shaped by social and institutional contexts, yet individuals are not passive agents in this process. They adapt strategically to their social contexts, depending on the opportunities and constraints they face. In other words, masculinity practices are subject to change according to historical, political, or social contexts (dynamic); they are negotiated in everyday interactions (situational); and individuals are consciously aware and selective in how they perform their masculinity (reflexive). If an individual adopts hegemonic masculinity, they contribute—knowingly or not—to sustaining unequal power relations.

In this framework, Messerschmidt (1997, pp. 23, 34) argues that society is not a harmonious space, but rather an ongoing arena of power contestation between social groups. Each group does not merely pursue its own interests but also seeks to claim or impose its definition of what constitutes the common good or public interest—definitions that, in essence, reflect each group's own logic of domination. Social groups occupying dominant positions often present themselves as the embodiment of moral virtue or guardians of purity. Through such claims, they actively defend and expand power relations that benefit their social standing—particularly in terms of gender, race, and class.

In contrast, lacking coercive force, the truth claims of subordinated groups are suppressed by the dominant discourse of morality. These subordinated groups are frequently made to feel inferior, living within a hegemonic social structure that monopolises moral definitions and casts their identities as lower, impure, uncivilised, wild, dangerous, or even as a threat to hegemonic virtue (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 61). However, not all individuals within subordinated groups recognise their position as one of oppression. Some internalise the dominant logic and accept it as moral truth, while others—having experienced injustice or suffering directly—consciously seek to voice or demand recognition of their own alternative truths.

Thus, claims about what is “good” are not neutral or universal, but rather ideological. As a result, Messerschmidt (1997, p. 5; 2018, pp. 114, 117) argues that knowledge, particularly about heterosexuality, reflects hegemonic interests rather than objective reality. In other words, knowledge is the outcome of negotiation within a hegemonic bloc, rather than a passive reflection of social structures. In the pursuit of consensus, hegemonic systems do not allow knowledge to develop neutrally; instead, they filter and determine what is considered rational, acceptable, and true.

In the realm of gender, hegemonic systems monopolise and reproduce masculinity by elevating one dominant ideal as the norm while marginalising alternatives as subordinate or deviant (Schippers, 2007). These ideals are repeatedly reinforced through social institutions and embedded into public consciousness. As hegemonic masculinity becomes “common sense,” individuals often internalise these norms unquestioningly. This passive or voluntary acceptance leads to the unconscious reproduction and reinforcement of the hegemonic system.

In the context of corruption, it means that the hegemonic social system produces official knowledge shaped by their interest in maintaining dominance, not by neutrality (Bjarnegård, 2024). Acting as a regime of truth, the hegemonic system monopolises the dominant discourse on what corruption is and how it is evaluated. Through these discourses, it attaches hegemonic masculine values to acts of power abuse, thereby not only obscuring such acts but also reframing them as legitimate, respectable, and seemingly accountable performances of masculinity.

As a result, within the logic of dominant hegemonic masculinity, various abuses of power—whether to control resources or to maintain authority—are institutionalised, encouraged, and reproduced as normal or acceptable ways of exercising power. Systemic corruption thus no longer appears as a deviation, but rather as a form of “doing masculinity” hegemonically—as though it were an acceptable and legitimate way for men to wield power.

Through this logic, hegemonic systems normalise power abuse as masculine and obscure the unequal relations behind it. It does so by reducing corruption to the deviance of individual actors or bad apples, thereby deflecting attention from the forms of power abuse that are rooted within institutions themselves. Consequently, structural corruption is not only protected but also positioned as beyond the reach of critique or enforcement—rendering it seemingly untouchable. This narrow definition of corruption ultimately functions as a mechanism for masking hegemonic interests—by filtering the meaning of corruption, determining which acts are treated as punishable scandals, and which are normalised as tolerable masculine practices (Bjarnegård and Murray, 2018; Rothstein, 2018; Isaac and Gill, 2025).

Based on how hegemonic knowledge spreads, Messerschmidt (2018, pp. 47, 122) concludes that power doesn't just work in a top-down way at the macro level, but also operates in contextual, plural, and decentralised forms at the micro level. In other words, hegemonic masculine power isn't simply imposed from above through large or centralised power structures—it's also everywhere (ubiquitous) and spreads through individuals who carry out small, repeated, everyday practices in their daily relationships and routines.

Here, Messerschmidt aligns with Foucault (1979; 1980), who argued that power is not something exclusively controlled by a particular class, gender, masculinity, or race, but is a practice that operates within micro-relations. As power is embedded in wide-ranging social networks, the main mechanism of modern power works more through normalisation than direct force. The process of normalisation leads individuals to willingly conform to dominant norms, seeing them as rational and natural. It also reveals how power subtly shapes subjectivity and limits life possibilities beyond the hegemonic framework. Rather than simply submitting, individuals actively manage or discipline their appearance, speech, and everyday behaviour to appear in line with dominant social norms.

These norms construct, categorise, and enforce a singular, legitimate model: two distinct sexes, two fixed genders, heterosexuality as the natural form of sexuality, and hegemonic masculinity as the ideal. By linking biology to social roles, this framework naturalises hierarchical power relations—legitimising dominance for some while relegating others to subordinate positions—and embeds these inequalities within institutional structures (Laqueur, 1990, p. 150).

As such, individuals not only act as operating points of the microphysics of power, but also as active agents who, through their daily practices, productively renew, reproduce, and reinforce hegemonic constructions. It keeps hegemonic masculine power relations appearing natural, normal, and inevitable. Put simply, these seemingly trivial micro-practices by individuals generate social harm: dominant groups continue to benefit because their hegemonic structure is maintained and normalised, while minority groups remain disadvantaged, as their non-hegemonic structures are not only delegitimised but also dismissed and treated as deviant.

In the context of this study, Messerschmidt's claim that hegemonic masculinity is a social construction supporting intersectional power relations allows for a deeper and more critical analysis of systemic corruption within Indonesia's police institution. This theory helps explain how the Indonesian police force (INP) itself, as an institution that reproduces hegemonic masculinity, is not a neutral or passive body—but an active agent that plays a central role in facilitating and maintaining systemic corruption.

By linking hegemonic masculinity to how power operates within social structures, the researcher can see that police corruption in Indonesia is not just about individual misconduct. It has become a hegemonic practice that upholds the patriarchal-capitalist-racial structure of the Indonesian state. Their corrupt behaviour is not simply a personal choice made in isolation, but emerges from a consciousness shaped, disciplined, and normalised by institutional hegemonic structures—as a mechanism for demonstrating or proving masculine accountability.

All of this does not merely serve individual interests but also upholds the power of dominant groups in Indonesian society—including the upper class or economic oligarchs, the majority ethnic group (Javanese), the dominant religion (Islam/Muslim masculinity), and the structure of hegemonic masculinity which places hegemonically masculine men exclusively at the centre of power (Eklof, 2003, p. 34).

As Nilan (2009, pp. 332, 339) and Nilan and Demartoto (2012) argue, Muslim masculinity in Indonesia constructs the ideal male as honest, religious, knowledgeable, responsible, and self-disciplined, yet this ideal also reproduces gendered power relations by legitimising male dominance over women and authority within familial and spiritual domains.

By understanding corruption as an ideological mechanism, this analysis reveals how dominant groups actively marginalise vulnerable ones—such as subordinate masculinities, lower-class citizens, women, ethnic minorities (non-Javanese), or religious minorities (non-Muslims)—as part of a broader strategy to maintain their hegemony.

However, from the same hegemonic masculinity perspective, the researcher also recognise that the police structure cannot be understood as absolute or monolithic. Rather, the police institution is itself a battleground of competing power interests: between status quo and reformist forces; between superiors who normalise corruption or abuse of power and subordinates who are trying to survive or resist; and between hegemonic and subordinate masculinities.

3.3. Differential Association

After exploring how the structure of hegemonic masculinity shapes the culture of power, dominance, and internal loyalty within the police force, it is crucial to examine how these values are internalised and expressed in day-to-day practice, including in corrupt behaviour that occurs systemically. In the INP, corruption is not merely the result of individuals abusing their power. Rather, it reflects deeper structural dynamics—a hegemonic police system.

This system not only reproduces dominant masculine norms but also creates a social ecosystem that enables corrupt practices to be inherited, learned, passed on, and normalised through exclusive and hierarchical power relations and internal solidarity. It is where the theory of differential association becomes especially relevant, as it explains how systemic corruption is transmitted through close associations—not only among police officers themselves but also between officers and members of the wider public.

Differential association theory, introduced by Sutherland (1939), argues that criminal behaviour is learned through social interaction, not innate traits. Sutherland (1978, pp. 3–11) sharply criticised dominant positivist criminology for focusing too heavily on individual factors while neglecting broader social contexts. By highlighting dominant actors in the social structure, Sutherland (1978, p. 13) exposed a core paradox of hegemonic systems: many harmful behaviours are not legally defined as crimes, while legally defined crimes often cause minimal social harm. Sutherland argued that harmful practices like corruption often go unaddressed by law because they are embedded in power structures and serve the interests of those in control.

Sutherland (1978, pp. 17, 20) argued that crime is relative, shaped by prevailing power structures. What is seen as deviant or criminal depends on who holds authority and which norms are enforced, as dominant systems shape how behaviour is perceived and judged. In a hegemonic power system, Sutherland's view suggests that the authority defining truth, falsehood, or crime is rarely neutral—it typically serves dominant groups. The authority is often held by men who embody and enforce values like control, dominance, and strength, socialising others into exploitative, conformist masculine behaviours (Swinehart and Mowen, 2024).

Through hegemonic mechanisms, social definitions are shaped in such a way that harmful behaviour carried out by elites is often legitimised, disguised, or even seen as acceptable or admirable—while similar acts committed by marginalised or lower-class groups are labelled as criminal. These dominant values, in turn, give rise to double standards in the way hegemonic masculinity is understood and judged.

In cases of systemic corruption, hegemonic systems often enforce the law more harshly against lower-class or non-dominant groups. When elites commit similar acts—often under the guise of serving collective interests—the system tends to strip away the criminal label, protect the perpetrators, dismiss victims, and legitimise the abuse as acceptable authority (Sutherland, 1983, p. xxxi, 93; Dormaels, 2015, p. 606). A similar dynamic is likely present within the INP, where corruption is often normalised despite being a criminal offence. When committed by those in dominant positions—whether by class, patriarchal masculinity, or majority race or ethnicity—such acts are seen as routine or necessary. In contrast, similar behaviour by lower-ranking or marginalised individuals is quickly labelled as criminal.

Sutherland (1978, pp. 80–83) emphasises that individuals learn to define what they perceive as “objective” situations through lifelong social interaction. Moral awareness, he argues, is shaped by dominant values transmitted via formal institutions and everyday relationships. Through internalisation, individuals adopt norms that define which behaviours are considered acceptable or unacceptable—though these definitions vary across cultural, social, and institutional contexts. People tend to act in accordance with the values reinforced in their environment; when compliance with legal norms is framed as morally right, they are more likely to follow them.

However, if non-compliance is normalised or viewed as justifiable within a particular context, individuals may adopt that perspective. The influence of such messages depends on the frequency, duration, timing, and intensity of exposure to those transmitting them.

Sutherland’s ideas can be reinterpreted through a hegemonic lens to illustrate how dominant power structures shape moral consciousness in ways that legitimise and normalise the dominance of men, the upper classes, and majority racial groups. This dominance is widely accepted—even by subordinate groups—through ideologies embedded within institutions and presented as universal and objective truths (Vande Walle, 2002). These mechanisms routinely define and socialise values around class, gender, and race to serve the interests of dominant groups—including interpreting and justifying corrupt practices as rational and in line with the greater good. Through this process of social learning, the interests of dominant groups are deliberately aligned with the needs and fears of subordinate groups, making such alignment appear natural, even though it is contradictory.

Here, the social system plays a crucial role not only in shaping basic needs but also in prescribing acceptable ways to fulfil them, but also in prescribing the socially legitimate or acceptable ways to fulfil those needs. It is reflected in Sutherland's assertion (1978, p. 82) that all individuals—whether aligned with hegemonic masculinity or non-hegemonic masculinity—essentially have the same basic needs.

However, according to Sutherland, the difference lies in how each group defines and pursues those needs—something learned through their respective social associations. Hegemonic masculinity groups often equate status with power, dominance, and public achievement, leading them to prioritise their interests as more legitimate. In contrast, non-hegemonic groups may value loyalty or obedience, often accepting their subordinate position and the marginalisation of their needs within the hegemonic masculine order.

In the context of systemic corruption, it suggests that social systems rooted in dominant values often legitimise or tolerate unilateral decision-making, control, and repression by dominant groups—manifested through practices such as corruption, collusion, and nepotism (Peoples and Sutton, 2015, p. 106).

Within these systems, such behaviours are frequently perceived as normal, or even necessary, as “effective” means of exercising authority to achieve higher social goals. In contrast, behaviours that challenge hegemonic masculine norms are frequently discredited or delegitimised. Lacking structural support, individuals tend to avoid such “deviations,” recognising that actions contrary to dominant expectations may be perceived as threats to hegemonic power.

Various studies on white-collar crime reveal patterns consistent with the differential association theory. New members learn by observing the behaviour of senior members and participating in their practices (Jones, 1986; Ashforth and Anand, 2003; Stewart, 2015); individuals adopt logical justifications for breaking the law from colleagues and superiors (Gross, 1978; Coleman, 1992); and when corrupt practices become routine, they are treated as official procedures (Zucker, 1977; Oliver, 1992).

Small-group pressure fosters corrupt loyalty (Clinard, 1979; Perrow, 1972), while organisational culture teaches silence as a safe strategy (Gobert and Punch, 2000; Brooks et al., 2013). Even the weakness of sanctions can lead individuals to perceive corruption as low risk (Braithwaite, 1985, 1988). Nevertheless, all of these studies support Sutherland's key point: that corruption is not simply individual behaviour, but a product of social learning that is institutionalised and facilitated by organisational structures.

Differential association theory has been criticised for ignoring structural inequality, particularly how dominant values sustaining hegemonic masculinity are produced and legitimised. Kornhauser (1978) argues it treats power relations as equal, portraying hegemonic practices as products of isolated subcultures. This view overlooks how internal value systems are shaped by dominant external forces—capitalist, patriarchal, hegemonic masculine, and racially dominant structures—that naturalise power relations and reproduce structural inequality. As a result, the theory can misleadingly suggest that all groups or subcultures have equal power to spread their values, when dominant groups hold significantly more influence and control (Boeker, 1997; Tushman and Romanelli, 1985; Zimmerman, 2001).

Neglecting hegemonic masculinity has serious implications for understanding how corruption is socialised and reproduced. First, it reduces corruption to internal organisational processes, ignoring the influence of external social values. Second, it limits explanations of corruption's origins, as differential association theory focuses on behavioural transmission without addressing how deviant values initially enter and gain legitimacy within institutions (Matsueda, 1988, p. 288). Ultimately, this narrow focus risks framing corruption as merely an individual or organisational failure, obscuring its systemic nature—a manifestation of the interaction between institutional values and the broader logic of dominant social norms.

Despite critiques of its limited attention to structural factors, differential association theory remains relevant to this study. In the context of systemic corruption within the INP, it helps explain how corrupt practices are inherited, normalised, and reproduced through institutionalised socialisation. Within environments already shaped by hegemonic masculine norms, the theory reveals the micro-mechanisms through which power values are passed down. As individuals enter such hegemonic spaces—whether in the police, families, schools, religious groups, or media—they interact with influential socialising agents embedded in the system.

By combining differential association and hegemonic masculinity theories, the study will show that corrupt values are internalised not just through interaction, but because they are legitimised and normalised by dominant structures.

3.4. Strain

As demonstrated through the theories of hegemonic masculinity and differential association, corruption within the INP is rooted in social structures that normalise norms and arrangements which privilege dominant groups while disadvantaging those in structurally subordinate positions. To complement this analysis, the study employs General Strain Theory (GST) to examine how hegemonic social structures generate strain that compels police personnel across ranks to conform to prevailing conditions or to accept the institutionalised corruption embedded within the system, ultimately leading to their involvement in corrupt exercises of power over weaker groups beneath them. Although Agnew (2005, p. 40; 2011, p. 78) does not explicitly use the term “hegemonic,” his framework—which emphasises the role of class, gender, and race in shaping access to resources and producing structural strain—aligns closely with the concept of hegemonic masculinity.

In a hierarchically organised society, the strain distribution is far from equal due to the unequal allocation of resources, opportunities, and barriers, which typically favour those at the top of the hierarchy (Agnew, 2011, p. 128). Strain often weighs more heavily on minority groups, as social norms tend to benefit dominant groups while disadvantaging minorities.

This blind spot in recognising the uneven distribution of strain is what makes GST struggle to explain why deviance levels vary between dominant and marginalised groups (Agnew, 2006, p. 149). Therefore, Agnew stresses the need to connect GST with a macro-level theory that explicitly addresses dominant social structures as the roots of systemic strain (Agnew, 2011, p. 162).

Within this context, the lens of hegemonic masculinity is especially relevant. By integrating hegemonic masculinity theory with GST, this study frames strain not as a purely individual experience, but as shaped by macro-level power systems that propagate hegemonic masculine values (Bandura, 2001, pp. 3–5). From this perspective, strain is embedded in a hierarchical social order that sustains corruption through hegemonic logics operating within state institutions.

In line with Messerschmidt, Agnew (2006, pp. 2–3) argues that dominant social structures—which subordinate minority groups and legitimise unjust and unequal social relations—are central sources of strain. This strain compels individuals to adopt strategic or adaptive behaviours as coping mechanisms, often resulting in conformity to prevailing power structures. In this thesis, such pressures are understood as responses to power relations that simultaneously constrain and facilitate expressions of masculinity aligned with hegemonic interests.

GST itself is an expansion of earlier classical strain theories developed by Robert K. Merton (1938), Albert Cohen (1955), Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin (1960), and Messner and Rosenfeld (1994). Both GST and classical strain theories view dysfunctional or unequal social systems as the root of strain, which drives individuals toward hegemonic practices. These theories highlight how dominant structures pressure all members of society to pursue idealised values but deny equal access to legitimate means—especially for marginalised groups. Strain emerges from the gap between glorified goals and limited opportunities, prompting some to seek alternative, conformist or nonconformist, paths to achieve them. (Merton, 1968, p. 186; Agnew, 2006, p. 7; 2011, p. 80).

In other words, both theories share a fundamental assumption: that humans are generally conformist rather than uncontrollable or self-serving. They believe that individuals are naturally motivated not only to comply with dominant social norms but also to gain social recognition and acceptance (Cohen, 1955, p. 56; Agnew, 2011, pp. 78–79). As free agents, individuals rationally seek ways to adapt and cope with social pressures, though their freedom of choice is ultimately shaped and constrained by their position within the social power structure (Agnew, 2011, pp. 120).

The key difference lies in their assumptions about the nature of society. Classical strain theory assumes a shared set of universally accepted values and goals, viewing social order as based on collective consensus—despite unequal access to the means of achieving those goals. By contrast, Agnew (2011, p. 120) extends this view by showing that social order is not entirely based on pure consensus but also shaped by ongoing conflicts of interest between various groups in society.

From this view, Agnew (2011, pp. 145, 147) argues that while a basic level of consensus is necessary for social stability—such as agreement on the right to life—beyond these core issues, consensus varies widely across social groups, reflecting differing values and interests. It means that the social system is not neutral but shaped by power interests. In such a dynamic society, social arrangements tend to be shaped by dominant power groups that impose their values as shared truths, then use them to demand conformity while reproducing inequalities that harm minority groups. As a result, strain is also unequally distributed, with subordinate groups bearing a heavier burden than those in dominant positions.

At this point, Agnew (1992, p. 48; 2011, p. 80) criticises the consensus view in classical strain theory for assuming broad agreement with upper-class goals. This leads to a narrow understanding of strain, focusing mainly on economic inequality and the lower class's failure to meet elite ideals. However, according to Agnew, strain stems not only from the gap between goals and means but also from losing valued stimuli or facing negative ones. Such strain can lead to deviant behaviour, particularly when intensified by systemic injustice, intense exposure, weak control, and strong motivation to retaliate. For this reason, Agnew emphasises that strain is a universal, multidimensional phenomenon spanning class, race, and gender, encompassing economic, relational, and socio-cultural pressures shaped by hegemonic masculinity.

However, while strain affects everyone, Agnew (2001) argues that its impact and responses are shaped by one's social position. He distinguishes between objective strain—commonly perceived stressors—and subjective strain—individual interpretations of those stressors (Agnew, 2006, pp. 9–10; 2011, pp. 168–170). It helps explain why similar strains elicit different responses, from resistance to adaptation or resignation. In this regard, GST (Agnew, 2011, p. 186) suggests that in societies where masculinity and gender hierarchies are idealised, unequal social realities are interpreted differently across groups—shaped by hegemonic ideologies that define and enforce masculine standards (Pleck, 1995; Messerschmidt, 2019). Individuals who fail to meet these masculine standards clearly experience strain, but even those who succeed are not free from pressure—they may even face new forms of strain, as hegemonic standards themselves are inherently competitive, fragile, and in constant need of reaffirmation (Agnew, 2006, p. 8; Messerschmidt, 1999).

In this context, dominant groups often view threats to their masculinity, status, or authority as urgent forms of strain (David and Brannon, 1976; Dubinskas, 1988). To alleviate this tension, these groups often shape the socio-political and economic conditions in ways that ensure the preservation of their power and legitimacy. The policies they endorse tend to benefit them, whether individually or collectively, while simultaneously weakening or oppressing minority groups—through low wages, exploitative labour conditions, politicised recognition, and the normalisation of hierarchical corruption (Townsend, 2002, p. 5).

Meanwhile, minority groups may internalise hegemonic masculine values but rarely adopt them as a core identity, making them more likely to experience such norms as subjective strain rather than primary pressure (Agnew, 2006, p. 61; Fontaine, 2019, p. 176). For subordinated groups, everyday experiences of oppression, discrimination, and injustice—stemming from dominant masculine practices that sustain inequality—are more likely to be perceived as objective strain, as they are widely seen as harmful and unjust (Agnew, 2006, p. 185).

Yet this strain is frequently misrecognised due to dominant ideologies that lead subordinate groups to interpret their struggles as personal failings rather than structural problems. Even though strain stems from structural hegemonic forces, it does not determine individual responses. As previously explained, strain increases the likelihood that individuals will seek shortcuts to resolve problems, but the final decision rests with the individual's agency and free will—it is not deterministic (Agnew, 2011, p. 54).

Rather than responding uniformly, individuals may adapt by accepting their fate, resisting constructively, or engaging in harmful behaviour. The chosen response depends not only on the type of strain experienced, but also on an individual's social identity—such as gender, race, and class—as well as the social environment in which they live (Agnew, 2006, pp. 89–90).

From a hegemonic masculinity perspective, it becomes clear that dominant actors hold greater agency to define and legitimise their strain as significant, enabled by broader access to resources and opportunities. Conversely, minority groups are left to accept that their own strain is considered less critical, as their agency is more limited due to their limited access and position within a hegemonic environment that constrains expressions of subordinate masculinity (Agnew, 2006, p. 132). Within such a hegemonic system, their adaptive responses to these non-neutral strains are unlikely to be uniform. These may range from conforming to dominant values to survive—thereby reinforcing injustice—to seeking alternative paths, or even opening space for collective resistance (Agnew, 2006, p. 156).

Ample empirical evidence on corruption and white-collar crime supports this point: the pressure to meet hegemonic masculine ideals—such as being a leader, provider, protector, or a respected and successful figure—often drives individuals across social strata to pursue alternative, including illegal, routes to prove themselves (Broidy and Agnew, 1997; Langton and Piquero, 2007; Wang et al., 2022). From a structural perspective, this reflects a hegemonic system that pressures individuals—especially men—to constantly prove their masculinity through traits like courage, resilience, competition, success, and risk-taking. (Arch, 1993, p. 4).

The problem is that many of these findings lack sensitivity to how class, masculinity, and race intersect within the social structure. As Fontaine (2019, p. 178) argues, ideological and cultural differences should be central to understanding why some groups in hegemonic societies are more vulnerable to strain that compels them to perform hegemonic masculinity, while others experience harm from it. Yet, as noted earlier, GST's emphasis on individual psychology results in a universalist approach—assuming strain is neutral or equally experienced—overlooking how it is actually produced and unequally distributed through power relations.

Stuart Hall (1978, p. 55) reinforces this view by arguing that society is not homogeneous but composed of diverse, often conflicting groups. In hegemonic systems, dominant groups seek to secure consent by framing their interests as universal and by appealing to subordinate groups for legitimacy. However, this consensus is not formed on equal terms but is hierarchically constructed. It implies that identities such as gender, race, class, and ethnicity are not natural or fixed but are ideologically and historically produced (Hall, 1986, p. 22). As a result, individuals experience strain differently, depending on how social consensus constructs and positions them within these unequal relations.

Further, Foucault (1982, pp. 788–789) argues that what appears to be natural consensus is the result of power relations. Dominant actors shape and constrain the actions and discourse of others, using hegemonic narratives to prioritise their own needs and portray their strain as urgent, collective concerns. In contrast, the needs of subordinate groups—such as redistributive justice or access to basic rights—are devalued, often seen as secondary and addressed only conditionally, if at all.

This limitation becomes particularly evident in the context of systemic corruption within power-based institutions such as the INP, where strain is not a neutral or purely individual experience, but one that is structurally produced and imposed by the very system that governs and sustains institutional power. As a state apparatus co-opted by the regime, the hegemonic police institution operates not independently, but as part of Indonesia's political and economic networks, serving their interests. Historically, these networks have been dominated by a power bloc formed through alliances or compromises between the Sino-Indonesian economic oligarchy (representing the upper capitalist class), patriarchal forces sustaining the hegemonic masculinity of the majority Muslim male population, and the Javanese patrimonial elite as the dominant local ethnic group (Casci, 2006; Riyani, 2021). This bloc continues to operate through institutional channels within the police, leveraging economic, political, and cultural authority to reproduce its hegemony.

Departing from the view that social strain is embedded in unequal social structures, this study applies GST to examine the structural pressures faced by lower-ranking personnel within the INP. In other words, this approach provides an analytical framework for uncovering the hegemonic arrangements within the institution that generate such pressures. These pressures compel individuals not only to comply unquestioningly with superiors' directives—including corrupt ones—but also to impose dominative practices on subordinates. Over time, both behaviours become normalised as legitimate and necessary components of institutional operations, thereby reinforcing the hierarchical and hegemonic order.

3.5. Neutralization and Denial

When applied together, Agnew's GST and Messerschmidt's theory of hegemonic masculinity offer a layered understanding of how systemic strain leading to corruption emerges and becomes normalised. GST highlights how dominant social structures create unjust, unequal, and obstructive conditions that compel individuals—particularly those from marginalised groups—to adapt to oppressive systems. In parallel, hegemonic masculinity theory explains how such inequalities are upheld by dominant groups who determine which claims of harm are legitimised, while disregarding those raised by subordinate groups. Within this framework, it is critical to expose how hegemonic power structures rationalise the very inequalities and harms they are responsible for creating. Neutralisation Techniques Theory (NTT) sheds light on this process by identifying five common strategies used to justify corrupt compliance: denial of responsibility, denial of harm, denial of wrongdoing, condemnation of critics, and appeals to higher loyalties (Sykes & Matza, 1957).

The development of NTT is closely linked to Sykes and Matza's critique of deterministic subcultural theories, particularly Albert K. Cohen's (1955) claim that delinquent subcultures stem automatically from working-class conditions. Cohen argued that morality is not innate but socially constructed by dominant structures to maintain order. Society enforces these moral standards, rewarding conformity and sanctioning nonconformity. Tensions arise when marginalised groups are held to the same standards without equal access to legitimate means. As Cohen (1955, p. 55) noted, this inequality drives them to form delinquent subcultures to reclaim self-worth and resist an unjust system through alternative values.

Sykes and Matza (1957, pp. 664–666) rejected Cohen's view, arguing that deviants don't reject dominant values or create entirely separate ones. Instead, they often feel guilt or shame, reflecting ongoing moral ties to social norms. Rather than abandoning these values, they use situational justifications to excuse rule-breaking, allowing them to maintain a sense of legitimacy within a society that expects conformity. In other words, society upholds a dominant value system, and deviations from it are seen as non-conformity. However, deviant behaviour often doesn't stem from a belief in its moral correctness, but from temporary justifications used to ease guilt or resist norms perceived as unfair. This shows that dominant norms aren't absolute—they reflect power dynamics and often exclude the lived experiences of subordinate groups. As a result, these norms are flexibly negotiated, especially by those whose realities aren't represented. Ultimately, morality is shaped and enforced by dominant groups to serve their own interests, not collective needs.

Through the lens of hegemonic masculinity, NTT reveals how moral negotiation in hegemonic societies often reinforces the interests of the powerful rather than reflecting an inclusive moral consensus—particularly for marginalised communities. The dominant value system, often framed as universal, claims moral authority (Rubin, 1984, cited in Messerschmidt, 1997, p. 10), while moralities rooted in oppression or grassroots awareness are sidelined. These alternative moral frameworks operate outside dominant structures, which prioritise preserving power over achieving justice. As a result, morality is reduced to conformity with institutionalised ideals of dominant masculinity and acts of resistance—however principled—are often dismissed as unethical simply for defying the status quo.

Sykes and Matza (1957, p. 669) recognised that moral disengagement can occur across all social groups. However, those in dominant positions have greater power to define morality and legitimise their actions through official narratives that shape public perception (Connell, 2005, p. 82). In contrast, minority groups lack control over these narratives and are often denied moral legitimacy, criminalised, or stigmatised—even when using similar justifications. Their disengagement often reflects efforts to survive or resist the structural hegemonies that govern moral order (Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 196). This imbalance reveals a moral hierarchy where dominant group values are legitimised, while those of subordinate groups are dismissed as deviant or dangerous.

According to Messerschmidt (1997, pp. 7, 17), moral hierarchies are shaped by value systems that prioritise capital, hegemonic masculinity, and racial dominance over universal social needs. Through dominant narratives and symbolic language, practices like exploitation, inequality, and selective recognition are framed as neutral or beneficial aligned with free markets, masculine competition, or globalisation. This framing often rationalises the harm caused by systemic corruption as either inevitable or as personal failure to meet dominant standards of success or justice.

According to critical scholars (Box, 1983; Cohen, 2001; Pemberton, 2004; Hillyard, Pantazis, Tombs, and Gordon, 2004), criminology has played a significant role—whether knowingly or not—in shaping hegemonic social logic by providing a framework that prioritises intent or malice as the key criterion in defining corruption. Meanwhile, indifference, negligence, or moral carelessness are often treated as lesser offences.

By endorsing such a narrow definition of corruption, criminology has, perhaps unintentionally, helped legitimise the workings of the criminal justice system (CJS) in hegemonic societies. Corruption involving marginalised populations is frequently met with harsher punitive responses by the CJS, in contrast to the leniency—or implicit justification—granted to systemic corruption by dominant elites. Often, dominant actors conceal the harmful intent behind policies that enable corruption by invoking ignorance, administrative oversight, unawareness, or unintended consequences—especially in relation to the suffering of those systematically excluded from political, economic, and social decision-making processes (please see Chapter 2).

Seen this way, dominant groups use neutralisation techniques not only to silence alternative moralities but also to shape public perception in favour of hegemonic masculine ideals like power, success, and control. In this context, elite abuses of power—despite harming minorities—are no longer perceived as corruption, but rather as legitimate attempts to maintain authority, so long as they can secure public justification.

In contrast, subordinate groups often turn to neutralisation techniques not simply for self-justification, but as a survival strategy within a moral order monopolised by dominant interests. As a moral survival tool, neutralisation helps resist moral silencing, ease guilt over breaching dominant norms that ignore their suffering, and expose harms masked as humanitarianism but serving the status quo. It implies that how people justify or deny their actions isn't neutral at all—it is deeply shaped by how the hegemonic social system defines right and wrong in line with dominant interests.

This view aligns with Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, pp. 832, 842), who argue that hegemonic morality arises when individuals delegate moral authority to dominant social structures—often through uncritical acceptance of prevailing norms. In such cases, morality is shaped by those with political and economic power, rather than by personal conscience or reason. Hegemonic masculinity is then framed as moral virtue, while non-hegemonic masculinities—often grounded in empathy and ethical awareness—are seen as deviant or immoral.

In hegemonic systems, however, this social morality is often co-opted by dominant groups and turned into an ideological tool to justify exploitative practices (Messerschmidt, 1997, p. 69; Segal, 1990; Faith, 1993; Fraiman, 1994; Pemberton, 2015). This hegemonic moral order denies individuals recognition as autonomous, instead reducing them to instruments within a power structure that serves dominant interests. Responsibility is shifted away from the powerful and imposed on the vulnerable. As a result, these power-driven relations not only weaken ethical responsibility but also erode empathy and sensitivity to human suffering (Messerschmidt, 1997, p. 98; Acker, 1992).

As a result, individuals come to view hegemonic standards as natural and morally valid, seeing conformity as a moral duty. This drives the pursuit of social recognition through hegemonic masculinity, which frames others as threats rather than equals (Messerschmidt, 1997, p. 29). Within this logic, ethical concern is devalued as an obstacle to success, and guilt for harming others is suppressed, as such actions are rationalised as legitimate rule-following.

Those who fail to conform are seen not as victims of systemic corruption but as morally deficient, blamed for their own failures rather than the structures that shape them (Coleman et al., 2009; Messerschmidt, 2018; Schippers, 2007). In this context of moral indifference and individual blame, rationalisation serves as a defence—allowing dominant groups to justify power abuse while pressuring victims to internalise or disengage from imposed norms (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 666).

Cohen (2001) critiques Sykes and Matza for failing to consider how power relations shape not only dominant values but also the ideologies that legitimise them. This critique challenges NTT's underlying assumption that such techniques are universal, ideologically neutral, and equally accessible across social group (Whyte, 2016, p. 168; Schoultz and Flyghed, 2019, p. 741). This narrow focus reduces NTT to individual-level justifications, often applied primarily to lower-class deviance. However, powerful actors and institutions also engage in rationalisation—often in more systemic, structured ways enabled by their institutional authority.

As a result, NTT fails to fully address how social structures—such as class, gender, masculinity, and ethnicity—shape who holds the legitimacy, access, or power to use certain justifications (Braithwaite, 1989; Maruna and Copes, 2005; Brooks, 2016). It overlooks the uneven internalisation of dominant norms and the unequal distribution of neutralisation strategies across social groups. More deeply, it treats dominant norms as fixed and universal, dismissing alternative moralities rooted in the lived experiences of marginalised groups. It denies space for moral resistance and reinforces a system where dominant groups define legitimacy while subordinate voices are excluded—often invisibly and without question.

NTT's passive acceptance of majority morality assumes universal internalisation and merely temporary suspension of dominant values, oversimplifying moral complexity and ignoring how social relations that enable structural corruption shape moral norm production (Cohen, 1993, p. 107). In this context, this thesis seeks to expand NTT—making it more context-sensitive and attuned to power dynamics and the diverse moral experiences that inform rationalisation strategies.

In the context of hegemonic practices like state crimes and human rights violations, Cohen (2001) shows that the perpetrators are often powerful elites, not marginal individuals. These actors don't just suspend moral norms—they strategically invoke values like nationalism or economic growth to justify and deny systemic abuses (Cohen, 2001, pp. 17, 59, 64, 98, 137). Here, neutralisation functions not as a personal defence but as an ideological tool used by dominant groups to maintain legitimacy and control. This reinforces the view that neutralisation must be understood as part of broader hegemonic and masculine power structures, not merely as individual moral reasoning.

Recent studies on corruption increasingly frame neutralisation techniques not just as personal psychological processes but as ideological tools of power (Cohen, 2001; Green and Ward, 2004; Schoultz and Flyghed, 2016, 2020; Amagnya, 2025). Beyond the five classic techniques, collective corruption within hegemonic systems is justified through a broader range of strategies—such as denial of deviance, harm, knowledge, legality, intent, or control; scapegoating; moral indifference; diffusion of responsibility; and metaphors like the ledger of good deeds (Ashforth and Anand, 2003; Whyte, 2016).

However, neutralisation is still too often understood narrowly—as a fixed set of techniques—rather than as part of a broader, fluid power dynamic shaped by shifting hegemonies and public responses. In practice, moral justifications evolve based on who holds power and how society reacts—through acceptance, silence, or resistance. As a result, corruption is still treated as a static, universal moral failure by “bad actors,” rather than as a product of institutionalised power relations. Social research often responds by expanding the list of neutralisation techniques, without questioning the contested nature of corruption itself—a moral and political battleground shaped by competing definitions of legitimacy.

Without deconstructing the definition of corruption, the growing list of justifications is often dismissed as cultural relativism or scepticism toward universal moral claims. This framing reinforces dominant global narratives that present corruption as a violation of “universal morality,” reducing it to personal moral failure rather than a product of systems that enforce such moral consensus. In response, critical scholars urge the need for an approach that avoids both blind rejection of universalism and extreme relativism, grounded instead in real human needs and social justice (Cohen, 1993, p. 111; Gill, 2003, p. 10; Pemberton, 2015, p. 32).

While previous research has shown the relevance of neutralisation in exposing corruption as systemic (Brooks, 2016, p. 116), many studies still rely on formal definitions shaped by dominant groups. These definitions reflect the interests of power rather than ethical realities. Harm against state or elite interests is quickly criminalised, while the suffering of ordinary people under systemic corruption is often ignored and excluded from legal or moral concern.

By erasing the harm experienced by subordinate groups from the official moral radar, neutralisation techniques do more than justify systemic corruption—they serve as tools for hegemonic actors to construct moral justifications that allow them to bypass universal anti-corruption norms without experiencing guilt. In this sense, neutralisation does not eliminate moral rules—it simply delays their application, allowing actors to momentarily suspend their obligation to those norms. In this way, dominant norms—such as laws against abuse of power—are still recognised as legitimate, but are deemed inapplicable under “special” circumstances that serve the interests of those in power.

In contrast, this study shifts focus to how dominant groups shape official moral standards through the state and its apparatus. It argues that corruption should include harm to subordinated social groups, not just losses to the state or elite interests. The lived experiences and testimonies of those affected offer an objective basis for identifying how hegemonic systems construct legitimacy around corruption—without falling into moral relativism (Doyal and Gough, 1991, p. 2; Messerschmidt, 1997, p. 37) (for further discussion, see Chapter 4).

This study draws on Gresham Sykes and David Matza’s (1957) NTT to examine how Indonesia’s hegemonic police institution rationalises or normalises both overt and covert systemic corruption (Research Question 3). Beyond explaining individual justifications, NTT is used here to reveal the ideological mechanisms within the police power structure. These mechanisms not only suppress guilt but also construct a false consensus that masks corruption and may reframe it as necessary or even virtuous.

The study argues that the Indonesian police, as a hegemonic institution, reproduces a moral hierarchy that elevates elite interests as the highest moral truth. Within the command structure, corruption that serves institutional or regime goals is moralised, while lower-level acts are individualised and condemned—enabling the deflection of systemic responsibility. Neutralisation techniques operate upward to legitimise elite abuses as serving a ‘greater good’, and downward to frame lower-level corruption as personal moral failure.

As a downstream effect, the broader public—especially the working class and marginalised groups—is excluded from the police’s moral universe, which prioritises loyalty to dominant actors over public accountability. The police act as moral gatekeepers, adjusting standards to shield elites while disciplining subordinated groups. Harm against these groups is rarely seen as morally relevant and often reframed as deserved. Neutralisation techniques thus function as ideological tools that uphold elite dominance and institutional privilege.

What becomes clear is that how the police neutralise corruption depends on their position within shifting power relations. Justifications directed at subordinates often reinforce authority, while those aimed at superiors tend to protect the self or preserve hierarchical loyalty. This study shows that collective rationalisations within the police force are not fixed, but flexible and adaptive shaped by everyday power dynamics and negotiations

3.6. Conclusion

Chapter Three aims to build a theoretical framework for understanding how hegemonic social structures systemically facilitate public consent towards corrupt practices. By integrating macro, meso, and micro-level theories, it argues that police corruption is not an anomaly, but a product of systemic power relations that idealise authority-laden moral values.

In the first section, hegemonic masculinity theory situates the police within a broader capitalist, patriarchal, and racially dominant structure. In Indonesia, this masculine ethos reinforces power relations that institutionalise and legitimise corrupt practices among police personnel. Differential association theory further shows that the police act as an “ideological school,” where dominant norms—like hierarchy, authority, and loyalty to state interests—are socialised. As a result, corrupt practices aligned with dominant interests are normalised, even when they harm marginalised communities.

The middle section applies GST to bridge macro and micro dynamics. By viewing hegemonic social structures as sources of systemic strain, GST explains police corruption in Indonesia as a collective response to institutional and social pressures—not just individual stress. The hegemonic system pushes the police to prioritise institutional over public interests, leading to corruption as a coping mechanism. Lower-ranking officers, exposed to negative stimuli and denied positive ones, often engage in corrupt acts—particularly against marginalised groups—as a response to structural strain.

The final section of this chapter focuses on neutralisation techniques theory, which explains how police officers manage the moral dilemmas of corruption by using justifications that suppress guilt. These rationalisations are not individually invented but are embedded in the formal and informal language institutionalised by the hegemonic police system. Through the internalisation of official ideology, the force constructs a moral hierarchy that prioritises institutional and state interests over public needs. Officers—especially new recruits—are taught to adopt pre-approved narratives and align their actions with official discourse, even when those actions are corrupt. Chapter Four details the methodological framework used to explore how these dynamics play out in practice.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

Chapter Three presents a methodology for uncovering systemic corruption within the Indonesian National Police (INP). It shifts focus from individual misconduct to the collective dynamics and institutional structures that sustain corruption. It centres on the experiences of subordinate actors, highlighting how corruption is embedded and reproduced through hegemonic systems.

The chapter opens with the ontological foundation of Critical Realism, enabling a layered analysis of the dialectical interplay between agency and institutional constraint. This perspective reveals corruption not as an anomaly, but as a symptom of deeper structural mechanisms.

This section outlines the study's critical qualitative case study design, which integrates semi-structured interviews and document analysis, supported by triangulation to ensure validity. It introduces the analytical framework—combining thematic analysis with retroduction—to explore how police officers experience, rationalise, and navigate corruption, and how these practices are shaped by structural pressures and hegemonic ideologies.

The chapter concludes by reflecting on the ethical challenges linked to the researcher's insider status, reliance on gatekeepers, and participation dynamics within the INP. It highlights associated risks and underscores the reflexive strategies employed to navigate them.

4.2. Critical Realism Philosophy

This study adopts critical realism as its philosophical foundation because it exposes hidden structures—like systemic corruption in the INP—and treats social science as a medium for reflexivity, emancipation and change (Bhaskar, 1976, Giddens, 1987; Fay, 1987). Rather than claiming neutrality—which often protects hegemonic power—critical realism calls for a committed, justice-oriented approach that challenges dominant narratives and reveals the structural roots of inequality and marginalisation (Bhaskar, 1976, pp. 7–8).

This study moves beyond description to critically uncover the systemic structures that enable police corruption. It argues that corruption is not merely individual misconduct but a product of hegemonic power relations, demonstrating that such behaviour—rather than occurring in a vacuum—is shaped by, and recursively shapes, the stabilisation of those very structures in which the individual is situated (Giddens, 1987, p. 11).

Guided by critical social theory, the research aligns with vulnerable groups—especially those harmed by elite police actors backed by a national hegemonic regime—and calls for systemic change. It seeks not just to trace corruption’s roots but to challenge the structures sustaining it. In line with Bhaskar (1979, p. viii, 13; 2009, p. 15, 81) and Giddens (1987, p. 27), the study contends that social problems such as corruption should not be reduced to individual failings—behind every act is a structure that enables it. The role of social science, then, is to reveal these hidden systems while recognising that knowledge is constantly evolving.

In this context, the study connects Bhaskar's philosophy with Fay's (1987, pp. 20, 28, 29) emphasis on social science as a tool for enlightenment (realising the normalisation of harm), empowerment (enabling change), and emancipation (imagining and pursuing a fairer, more humane and equal society). While exposing the structures that sustain police corruption, the study also recognises its own embeddedness within those very systems. As a male insider, the researcher's positionality—shaped by personal experience and social ties—holds the potential to either reinforce or challenge existing power relations (see Subsection 4.6).

It makes critical reflexivity essential—the analytical core of the research. Reflexivity allows the study to move beyond surface-level descriptions (empirical) to uncover repeated patterns (actual) and the deeper structural mechanisms beneath them (real). It also aligns with Giddens (1986, p. 281) and Archer (2007, p. 15) who argue that knowledgeable human agents—including researchers—enter into social structures with their own intentions and values, engaging in internal dialogue to weigh norms and act within the constraints and possibilities offered by those structures.

Adopting this reflective approach, the research resonates with Fay's (1987, pp. 66, 74) view that social science must move beyond detached inquiry and take a normative stance: to defend the oppressed and confront those who misuse power. This reflexivity influences the entire research process—from data collection to interpretation and presentation—ensuring the study does not simply reproduce dominant narratives but instead exposes the hidden structures that sustain corruption and amplifies marginalised voices. The methodology, therefore, is not neutral—it intentionally sides with those harmed by systemic police corruption.

Grounded in critical realism, this study argues that hegemonic power shapes knowledge production on corruption—especially in criminology—as Bhaskar (1979, p. 77) notes, dominant power hinges on controlling understandings of social reality. Conventional criminology often legitimises hegemonic actors like the police, rather than exposing their structural abuses. Due to its historical and political alignment with the state and law enforcement, criminology has tended to frame corruption in narrow, individualistic terms—obscuring the broader structural forces at play.

In line with Zotzmann’s critique (2025, p. 31), much criminological research reduces corruption to individual deviance or “corrupt cultures,” obscuring its political, institutional, and structural dimensions. This framing, as Archer (2007, p. 6) argues, diminishes human agency by treating individuals as passive products of culture, ignoring their critical and resistant capacities. Dominant groups shape both public and academic discourse, restricting alternative explanations and portraying systemic corruption as a problem of cultural inferiority or personal morality—while deflecting attention from structural forces that produce impunity and abuse.

As Tombs and Whyte (2003, pp. 29–39) show, this narrowing is deliberate. By defining corruption through state-centric lenses, research is steered toward individual misconduct and away from structural critique. Efforts to examine broader abuses—like politicised budgeting, discriminatory policing, or clientelist public services—are often delegitimised as unacademic. Critical corruption research faces systemic barriers, including lack of funding, restricted data access, legal threats, and exclusion from mainstream journals.

Foucault (1982, pp. 781, 791) argues that truth is never neutral; in any regime of truth, those in power define the boundaries of right and wrong. Knowledge often serves to justify authority, while criticism is dismissed as deviance rather than liberation. Power operates not only through coercion but also through internalised dominant ideologies. From this view, definitions of corruption reflect prevailing norms rather than objective facts, serving to uphold established power. Social researchers are not detached from systems of power and discourse; instead, they are situated within them, which limits their ability to interpret corruption with full objectivity.

At this point, the study draws on Foucault, who urges critical social science to move beyond the epistemological and methodological limits imposed by dominant structures and to create space for marginalised knowledges. These alternative perspectives help reveal how power shapes what is known and constrains interpretation. Foucault (1982, pp. 780, 792) argues that critical inquiry should begin not with dominant theories of power, but with the everyday acts of resistance by subordinated groups. These voices of resistance provide a grounded entry point to expose and dismantle domination, enabling more ethical, reflective, and transformative analysis rooted in lived experience over official narratives.

Given the unequal power dynamics shaping knowledge, research on systemic corruption cannot be neutral. It is subject to structural and epistemic pressures that shape how corruption is defined and studied (Zotzmann, 2025, pp. 55–56). Dominant discourses, driven by institutions like Transparency International and the World Bank, often prioritise legalistic, rationalist, and quantitative approaches (Heidenheimer et al., 1993, pp. 32, 213), marginalising alternative, context-specific understandings.

In studying systemic corruption in the INP, knowledge production reveals a tension between legal-formalist narratives and informal realities. While critical media frame police corruption as institutional failure (Davies et al., 2016), dominant cultural narratives often portray it as part of national identity—functional, understandable, or even positive (Pertiwi, 2022). This cultural hegemonisation obscures internal power dynamics and discourages structural critique. Powerful actors shape and incentivise research ecosystems that favour narratives aligned with their interests, while sidelining inquiries into patronage networks or institutional enablers of corruption.

Critiquing local norms is often stigmatised as Western-centric, culturally insensitive, or harmful to social harmony, complicating trust-building with informants (Tombs and Whyte, 2003, p. 144). It leads to researcher self-censorship, while informants stay silent out of fear or loyalty, reinforcing dominant narratives. (Whyte, 2008; Buttle et al., 2015, p. 450). Ironically, researchers highlighting local corruption narratives are often dismissed as unscientific for defying dominant Western epistemologies (Maggio, 2023, p. 1). Pressure to adopt legalistic definitions obscures local meanings, framing context-sensitive research as relativist. As a result, research that exposes power relations or challenges dominant frameworks is often marginalised—lacking government backing, journal acceptance, and global funding.

Despite appearing to be in conflict—the permissive local narrative and the rigid global legalistic one—these two converge in sidelining critical-structural approaches. Both suppress efforts to reveal police corruption as a manifestation of structured power relations: class hierarchies, state-driven masculinity, dominant political actors, and the lingering traces of racial colonialism that still shape institutional behaviour.

According to Tombs and Whyte (2003, pp. 17, 32, 161), epistemological dominance reveals how knowledge has been commodified—produced, sold, and controlled by hegemonic actors. Within this market logic, only knowledge that can be quantified, standardised, or commercialized is deemed legitimate. In contrast, critical research that challenges powerful institutions is dismissed as politically risky or incompatible with global metrics. Knowledge thus becomes ideologically shaped to serve political-economic interests, pressuring researchers to produce "safe", technocratic, and marketable outputs to gain legitimacy, funding, or publication.

The power-knowledge nexus stems not from individual failings but from a hegemonic system that rewards conformity over critique (Bhaskar, 2009, p. 308). Academic incentives—status, security, and influence—often align scholars with power. Bauman (1987, p. 9, 21, 127) thus urges critical social researchers to avoid making claims to universal truth. Instead, they must act as interpreters who amplify the experiences of groups silenced by dominant discourse.

4.3. The Implications for Critical Methodology

As discussed earlier, the epistemology of critical realism holds that social reality has deep underlying structures that can only be understood by uncovering hidden causal mechanisms. From this perspective, knowledge production is never value-free—it is always shaped by power relations that determine what counts as "truth." Methodologically, this means research must go beyond technical procedures and adopt a politically conscious stance—using methods that expose, critique, and challenge the power structures underpinning the social phenomena under study.

Lee Harvey's (1990, p. 2, 20) critical methodology is highly relevant to this study, as it views knowledge production as a contested arena shaped by competing social interests. Rather than treating knowledge as neutral, it is positioned as a tool to critically interrogate dominant social realities. By integrating theory, method, and epistemology, this approach aims to expose and resist oppressive structures embedded in everyday life—such as patriarchy, capitalism, and racism.

In line with this perspective, the study adopts a critical methodology to uncover the complex power dynamics behind systemic corruption within the INP. In doing so, it draws on Harvey's (1990, p. 16) argument—developed through the works of Bauman (1976) and Habermas (1970)—that such methodology must rest on an emancipatory moral foundation, grounded not in liberal-positivist ethics, but rather in the lived experiences of oppressed groups. As Harvey argues, surface-level empiricism often naturalises structural oppression and reinforces the political status quo. Critical research must therefore reflexively expose hidden conditions that drive corruption, work to transform them, and support the liberation of those affected (Harvey, 1990, pp. 72–74; 123–125; 219).

For Harvey (1990, p. 161), this normative foundation is essential for critically evaluating which social structures reinforce domination and which enable genuine emancipation. Practices of subordination, then, are not merely the result of individual moral failings, but manifestations of historically entrenched and systemically institutionalised structures that suppress and impose dependency on the powerless to preserve hegemonic power.

With a clear normative framework, this study can define whether the INP permissively normalises corrupt practices for hegemonic interests or whether it aligns with the interests of subordinated social groups. Only through this approach can the analysis avoid falling into relativism, which would otherwise serve to perpetuate the status quo. Ultimately, this study also offers victims of systemic corruption a fairer understanding of how the police institution has been instrumentalised as a tool of power to create and maintain a hierarchical, hegemonic, and exploitative social order—for the benefit of dominant groups, at the expense of the less powerful.

More importantly, by presenting an alternative perspective from the victims of systemic corruption, Harvey (1990, pp. 26–29) explicitly demonstrates how critical methodology operates: not merely reconstructing history descriptively, but offering a sharper and more political reading of it—that is, by revealing how or why dominant groups within hegemonic institutions like the police create, legitimise, normalise, inherit, and conceal corrupt or rent-seeking practices to ensure the institution continues to serve dominant interests.

According to Harvey, history is not simply a collection of neutral facts, but an interpretative process always influenced by a given period's prevailing social, political, and ideological interests. Therefore, for critical social research, historical analysis does not stop at reconstructing “what happened”, but also traces how systems and patterns are formed and reproduced—ones that continuously enable certain groups to hold power while others remain in subordinate positions, even to the point where such inequality is seen as normal.

In this context, corruption should not be viewed merely as isolated acts by individuals, but as embedded in the historical fabric of the INP, where dominant groups have long employed corrupt practices as a hegemonic mechanism that persists over time. This logical framework enables the study to critically reinterpret these normalised practices by centring the lived experiences from police personnel—particularly lower-ranking actors—as the social group most affected by a corrupt system.

The study itself aims explicitly to identify and map themes of domination in order to understand why systemic police corruption continues to persist, despite facing critical discourses from non-hegemonic communities—such as demands for justice, equality, transparency, accountability, the protection of fundamental rights, and institutional reform of the police—which implicitly reflect a contestation against the normalisation of corrupt practices, even though such contestation rarely emerges as direct resistance from within the police institution itself (Kristiansen and Trijono, 2005; Salam, 2025; Harun, 2026).

Within this framework, the study moves beyond the official narrative that reduces corruption to individual misconduct. Instead, it draws on the voices of police personnel as counter-narratives to reveal how power is systematically abused to benefit dominant actors through exploitative, dehumanising, and alienating relations. The lived experiences of affected communities are not merely empirical data, but reflections of how hegemonic structures operate in everyday life. These experiences serve as entry points for tracing the historical reproduction of systemic corruption as part of a broader structural order.

Put simply, critical methodology is not only aimed at identifying hegemonic social structures but also at confronting the epistemological barriers they create (Harvey, 1990, p. 32). These barriers may appear as claims of objectivity in dominant knowledge—often ideologically driven—or remain embedded in academic discourse that reduces corruption to individual legal offences, ignoring its structural roots. The next section outlines the research design used to operationalise this critical approach in examining systemic corruption in a more comprehensive and transformative way.

4.3.1 Qualitative Research Design

As discussed earlier, critical methodology goes beyond description—it demands reflexivity and a direct challenge to power structures to expose hegemonic forces within society. Grounded in this framework, this study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the experiences, meanings, and power dynamics that underpin systemic corruption in the INP. This choice is not merely technical but stems from the approach's strength in enabling contextual analysis, direct engagement, and the amplification of voices often silenced by positivist traditions.

Silverman (2017, p. 176) reminds us that social research requires political sensitivity, as it is always entangled with power and interests. Qualitative design enables this sensitivity—encouraging critical interrogation of dominant discourses, inclusion of marginalised voices, and continuous reflection on the researcher's positionality and values.

As Saunders (2023, p. 185) notes, qualitative design enables researchers to uncover power dynamics by interpreting meaning from participants' perspectives within their natural contexts. Its flexibility and iterative nature are not methodological weaknesses, but necessary responses to structural challenges such as limited access, ambiguous meanings, and the complexity of non-numeric data. This adaptability allows the research to grasp social complexity without oversimplification, while maintaining a reflective and critical trajectory.

Lewis and McNaughton Nicholls (2014, pp. 51–52) describe this flexibility as a dynamic interplay between theory, data, and process. Rather than imposing a fixed framework, theory serves as a provisional guide that evolves with the inquiry. As the research progresses, focus may shift, concepts may be refined, and theoretical assumptions revised based on empirical insights. This prevents rigid adherence to grand theories and fosters a more grounded, responsive, and critically engaged approach to theory-building.

In complex, sensitive, and power-laden settings—such as systemic corruption in the INP—a qualitative approach is especially relevant (Ritchie and Ormston, 2014, pp. 37–38). Corruption cannot be captured by statistics alone; but through lived experiences and everyday practices. This flexible design allows the research focus to evolve with field findings, especially when investigating informal, ambiguous, and hidden dynamics. Here, the initial theoretical framework serves as an open guide rather than a fixed structure.

As this study examines institutional complexities, the qualitative design enables a shift in focus and theoretical refinement—moving beyond individual misconduct to critically interrogate the power structures that normalise collective abuse of power as an institutional ideal. It also facilitates a deep, reflective, and empathetic exploration of hidden dimensions by fostering trust and open dialogue. Through rapport-building, the researcher can access silenced police narratives, which are crucial for a nuanced understanding of how systemic corruption is socially normalised. These insights provide empirical ground to deconstruct narrow narratives of corruption and reconceptualise it as a systemic, structural phenomenon.

4.3.2 Case Study Approach

The study employs a critical case study approach as its primary strategy to unpack the layered complexity and evolving power dynamics of systemic corruption within the INP. This approach is chosen for its ability to expose the latent power relations operating through overlapping formal and informal mechanisms. As Yin (2018, p. 14) notes, a case study is an empirical method that enables the exploration of phenomena within their real-life contexts, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are blurred. Within this framework, the case study is not merely a data collection technique, but a comprehensive strategy encompassing research design, analytical methods, and integrative research logic.

Corruption never exists in isolation. Within the INP, it is socially constructed—embedded in informal interactions shaped by hierarchy, loyalty, and hegemonic masculinity—rarely captured in official records. Its meaning and legitimisation must be understood from within the system, not judged from outside. A critical case study approach is therefore essential to grasp its complexity, beyond the reach of quantitative methods or conventional surveys. Following Swanborn (2010), case studies operate at micro, meso, and macro levels. This study analyses the INP systemically across these levels, aiming not just to describe events but to interrogate them critically.

Referring to Lee Harvey (1990, p. 202), the critical case study approach is utilised to frame the case of corruption within the INP as a paradigmatic case—strategically chosen to expose structural contradictions and deconstruct institutional myths. This case was not selected at random, but for its revelatory potential in demonstrating how hegemonic power relations reproduce corruption as part of institutional routine.

This approach is implemented through a single-case holistic design, focusing on one institution as an integrated unit of analysis, without dividing it into separate sub-units (Yin, 2018, pp. 51–53). While various divisions and internal structures of the INP are employed to enrich the data, they are analysed in an integrated manner, rather than as independent analytical entities. A notable risk of this approach is the potential for abstraction to become excessive, which may result in slippage—an inadvertent shift in focus.

To mitigate this, the study maintains alignment among the theoretical framework, the unit of analysis, and the empirical data to preserve coherence. As Ormston et al. (2014, p. 22) recommended, theory is employed from the outset as a flexible framework to frame the case and formulate exploratory questions, rather than as a rigid structure that limits findings. It serves as a conceptual guide during the data collection process and as a reflective tool in the final analysis stage, helping to contextualise the results without imposing theoretical justification.

Although this study focuses on a single case, analytic generalisation remains possible. According to Lewis et al. (2014, pp. 349, 353), findings from a single case study can enrich conceptual understanding of the dynamics of corruption within complex organisations. In the context of critical studies, generalisation is not only theoretical but also aims to open up space for contesting dominant narratives. Gobo (2007), as cited in Silverman (2017, p. 268), asserts that such generalisation is essential for fostering critical awareness and promoting social change in similar contexts.

Moreover, the INP was selected not only because of its formal role as a state bureaucracy, but also due to its position as a dominant regulatory body that symbolises the authority of the state. On the one hand, the INP holds extensive authority to enforce the law, maintain social order, and serve the public; on the other hand, it functions as a vehicle for hegemonic politico-economic interests—upholding laws that favour dominant groups and preserving regime security at the expense of the grassroots (Siregar, 2025).

The contradiction between its normative role and actual practice is stark: an institution tasked with protecting the public from elite corruption instead becomes complicit—shielding corrupt elites, enabling the exploitation of marginalised communities, and at times becoming part of the systemic corruption itself (Aspinall and van Klinken, 2011, pp. 2, 23). As such, it constitutes a critical case—an ideal site for examining how hegemonic power relations produce and normalise corruption.

Referring to Smith (1974) and Harding (1991), as cited in Denzin and Lincoln (2018, p. 102), meaningful objectivity does not stem from false claims of neutrality, but from critical awareness of how values shape power relations—particularly along lines of gender, race, and class. In this view, reflexivity strengthens rather than weakens objectivity, by enhancing the researcher’s awareness of how their positionality influences interpretation, and how hegemonic forces frame power practices—such as systemic corruption—as normalised and socially acceptable.

To examine how systemic corruption operates in a cross-functional, complex, and dynamic manner within the INP structure, this research gathers data from various structural elements covering administrative and operational functions. Each division or department possesses unique functions, mandates, and networks of power relations, all of which contribute to diverse experiences, structural pressures, and mechanisms for rationalising corrupt practices. The analysis treats this diversity not as separate sub-units but as interconnected elements within a unified institutional system.

By examining these elements together, the study critically directs its analytical focus to the role of power structures governing all units within the INP in producing and normalising structural inequality and injustice—where practices benefiting those in power through subordinate compliance are no longer seen as corrupt, but normalised as routine functions essential to maintaining institutional order. It highlights the value of a critical case study in exposing corruption as a systemic logic, not isolated misconduct, reproduced across an interconnected institution.

4.3.3. Research Validity

In seeking to uncover the structural dimensions of corruption, this study recognises that its subject—the INP—holds the power to monopolise truth. As such, conventional standards of validity are problematic, given their role in reinforcing hegemonic structures. Under regime-controlled knowledge, alternative data and non-traditional verification become essential to counter power bias and support counter-narratives.

Here, validity is not just technical but an epistemological issue shaping the credibility of knowledge claims. Although validity originates from the natural sciences and quantitative traditions, Ritchie et al. (2014) assert that validity remains relevant in the qualitative domain, so long as it is interpreted within its specific context and not confined by strict measurement-based logic. In this context, validity is not only about questioning the truth of findings, but also about how far those findings hold social and intellectual significance.

Within the subtle realism framework (Hammersley, 1992), Seale (2018, p. 52) argues that qualitative validity relies on methodological transparency, coherence between data and generated concepts, interpretive plausibility, and critical reflection. Given that the power mechanisms driving corruption within the INP are latent—often not immediately visible on the surface—this study ensures validity through plausible explanations, retroductive analysis of underlying causes, and reflexive awareness of the researcher’s role in interpreting power. Credibility is further strengthened by transparent reporting of methods, procedures, and analytical logic guiding the research.

Altheide and Johnson (2011, pp. 581–585) emphasise that qualitative validity is inseparable from its social, political, and cultural contexts. It requires more than epistemological coherence—it demands awareness of dominant ideologies, the researcher’s positionality, and a commitment to amplifying marginalised voices. Without this, interpretations risk not only becoming speculative and lacking direction but also reinforcing existing power structures and social inequalities.

Furthermore, ethical interpretation calls for continuous reflection on the researcher’s relationship to context and meaning; without normative responsibility, it may slip into moral ambiguity by disregarding the social and ethical dimensions of meaning-making. As such, validity and normativity are interdependent: validity safeguards the rigour and social relevance of research, while normative commitment ensures ethical responsibility in producing knowledge attuned to power and diversity.

This principle is central to the study, as systemic corruption in the INP cannot be fully understood through formal data alone, but through the meanings and practices that sustain institutional power. Validity thus requires more than accuracy—it demands critical awareness and emancipatory aims: exposing hegemonic structures, affirming the most affected, and promoting social justice and equality. The critical paradigm supports this by rejecting value-free knowledge and viewing truth as morally and politically situated, aimed at challenging injustice and empowering marginalised groups (Kincheloe et al. 2018, pp. 419-421).

The study adopts critical and reflective realism, defining validity not through neutrality but through reflexivity about the researcher's position within institutional power relations. Epistemic and ethical integrity is then achieved by critically examining the researcher's own social position—including his affiliations, ideology, and interests—while recognising that his understanding of corruption is inevitably shaped by surrounding power dynamics.

Referring to Smith (1974) and Harding (1991), as cited in Denzin and Lincoln (2018, p. 102), meaningful objectivity arises not from false notions of neutrality, but from critical awareness of the values shaping power relations, including gender, race, and class dimensions. In this view, reflexivity does not diminish objectivity; rather, it enhances the validity of research findings by making researchers more aware of how their engagement with power structures shapes their data interpretations and how hegemonic powers incorporate practices of domination into their logic as socially tolerable.

Furthermore, Altheide and Johnson (2011, p. 590) stress that a combination of explication, comparison, and triangulation constitutes a key analytical strategy in qualitative research—not because it guarantees absolute truth, but because it makes the researcher's thinking process traceable, comprehensible, and trustworthy to the audience. In line with this, Hammersley (2023, pp. 109, 115) affirms that the credibility of qualitative findings depends not only on the application of practical reflexivity—the researcher's awareness of potential biases, assumptions, and reasoning patterns—but also on the strategic use of triangulation—comparing data from multiple sources in a reflective rather than mechanical manner.

Establishing validity in this research presents a significant challenge, given the police's powerful position and the risk of denial or evasion under structural pressure. As such, the study recognises that no single source of data can be taken at face value. Informants may obscure or strategically frame information; official documents often present a sanitised or normative “official story”; and media accounts may be shaped by political control.

To address this, the research employs triangulation—drawing on multiple sources and informants of different ranks and genders—to capture varied perspectives and experiences. Following Hammersley (2023, pp. 116–119), this approach helps detect bias, balance dominant and subordinate narratives, and enhance the credibility of findings on grassroots-level corruption. Details are outlined in the next subsection on data collection.

4.4. Data Collection

Starting from validity as an epistemic foundation, this section outlines how core values—integrity, reflexivity, and sensitivity to institutional context—are operationalised during data collection, especially within a setting shaped by power and hegemonic dynamics. Hammersley (2023, pp. 135–137) defines researcher integrity as an epistemic commitment to making reflective, reasonable judgements throughout the research process. It involves attentiveness, openness, and intellectual honesty in selecting methods, alongside ongoing reflexivity and critical assessment of methodological choices. Integrity is demonstrated not through technical perfection, but through the researcher's capacity to manage time constraints, fieldwork uncertainties, and ethical responsibilities while remaining epistemically grounded.

In this study, data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews and document review, with the geographical scope limited to Indonesia and fieldwork lasting approximately three months, from January to March 2024. The choice of these methods reflects a commitment to researcher integrity as discussed by Hammersley, since it demands technical rigour in engaging with participants, reflexivity in interpreting their experiences, and awareness that data is never neutral—it is always shaped within complex power relations.

Interviews were chosen as they allow space for more honest and reflective narratives, especially within the closed and hierarchical nature of police institutions. On the other hand, document review was employed not merely as a complement, but as a triangulation strategy to counterbalance potential biases, denials, or manipulation of information—common challenges in sensitive research.

The three-month duration was deemed sufficient for building trust with gatekeepers and participants, given the researcher's position as an internal researcher, which enabled initial familiarity and nurtured the development of social connections—while remaining realistic about resource constraints and uncertainties of field access (see section 4.6.2 on the researcher's positionality). In this way, data collection is not understood simply as a technical procedure, but as a reflective and adaptive process for navigating institutional pressures, minimising risks of bias, and ensuring that the knowledge produced remains epistemically valid and sensitive to power dynamics within the INP.

4.4.1. Semi-structured Interview

As an initial step in data collection, this study uses in-depth interviews to capture police officers' experiences with corruption. More importantly, it aims to uncover how hegemonic structures within the INP shape these actors' perceptions of power, and how such perceptions influence their tendency to normalise corruption—whether in positions of authority or subordination.

Yeo et al., (2014), as cited in Ritchie et al. (2014, pp. 178–179), explicitly state that in-depth interviews are a primary method in qualitative research, as they can produce layered and meaningful data that reflect an understanding of the social world from the informants' perspective. Interviews are not merely about collecting objective data, but rather about understanding meaning construction, personal experience, and the social world from the informants' point of view.

Silverman (2017, pp. 100–101) further emphasises that interviews must be critically understood as discursive practices laden with social constructions, always bound to context and never neutral, thereby opening space to explore how meaning is produced and negotiated, rather than simply viewed as a direct reflection of participants' experiences. This perspective is relevant to critical research, including this study, which aims to reveal how hegemonic structures within the police influence the ways in which personnel interpret and narrowly define corruption.

In line with this, Hammersley (2023, pp. 136–137) stresses the importance of flexibility and contextuality in interpreting qualitative data and rejects the notion that interviews can neutrally represent reality. For Hammersley, the meanings that arise from interviews are shaped through negotiation, selection, and interpretation—all of which are inevitably shaped by broader social structures, including the prevailing police power structure that also shapes how personnel perceive and define corruption.

Yeo et al. (2014, p. 181) assert that qualitative interviews are never free from power relations, whether explicit or implicit. These relations are dynamic and contextual, influenced by social class, gender, profession, role, rank, age, or even seniority, altogether shaping and potentially creating imbalances between the researcher and the participant. In a different context, Petintseva et al. (2020, pp. 17–21) show that interviews with powerful or elite participants may place the researcher in a subordinate position.

This elite dominance may occur before, during, and after the interview—through interventions in the questioning flow, defensive responses, avoidance of sensitive issues, control of the interactional style, and even the imposition of a ‘moral leadership’ position as a means of intimidation. They stress that interviews with the powerful fundamentally differ in dynamics from those conducted with the "powerless".

Conversely, Brinkmann (in Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, pp. 1016–1017) highlights the dominance of the researcher in controlling the topic, the direction of questioning, and interpretation, while still acknowledging the existence of counterpower from participants, such as avoidance or reluctance to answer. Regardless of the direction of power imbalance, all of these views emphasise that interviews do not take place in a vacuum. Therefore, methodological reflexivity is required so that researchers remain aware of their positionality, biases, and the power relations that shape the process and outcomes of interviews, which do not always represent the objective truth.

In practice, the interviews conducted in this research demonstrate that power relations are never passive; instead, they are actively present and influence every interaction. The researcher’s position as a mid-ranking officer placed them in a fluctuating relationship—holding seniority over participants with ranks from brigadier to junior officers, while remaining subordinate to both peers in higher mid-level positions, such as Adjunct Chief Commissioners and Chief Commissioners, and senior officials, ranging from one-star to four-star generals.

Hierarchical disparities shaped the interview dynamics—affecting the conversation flow, depth of disclosure, and participants' willingness to critique the institution. Lower-ranking participants often faced internal conflict, torn between openness and discomfort in refusing a higher-ranking interviewer, leading to cautious responses. Conversely, higher-ranking officers, despite their authority, also hesitated to decline questions, fearing their refusal might imply defensiveness or suggest involvement in corruption.

In both cases, rank prestige and the desire to maintain a positive self-image influenced how participants responded. Participants rarely identified their own actions as corrupt yet readily applied the label to similar behaviours by others. Clearly, rank determined how self-image was managed in front of the interviewer and within the institutional hierarchy.

Gender added another layer of complexity to the interviews, as the researcher, despite sharing the same professional background, was male. Interactions with female participants—regardless of whether they held higher or lower ranks—revealed that gender influenced communication patterns and how narratives were conveyed. Their minority status often made conversations more formal and cautious, even with those in senior roles.

With lower-ranking women, the intersection of gender and rank required heightened sensitivity to avoid reinforcing institutional hierarchies. These positional differences not only shaped how participants articulated their experiences but also influenced the researcher's interpretive process in understanding the responses that emerged during interviews.

This study employed semi-structured interviews to accommodate the diverse social positions of participants within the Indonesian police hierarchy. This format allowed sufficient flexibility for lower-ranking participants to express their experiences without the rigid pressure of a highly structured question-and-answer framework. At the same time, this approach enabled the researcher to navigate power dynamics in interviews with elite participants by posing situationally adapted follow-up questions.

The police interviews were conducted dialogically, with no fixed order of questions. The interview guide acted as a flexible framework, adapted to each participant's narrative and the relational context formed during the interaction. As Brinkmann (2022, p. 18) asserts, semi-structured interviews allow researchers to engage actively in meaning-making and follow the participant's lead, which can bring forward unexpected but meaningful issues.

In this process, abstract main research questions are operationalised into clear, open-ended interview questions that participants can easily understand. Academic literature, organisational documents, and insights from prior interviews inform this transformation. These sources help shape questions that encourage participants to share their lived experiences rather than provide normative responses. As Rubin and Rubin (2005, p. 154-155) note, using literature helps situate the study within ongoing academic debates, while organisational documents and observational data deepen the researcher's understanding of the context. This method ensures the researcher avoids relying solely on assumptions.

The use of semi-structured interviews proved particularly significant in interactions with lower-ranking participants. As emphasized by Petintseva et al. (2020, pp. 97, 123), this interview format provided a more flexible space for them to share personal experiences or discuss sensitive issues more openly, without feeling overly constrained by a formal, hierarchical question-and-answer structure. In many cases, lower-ranking participants appeared more comfortable when the researcher did not entirely control the flow of conversation but evolved as a responsive two-way dialogue.

In contrast, participants in positions of authority or seniority often steered the conversation and carefully framed their responses within institutional boundaries, especially when questions were perceived as challenging their integrity or leadership. In such cases, the semi-structured interview became more than a space for exchanging questions and answers—it served as a complex site of meaning negotiation (Jupp, 1989).

In such situations, Fielding (2008, pp. 250–251) highlights prompting and probing as key strategies for critically examining the power dynamics embedded in participants' accounts. These approaches allow the researcher to interrogate how institutional discourses shape or constrain participants' everyday interpretations. Prompting helps respondents expand on their answers in a manner that feels non-threatening, while probing enables the researcher to pursue greater depth by inviting clarification, elaboration, and further reflection.

In this study, prompting was consciously used to explore participants' moral tensions and to distance them from the formal, institutional language commonly used within the INP. Many officers, especially those in lower ranks, may be reluctant to criticise organisational hierarchies openly. They may also recognise that giving money to superiors or accepting money from subordinates is ethically questionable yet continue to engage in such practices due to structural pressures. Through careful and non-confrontational probing, the researcher shifted the focus from individual blame to systemic conditions. This redirection opened a narrative space that avoided direct accusation while still illuminating how dominant institutional logics operate through taken-for-granted assumptions rather than overt coercion.

Meanwhile, probing was used to examine contradictions in participants' accounts, such as questioning why their use of authority over subordinates or their compliance with superiors' orders was regarded as legitimate, while similar actions by others were readily defined as corruption. Such questions encouraged participants to reflect critically on their own positioning within hierarchical power relations. In doing so, the interview created space to expose the largely unspoken logics of domination embedded within the institutional habitus, demonstrating how organisational norms may sustain corrupt practices even without explicit instruction.

4.4.2. Research Participants and Recruitment

Building on the methodological discussion, this section outlines the recruitment strategy and participant profile. The selection was strategic, aiming to reflect hierarchical diversity within the police, expose power imbalances, and amplify marginalised voices excluded from official narratives.

The study employed snowball sampling, consistent with a critical social approach that seeks to reach hidden or hard-to-access actors—both those in dominant roles and those marginalised within institutional systems (Petintseva et al., 2020, pp. 63–64). Participant referrals enabled access to individuals reluctant to speak or situated in sensitive positions. Nevertheless, as Ritchie et al. (2014, pp. 126, 129) note, snowball sampling carries methodological and ethical risks, such as limited diversity due to participants from similar social circles, and potential bias from unequal power dynamics. They therefore recommend combining it with other sampling methods to avoid reinforcing social bias, broaden representation, and richer perspectives in the data.

Given access limitations and topic sensitivity, participants were selected for their institutional roles and contributions. Recruitment followed two paths: informally through the researcher's police network to identify individuals involved in or sanctioned for corruption-related misconduct, and formally via a gatekeeper who facilitated access to closed units. Through these referrals, the researcher could engage participants with direct experience of institutional corruption—whether as undetected actors, beneficiaries of structural protection, or witnesses to corrupt practices routinised in everyday work.

Nevertheless, this approach is not without methodological challenges rooted in power dynamics. Informal networks may introduce selection bias, while gatekeepers can influence access and narrative control. These technical recruitment issues reflect how the police's hierarchical structure shapes who is accessible and what narratives are allowed to emerge.

Ritchie et al. (2014, pp. 126, 258) argue that institutional control over research goes beyond formal approval, setting the limits of what can be observed, who can be interviewed, and where the researcher stands in the hierarchy. Similarly, Petintseva et al. (2020, pp. 83–85) note that gatekeepers not only determine legitimacy and access but may also jeopardise participant anonymity because of their awareness of participants' identities.

Gaining access to the INP proved far from straightforward despite the researcher's insider status. Access control was dispersed and multilayered, extending from central administration to local units. Formal approval from the central gatekeeper in the Human Resources Department was largely symbolic; in practice, access had to be renegotiated with individual unit heads, whose decisions were shaped by the sensitivity and reputation of their departments.

The approval letter legitimised access to revenue-generating ("wet") units, while "dry" units—those without income-generating roles—were more easily accessed. Initial resistance from the central gatekeeper—who expressed surprise that an internal study would address corruption—was eventually overridden by a scholarship endorsement from the "Central Government" and an official education directive from the "Chief of Police".

Although the gatekeeper initially sought to select participants, the researcher declined on ethical grounds and clarified that recruitment would follow criteria based on institutional roles and relevant experience, a rationale that was ultimately accepted. Field experiences with unit-level gatekeepers ranged from voluntary cooperation to complex approval procedures like those faced by civilians, delays imposed by senior officials, and, at times, outright rejection accompanied by threats directed at the researcher. In contrast, personnel in “dry” units were generally more open, even without formal authorisation, owing to minimal institutional pressure and limited scrutiny.

At the conclusion of fieldwork, the researcher returned to the central gatekeeper to present the findings. Rather than engaging with the research outcomes, the gatekeeper offered a cash “token of appreciation”, leaving its intent unstated. Although initially refused, the researcher eventually accepted it as it was framed within the symbolic norms of senior–junior relations in the police corps. This encounter is thus documented as an expression of often-invisible symbolic power, through which even routine administrative interactions are not entirely free from institutional hierarchy and power etiquette.

Following a complex recruitment process and multiple layers of negotiation with gatekeepers and informal networks, the research ultimately succeeded in recruiting 40 participants from the INP, particularly from public service, administrative, and operational units that are commonly perceived by the public as vulnerable to corrupt practices (Martini, 2012; Dick and Mulholland, 2016).

These participants, from a range of units, were not treated as separate analytical subunits but as integral parts of the police institution that forms the single case study focus of this research. This number is deemed sufficient, as noted by Saunders (2023, p. 315) and Schreier (2018, p. 90), who assert that qualitative research typically employs relatively small sample sizes—often only a dozen to a few dozen interviews—because the primary concern is not representativeness but the depth of insight and the attainment of saturation.

Table 1 summarises the distribution of participants by police unit, number, rank, and gender.

Table 1: Interview Participants

No	Department	Unit or Role	Sample Size	Rank	Gender
1	Special Crime Investigation (<i>Reskrimsus</i>)	Investigation of corruption cases	1	Brigadier	M
		Investigation of cybercrime cases	1	Adjunct Chief Commissioner	M
		Investigation of industry and trade cases	1	1st Inspector	F
		Investigation of environmental cases	1	2nd Inspector	F
		Investigation of financial and banking cases	1	Brigadier	M
2	General Crime Investigation (<i>Reskrim</i>)	Investigation of cases involving violence, theft, and property crimes.	1	1st Sub-Inspector	M
		Investigation of juvenile, child, and women's cases	1	Brigadier	F
3	Narcotics Crime Investigation (<i>Resnarkoba</i>)	Investigation of narcotics cases	1	1st Sub-Inspector	F
		Investigation of psychotropic cases	1	1st Inspector	M
		Narcotics intelligence	1	Brigadier	M
		Investigation supervision	1	Adjunct Chief Commissioner	M
4	Traffic Police (<i>Lalu Lintas</i>)	Vehicle registration services	1	1st Inspector	M
		Vehicle ownership services	1	Chief Brigadier	M
		Driving licence services	1	1st Sub-Inspector	M
		Road traffic law enforcement	1	Adjunct Commissioner	F

		Traffic safety education	1	Adjunct Commissioner	F
5	Human Resources (SDM)	Job rotation of personnel	1	Brigadier	M
		Personnel rank promotion	1	2nd Brigadier	M
		New personnel recruitment	1	Commissioner	F
		Selection and admission for personnel education	1	Adjunct Chief Commissioner	M
6	Internal Affairs (Propam)	Complaint handling	1	1st Inspector	M
		Personnel misconduct investigation	1	1st Inspector	F
		Professional ethical standards	1	Commissioner	M
		Discipline enforcement	1	1st Inspector	M
		Supervision	1	Chief Commissioner	M
7	Intelligence and Security (Intelkam)	Political and economic monitoring	1	Adjunct Commissioner	F
		Police Clearance Certificate Services	1	1st Inspector	F
8	Community Guidance (Binmas)	Private security guard licensing and training	1	1st Inspector	F
		Community Policing	1	Adjunct Commissioner	M
9	Patrol and Public Order (Sabhara)	Patrol and vital facilities protection	1	1st Sub-Inspector	M
10	Police operations (Ops)	Conduct of police operations	1	Commissioner	M
		Police Help Desk	1	1st Inspector	M
11	Planning and Budgeting (Rena)	Planning and budgeting of policing programmes	1	1st Inspector	M
12	Logistics (Logistik)	Procurement and distribution of personnel equipment and supplies	1	1st Sub-Inspector	M
13	Legal Affairs (Hukum)	Legal assistance, advocacy, and litigation support for personnel	1	Commissioner	M
14	General Inspectorate (Itwasum)	Supervision, inspection, and audit of personnel performance and financial accountability	1	1st Inspector	F
15	Public Relations (Humas)	Distribution of official information and press releases to the public	1	Adjunct Commissioner	M
16	General Affairs (Setum)	Managing general or non-operational administration	1	1st Sub-Inspector	F
17	Headquarters Services (Yanma)	Managing headquarters housekeeping, maintenance, utilities, and facilities	1	Adjunct Commissioner	M
			1	1st Sub-Inspector	M
Total number of police participants			40		

4.4.3. Document Review

Document analysis was conducted in parallel with in-depth interviews during fieldwork across various police units. While the interviews explored officers' experiences of institutional power dynamics, the documents served not only for triangulation but also for understanding the historical and socio-cultural conditions that shape and reproduce those power structures.

Referring to Bowen (2009), documents serve as valuable contextual data sources that capture value systems, institutional norms, and power structures shaping actors' mindsets and behaviours. Rather than merely recording formal policies, documents actively construct meaning and legitimacy around social phenomena.

In line with Prior (2003), they are seen as products of collective practice—reflecting negotiation, consensus, and institutional power—while also functioning as tools that shape, justify, and stabilise power relations. Through this lens, documents reveal how hegemonic structures legitimise interest-driven policies, normalise dysfunctional authority, and direct their consequences toward weaker groups for elite benefit.

This study draws on official and unofficial documents as arenas where competing understandings of “corruption” are constructed. State-produced materials articulate an authorised account that supports institutional legitimacy, whereas sources from civil society, media, grassroots organisations, and academia provide alternative and often critical perspectives. To critically explore how corruption is historically defined, contested, and legitimised within the INP, the study analyses institutional texts alongside external materials to expose tensions, contradictions, and challenges to dominant narratives.

To interrogate the pressures that normalise police corruption, the analysis also examines documents that reflect structural burdens—such as unrealistic targets, excessive demands, loyalty-based incentives, selective regulation enforcement, and work ethics that mask deviance through narratives of tolerance. These dynamics are found in strategic plans, performance reports, budget realisations, violation records, and annual releases.

A critical reading of these materials exposes a clear divergence in representation. State documents largely silence structural pressures, instead individualising misconduct as personal failure, while NGO reports and public surveys reveal recurring patterns that point to systemic constraints. Interview data are therefore crucial for explaining the internal mechanisms of such pressures, while external sources indicate the phenomenon's wider scale. Together, these show that such pressures are not only an empirical reality but are also shaped and obscured by different discourses, consistent with Fairclough (1989), who argues that texts and discourse both shape social reality and power relations by determining what is visible and what is left unspoken.

Finally, to trace narratives that rationalise or deny corruption, the study analyses rhetorical documents—such as training modules, official speeches, and institutional histories—that use moral, religious, nationalistic, or cultural language to legitimise and stabilise the institution. These are examined alongside socio-cultural literature showing how dominant values like collectivism and feudal loyalty are reproduced to facilitate corruption. Table 2 outlines the types, origins, and selection rationale of the documents analysed.

Table 2: Document Sources

No	Source Institution	Status	Types of Documents	Rationale for Document Selection
1	Indonesian National Police (INP)	A State Body	Police act Police regulation Performance report Budget realisation report Annual work plan Annual strategic plan Annual report Annual press release Official letter Order letter Internal circular letter Police telegram Official history publication	Official representations of law and order and national security discourses Revealing the aims, priorities, and image that the organisation seeks to construct and project, as well as how it seeks to be perceived by the public Identifying the structural conditions that indirectly produce pressures and facilitate systemic corruption Verifying and contrasting the interview findings Comparing anti-corruption rhetoric with routine practices
2	Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK)	An Independent State Body	Annual report Performance accountability report	Official representations of corruption discourse and and public service discourse
3	Ombudsman of the Republic of Indonesia (Ombudsman RI)			Showing how external oversight actors evaluate the police
4	National Police Commission (Kopolnas)	A State Advisory Body	Annual report Performance accountability report	Understanding how state oversight bodies frame police corruption Understanding the selectivity of corruption oversight and enforcement Revealing the limits of state oversight bodies in confronting police corruption
5	Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs (Kemenkopolhukam)	A Central Government Ministry	Annual report Performance accountability report Strategic plan Ministerial regulation	Official representations of hegemonic state or ruling regime narratives Identifying the link between political agendas and INP institutional practices.

6	Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform (KemenPAN-RB)		Annual report Performance accountability report Ministerial regulation	Understanding how the state evaluates and reforms the INP's governance in relation to systemic corruption.
7	Ministry of Finance (Kemenkeu)		Financial memorandum and draft state budget (APBN) Ministerial regulation	Identifying how the state funds the INP, and how this generates economic pressures within the institution
8	Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (Kemen PPPA)		A specialised report on the protection of women and children Ministerial Regulation	Understanding how the state prioritises vulnerable groups and how the INP, as a hegemonic state apparatus, prioritises them.
9	Statistics Indonesia (BPS)	A Central Government Agency	Criminal statistics publication Human development index (HDI) publication Anti-corruption behaviour index publication	An official producer of statistics on crime and public safety Providing an overview of public attitudes towards corruption
10	The House of Representatives (DPR)	A Legislative Body	Indonesian Police Law Press releases Official statements	A public representation of executive institutions, including the police
11	Amnesty International	A Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO)	Survey report Research report Investigative report Annual report Press releases Official statements Policy briefs	Providing a counter-narrative to the official account of the INP
12	Transparency International (TI)			Comparing police definitions of corruption with those put forward by NGOs
13	Human Rights Watch (HRW)			Gaining access to hidden harm concealed by the police
14	Indonesian Police Watch (IPW)			Mapping levels of corruption at the national and sectoral levels
15	Indonesia Corruption Watch (ICW)			Capturing the experiences of subordinated social groups affected by police corruption
16	Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS)			
17	International Crisis Group (ICG)			
Total number of source institutions				17

4.5. Data Analysis

After the empirical data were collected, analysis became a crucial stage—not merely linking evidence to theory but relating victims’ experiences and expert accounts to the power relations or political–economic networks within the INP operating through generative mechanisms not directly visible. The two main data sources were analysed using the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 3 to unpack how these mechanisms recurrently structure hierarchical compliance, rendering corrupt orders from those in positions of authority and the compliance of those in subordinate positions situationally rational, while making resistance costly. This collective compliance, in turn, causally reinforces hierarchical power structures and ultimately consolidates corruption as systemic within the INP.

To conceptualise these hierarchical practices as systemic corruption rather than individual deviance, the analysis is organised into three case studies: (1) how police personnel define and internalise corruption through institutional narratives; (2) how structural pressures rooted in hegemonic and capitalist logics shape corrupt engagement; and (3) how the institution morally rationalises corruption through agents’ everyday practices.

These are not treated as independent chapters, but as interconnected dimensions of a systemic totality. Following Harvey (1990, p. 21), social phenomena must be analysed in relation to a broader socio-historical structure rather than in isolation. To apprehend this totality, the study employs the theoretical framework from the outset to orient the identification and categorisation of patterned data into the three domains prior to deeper analysis of their underlying causal mechanisms.

By rejecting the assumption that corruption within the INP operates incidentally, this study understands it as embedded within broader processes of power reproduction in Indonesia's social formation. Corrupt practices are thus situated within historically produced arrangements that enable and normalise power-oriented practices within the INP. Accordingly, the study first interrogates the historical constitution of the dominant social structures that shape the conditions of possibility for the emergence and persistence of these practices, prior to examining how police personnel themselves interpret institutional conduct in interview and documentary data.

At this macro-analytical stage, the study adopts Harvey's structural historicism. From this perspective, social relations and institutional structures are understood not as natural, technical, or politically neutral formations, but as historically contingent configurations forged through struggles over power. Tracing their historical formation enables the analysis to denaturalise dominant institutional arrangements and expose the specific interests they serve. As historically produced formations, these structures remain inherently contingent and, in principle, open to transformation through human praxis (Harvey, pp. 47–48).

From this critical perspective, contemporary power formations arise from the dialectical interplay of class, gender, and race. These interlocking relations organise the social terrain within which harm is produced and regulated, systematically privileging certain interests while marginalising others through social ordering (Harvey and MacDonald, 1993, p. 28).

Within this study, the structural-historicist reading draws on Messerschmidt's framework, which highlights how the intersecting dynamics of capitalism, patriarchy, and racialisation have historically organised and legitimised displays of toughness, strength, masculinity, and dominance as markers of power or success (Muir and Seitz, 2004) within masculine state institutions, thereby fostering hierarchical compliance among subordinate actors. Through this lens, systemic corruption within the INP is analysed as structured action emerging from the historically intertwined relations of class power, institutional patriarchy, and racialised domination across successive governing regimes in Indonesia.

Following the structural–historical analysis, the study then undertakes an institutional–discursive analysis to show how dominant social power structures operate at the institutional level. It demonstrates how these structures shape officers' consciousness and modes of thinking, organise incentives and pressures, and generate ideological legitimisation, enabling police officers to tolerate and rearticulate discourses and practices of corruption in their everyday lives.

To operationalise this analysis, the study employs Critical Thematic Analysis (CTA), tracing discursive patterns and latent clusters of meaning within informants' narratives, organising their accounts into coherent themes. The resulting themes are subsequently interpreted in relation to the historical and structural formation of the INP, recognising language as a medium that legitimises power, conceals interests, and normalises unequal relations. As Lawless and Yea-Wen Chen (2019) argue, CTA enables the identification of thematic patterns while critically interrogating the relations of power, ideology, and social structures that shape them.

Although not formally employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study draws on its theoretical insights to explore how power structures within the INP condition members to accept corrupt arrangements through ideological discourse. The analysis centres on recurring language and narratives that connect organisational hierarchy with routine policing practices. These discursive formations operate as hegemonic practices, reinforcing compliance and reproducing political–economic power relations within the INP and its broader role in the state apparatus.

As Foucault (1980, p. 114) argues, discourse—the systems of terms, categories and labels produced and circulated by institutions—works as a micro-mechanism of power. Through acts of labelling, defining and classifying, powerful institutions strengthen their authority, make certain interpretations appear normal, and push aside alternative views. In doing so, language does not operate as a neutral medium of communication; rather, it structures how social reality is framed and understood. Consequently, what appears rational, acceptable or authoritative is not naturally given, but shaped by power embedded in institutional discourse, which in turn influences how individuals interpret their position within the social order.

After becoming familiar with the data through repeated readings, this study identified thematic patterns across in-depth interviews, documents, and official INP statements through a carefully organised coding process. The analysis focused not only on what police participants said explicitly, but also on the deeper meanings behind their words. Greater emphasis was placed on the words and phrases officers frequently used or repeated, the metaphors they commonly relied on, how they portrayed key actors, and the pronouns they selected in their narratives.

As Braun and Clarke (2022, pp. 41–43) explain, good thematic analysis moves from the semantic level (what is explicitly said) to the latent level (what it implies). At this stage, the study looked beyond surface meanings to consider how power operates in the data. Word choices, the way experiences were framed, and the values presented as normal helped show how hierarchy and authority are treated as natural or legitimate. In this way, the analysis does more than describe meaning; it also shows how language can reproduce or challenge power structures.

In the first case study, themes of loyalty and respect were constructed as moral virtues rather than as potential ethical dilemmas. Words such as 'hierarchy' and 'superiors' were repeated, making vertical authority appear normal and legitimate. The study also found that the use of "we" and "they" helps establish clear group boundaries. In addition, terms like "gratitude money" and "voluntary contribution" softened the meaning of abusive exchanges, showing how dominant norms work not only through rules and structures but also through everyday language and emotions.

In the second case study, themes such as "pressure to meet living costs" and "operational needs" led to corruption due to system limitations rather than personal wrongdoing. Expressions like "we understand each other" blurred responsibility, making both individual and structural accountability less visible. The theme of low pay made corrupt acts seem like a reasonable response instead of an ethical breach. Frequent references to exhaustion and heavy workloads also built an image of sacrifice and dedication, which could then be used to justify informal payments.

In the third case study, terms such as “divine provision” and statements like “it has always been our culture” showed how religion and culture were used to defend these practices. Gaining benefits from the use of authority was framed less as a wrongdoing and more as a matter of intention or blessing. Those who disagreed were seen as failing to respect religious values or social norms. Phrases such as “obedient to the state and its leaders” were repeated often, placing the interests of the institution above other concerns.

The study uses retroductive logic to interrogate identified themes and uncover the deeper structures that produce them. In this process, NVivo supports the analysis through organised coding and data management, making the reasoning clearer and more transparent. Within a retroductive framework, Spencer et al. (2014, pp. 288–289) suggest that Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) can encourage more systematic thinking. By allowing the researcher to store, organise, retrieve, and link different types of data, CAQDAS helps ensure that the analysis remains clear, consistent, and open to review, while still allowing room for interpretation. In this study, NVivo was used to manage interview data, from AI-assisted transcription to layered coding. The software also made it easier to move between visible patterns of corruption and the deeper social mechanisms that produce and normalise them, thereby supporting the retroductive approach.

At the writing-up stage, this study interpreted the themes and examined their implications for the continuation and normalisation of systemic corruption within the INP. The themes were explained in relation to the organisation's political, economic, and ideological context, enabling the study to address internal power relations.

Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 178) state that individuals are always shaped by their social context, and meaning is never neutral or separate from it. In a critical approach, interpreting themes helps to show how power works and how certain ideas become taken for granted in ways that support existing power relations and unfair social systems (Flowers and Langdrige, 2007; Tischner and Malson, 2012).

For example, the theme of low pay as a justification for corruption was linked to wider economic conditions, particularly state salary policies, while the theme of heavy workloads as a basis for hierarchical obedience was connected to the state's authoritarian political system, especially its exclusive system of recognition. This step helped assess whether these discourses maintain or challenge the power structures that normalise corrupt practices among police officers.

4.6. Ethical Considerations

The concluding section of this methodology chapter reflects on how ethical principles were both enacted and negotiated throughout the research process. Given the sensitive and high-risk nature of this study, ethical considerations were central to protecting the dignity, safety, and autonomy of all participants—particularly police officers who are themselves vulnerable or have previously been subjected to abuses of power by dominant actors within the institution. This group is especially at risk due to the absence of institutional backing, limited avenues to voice their experiences of injustice, and a constrained capacity to resist systemic pressures. These conditions increase their vulnerability to retaliation, stigmatisation, or other social and legal repercussions arising from their participation in the research.

Webster et al. (2014, pp. 81–85) emphasise that principles such as informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation must be enacted dynamically—not as a one-time formality, but as an ongoing process responsive to the complex realities of the fieldwork. This approach maintains participants' trust without crossing professional boundaries, while also anticipating and addressing the potential relational dilemmas and emotional challenges that the researcher may experience. Similarly, Petintseva et al. (2020) draw attention to the ethical challenges of engaging with powerful actors, including risks of interference in the research process and its outcomes. They stress the importance of maintaining scientific autonomy and data integrity, especially when facing external pressures.

This research has been carried out carefully to balance participants' trust, scientific autonomy, and ethical responsibility. The ethical approach adopted not only prioritises protecting participants' rights but also involves critical reflection on the researcher's positionality in the field, along with a full awareness of the potential risks that may affect all parties involved.

4.6.1 Participant Rights

Participants' rights were central to the research process and safeguarded through a reflective, ongoing approach to informed consent. Prior to the interviews, participants were given a full opportunity to understand and voluntarily decide on their involvement without coercion. They were provided with a document explaining the questions' purpose, duration, nature, data confidentiality, and their right to refuse or withdraw without consequences.

Identity protection was ensured through pseudonyms, the removal of sensitive information, and encrypted data storage accessible only to the researcher. Anonymisation extended to participants' names and attributes that might reveal their identity, such as location, office names, and personnel details.

The participants' right to speak freely—without fear or stigma—was given utmost priority during the interviews. The researcher adjusted the questions' language, tone, and contextual framing to ensure respect for the participants' lived experiences.

Potentially intimidating or judgmental terms such as “corruption”, “bribery”, “extortion”, and “illegal levies” were replaced with more culturally neutral expressions—for instance, “gift”, “operational support”, “cigarette money”, “token of appreciation”, “participation fee”, “blessing”, “envelope money”, “contribution fund”, “solidarity support”, “security money”, and “voluntary donation”—to align with local idioms. This strategy did not aim to obscure reality but to build trust and minimise participant discomfort when discussing socially sensitive topics.

After the interviews, participants' rights to data control and representation continued to be respected. They were invited to review sensitive quotations prior to publication as part of ongoing consent, though none opted to do so. Personal data remained confidential and was not shared externally. Any external pressures that could compromise analytical integrity were documented as part of the researcher's ethical reflection.

As a gesture of appreciation, participants received souvenirs and meal vouchers valued between £25 and £50—proportional to institutional rank and funded by the state scholarship’s research grant. This practice aligns with Indonesian social norms, where expressions of gratitude are vital for maintaining warmth, mutual respect, and reciprocal trust. Failing to reciprocate kindness, even when not explicitly requested, is often perceived as ungratefulness and can lead to social tension.

4.6.2. Positionality

As an active member of the INP, I occupy an insider position, with both structural and cultural proximity to the institution. This status lends legitimacy and facilitates access to informants and official documents but also entails risks of institutional bias and pressure—especially when investigating systemic corruption.

Following Holmes (2020), positionality shapes how a researcher’s background, values, and relationships influence the research process. Recognising my embedded position within the institution under study, I sought to safeguard academic independence and integrity by securing a government scholarship (LPDP) and an official assignment letter from the Chief of Police. These formal arrangements provided a transparent and accountable basis for access, reducing the risk of relying on informal patronage or personal networks, and helping to mitigate potential conflicts of interest arising from my institutional ties.

However, although these verified documents symbolically frame the research as state-endorsed and may deter resistance from lower-level gatekeepers, they remain largely as bureaucratic formalities and offer limited protection against institutional ambivalence towards critical inquiry.

4.6.3. Risks of the Research

Research into systemic corruption within the INP is inherently high-risk but scientifically valid and ethically justified. As noted by Dickson-Swift et al. (2008, p. 134), critically examining powerful institutions can expose researchers to emotional, social, professional, and even physical risks, as such work is often seen not as scholarly inquiry but as a threat to legitimacy.

This study, while incorporating risk mitigation strategies, is rooted in a critical commitment to challenge the hegemonic structure that concretises police corruption and to promote police reform grounded on non-hegemonic principles: accountability, transparency, civilian supremacy, participatory democracy, social justice, equality of power, and emancipation.

Although once considered taboo, such research has increasingly emerged over the past two decades (PTIK, 2004; Darry and Asri, 2022; Listiyono et al., 2022; Syahputra et al., 2023). Still, most studies remain descriptive or normative, neglecting the underlying power relations that reproduce systemic corruption.

4.7. Conclusion

This research aims to unpack the complex hegemonic structures shaping the logic, discourse, and dominant narratives of corruption within the INP. It adopts a qualitative design grounded in a critical paradigm, chosen for its ability to uncover the hidden meanings behind corrupt practices—such as power relations, social structures, and moral justifications—through in-depth interviews and document analysis. Guided by the theoretical framework outlined earlier, the study traces the invisible causal structures underpinning hegemony.

However, this critical approach faces internal pressure from academic standards favouring measurable evidence, and external dismissal by hegemonic groups as subjective for centring lived experience and marginalised voices. To address validity, the study embraces ethical commitments to social justice, rejects the fact–value divide, and practices reflexivity. Triangulation is used not to confirm a single truth, but to surface diverse meanings and reveal how corruption is normalised within hegemonic systems.

To navigate institutional constraints, the study engaged actors across police ranks, used neutral language, and offered flexible interview arrangements. It also incorporated official and unofficial secondary sources to avoid over-reliance on police testimony. These sources were analysed not as neutral facts but as discursive fields, revealing tensions between dominant and alternative narratives. The analysis traced recurring meanings to show how seemingly legitimate discourses conceal and normalise underlying power structures.

The final section outlines the study's ethical considerations. As an insider, the researcher balanced access with the risk of bias through critical reflexivity, clarifying rather than erasing positionality. Given the police hierarchy and informant risks, participation was voluntary, with informed consent and the right to withdraw. Confidentiality and participant security were prioritised throughout.

CHAPTER 5: POLICE DEFINITIONS OF CORRUPTION

5.1. Introduction

Chapter Five examines how the Indonesian National Police (INP) define and exercise authority, and how these definitions enable systemic corruption to become normalised and protected by personalising it as individual misconduct. In other words, the chapter argues that definitions of corruption within the police are neither neutral nor derived solely from legal frameworks but are shaped by the power structures that govern the institution. Corruption therefore emerges as a systemic possibility embedded in the ways the dominant system defines, distributes, and legitimises power—including how it determines what counts as corruption and what remains tolerated within the institution.

The chapter begins by outlining the historical and structural conditions that have shaped the character of the INP, focusing on how successive political regimes in Indonesia have mobilised and reconfigured the institution to serve dominant political interests. It then demonstrates that definitions of corruption within the police are not singular or uniform but are constructed differently across units according to their structural positions and forms of authority. Ultimately, the chapter demonstrates that such definitions are not solely reproduced through formal institutional mechanisms but are also reinforced by broader social values regarding obedience and respect for authority. To analyse these dynamics, the chapter draws on hegemonic masculinity theory and differential association theory.

5.2. The Historical Origins of Systemic Police Corruption

Throughout Indonesia's history, the police have never been truly autonomous, consistently serving elite interests. Echoing Harvey's (1990) view of power as historically and structurally embedded, police corruption preserves oligarchic wealth, patriarchy, and ethnic dominance, disproportionately harming marginalised groups. The dominant political consensus has endured across regimes, turning the police into agents of extortion and repression against the public they ought to protect.

During Dutch colonial rule (19th century–1945), the police served as a tool of imperial control, protecting the interests of the colonial elite rather than those of the indigenous population. They monitored, suppressed, and isolated groups deemed threats to the colonial order, with recruitment prioritising loyalty to the regime (Van der Meer, 2021). The system was deliberately secretive and opaque, facilitating service to colonial-aligned elites and normalising bribery among underpaid officers. Police also enforced colonial monopolies and tax systems, exploiting Chinese Indonesian (*Tionghoa*) entrepreneurs. This legacy persisted and expanded under Japanese occupation, when the police were granted greater economic authority to consolidate control over the Dutch-established institution (Bloembergen, 2011).

From a class perspective, the colonial period marked the police from their inception as enforcers of elite interests, exploiting the indigenous lower classes through extortion and forced labour. This system also enabled the rise of a corrupt indigenous middle class that profited from its alignment with colonial structures. Racial hierarchies placed Europeans above Chinese Indonesians as vulnerable intermediaries, with indigenous people as primary targets.

During the Old Order era (1945–1965), the colonial police institution was not dismantled but instead inherited and renamed the National Police (Van Reybrouck, 2021). Initially placed under the Ministry of Home Affairs, the police were meant to preserve centralised command—not to ensure civilian control—amid fragmented local politics. While it gained public legitimacy through its role in the independence struggle, the police continued to function as a tool of social control—now serving domestic elites (Pusat Sejarah Polri [Police History Center], 2022a).

In a fragile post-colonial state, the regime used pre-colonial symbols—notably *Gajah Mada* of *Majapahit*—to promote national unity while also legitimising hierarchical, patriarchal governance. This symbolic nationalism helped mask the enduring corruption rooted in colonial systems. The latter integration into the Armed Forces (ABRI) entrenched the police as a loyal and repressive arm of the state, increasingly reliant on informal networks to sustain the regime amid fiscal constraints (Djamin, 2006; Bloembergen and Eickhoff, 2020, p. 156).

From a class perspective, police corruption has deepened inequality: elites are protected, the poor repressed, and the middle class co-opted to mediate between state power and the informal economy. Independence did not liberate the poor—it replaced colonial rulers with local elites. Racially, native elites continued to manage and exploit the Chinese Indonesian community, using them economically and politically as scapegoats. Structural corruption is compounded by gender exclusion, with elite men dominating a police force deeply shaped by masculine norms. Female officers were formally accepted but systematically confined to moral and utilitarian roles, rather than being recognised as equal actors (Police History Center, 2022b, p. 211).

During the New Order period (1966–1998), military power hegemonised the police through ABRI's dual function and state corporatism (Police History Center, 2022a, p. 379). Marginalised and lacking structural recognition, they served as a repressive arm over civil society, subordinated as the military's "junior partner" in the regime's stability architecture (Baker, 2012, p. 37). Economically, chronic underfunding forced the police to depend on informal income sources, many of which were already controlled by the military.

Corruption became a covert means to fill budget gaps, maintain cohesion, and uphold political control. By framing corruption as individual misconduct, the regime concealed a rigid internal hierarchy: top officers enjoyed impunity and controlled resources; mid-level ranks operated within illicit economies under limited protection; and lower ranks depended on petty extortion, often scapegoated as mere "bad apples" (*oknum*) (McLeod, 2008, p. 213).

For 32 years, corruption entrenched class control: the poor were extorted, unaffiliated elites coerced, and the middle class trapped in corruption cycles (Verhezen, 2003, p. 109). Racially, the state increasingly exploited Chinese Indonesians for capital, while indigenous groups like Acehnese and Papuans—who opposed the regime's capitalist agenda—were criminalised instead of recognised as citizens demanding equality. Gendered hierarchies persisted within the police: female officers were confined to admin roles, judged by revenue, and instrumentalised as PR symbols (Police History Center, 2020, p. 85). It also reflects the wider marginalisation of women in Indonesia, excluded from elite networks yet exploited in informal economies under police protection (Hapsari et al. 2020).

The Reform Era (1998–present) granted the police greater autonomy. Following a legitimacy crisis, the force was separated from the military and placed under direct presidential control to end its corrupt legacy. However, reform proved largely symbolic (Haripin and Siregar, 2016), reflecting elite political compromise rather than a genuine commitment to democratisation, resulting in mere institutional repositioning. Instead of decentralising power, authority became more centralised within a rigid hierarchy aligned with dominant elites. Democratic accountability remained weak: the police prioritised upward loyalty while resisting grassroots civilian oversight (O’Rourke, 2010, p. 150). Re-emerging as a hegemonic “super-agency” replacing the military’s former domestic role, they enable systemic abuse to preserve regime stability. The New Order’s corrupt system persisted in reconfigured form, with control over illicit income shifting from military to civilian elites, who instrumentalised the police to silence opposition and expand their influence (Mietzner, 2006; Muradi, 2014).

As a result, policing remains structurally exploitative and prone to corruption, disproportionately harming the poor, women, and racially marginalised groups. Within the INP, corruption entrenches stratification between academy and non-academy officers, while female officers remain subordinated within a patriarchal order despite formal rank. Beyond the institution, it reproduces racial hierarchies, casting Chinese Indonesians as outsiders and indigenous groups as backward (Power and Warburton, 2020, p. 222). Corruption is thus systemic, embedded in the political economy and sustained across regimes as a tool of authoritarian control. This continuity reflects not institutional failure but structural persistence, where ruling elites change while hegemonic norms remain intact. Through continual socialisation, officers internalise norms that legitimise corruption, ensuring its reproduction across generations.

5.3. The Hegemonic Constructions of Police Corruption

Having outlined how Indonesia's historically hegemonic political-economic structure created the conditions for systemic corruption within the INP, the analysis now turns to how these conditions shape officers' everyday rationalities. In Sutherland's (1970, p. 12, 81) terms, these rationalities are reproduced through social interaction, as officers internalise definitions favourable to conduct aligned with dominant power interests. This section examines the boundaries of how INP personnel interpret and enact authority, loyalty, and responsibility in their routine institutional practice. The focus is not on determining whether conduct meets the formal definition of corruption, but on understanding how these interpretations may normalise and legitimise practices that normatively constitute corruption.

In this context, the misuse of authority is not always perceived as deviant but as part of the system's operating logic, as officers align their actions with dominant power interests. The police thus shape and manage the meaning of corruption in flexible ways that protect the existing order, making the underlying power structure embedding these hegemonic values appear largely unproblematic.

Discretionary exercises of authority that sustain the regime's political-economic order are framed as legitimate institutional duties, while corruption is selectively defined as actions that threaten institutional authority or regime legitimacy, particularly when associated with oppositional or marginalised groups. This hegemonic framing of corruption is evident across both administrative and operational divisions, which, despite their different roles, remain embedded within the same power structure.

5.3.1 Systemic Corruption in Administrative Units

Administrative units in the INP act as centres of power as they control promotions, resource allocation, protection, and sanctions, placing personnel in positions of dependence. This position creates incentives that encourage hierarchical compliance while enabling operational corruption to develop.

This study argues that the way administrative units use their authority to achieve organisational goals—even when it harms lower-ranking personnel—can be understood as systemic corruption. This view aligns with Messerschmidt's (2018, pp. 115, 129) concept of situational accountability, which suggests that actors adjust their behaviour to meet the expectations of superiors and peers. In corrupt systems, conformity to corrupt cultures may signal masculine competence and secure internal recognition.

Situated within the earlier historical context, systemic corruption in these units arises when authority is directed towards securing recognition from the ruling regime, even at the cost of subordinates' autonomy and welfare, as the regime monopolises the power to define not only strategic priorities but also moral boundaries at the national level.

A. Human Resource Management Unit

The Human Resources (HR) unit of the INP actively accommodates the interests of the dominant regime by steering the appointment of strategic positions toward individuals loyal to power, rather than on professionalism or a reformist orientation. With full authority over the entire personnel cycle, the HR plays a strategic role in shaping the institution's internal direction.

This authority is utilised to ensure that key positions are filled by individuals who do not pose a threat to, or challenge, the dominant power structure. As such, control over the HR system becomes a crucial instrument for aligning the police's institutional trajectory with the regime's political interests while simultaneously suppressing potential internal resistance to the prevailing power order.

“Not everyone with good achievements ends up with a good position; there are also those without notable achievements who hold high positions. Earlier, regarding networking—sometimes police officers approach their superiors through a third party. This third party often plays a significant role, perhaps because the superior owes them a favour or they once acted as the superior’s mentor in the past. From what I’ve observed, people like that are usually the ones who manage to progress and follow along with that superior’s circle.” (Sandro, commissioner, male, legal affairs unit).

Sandro’s statement reflects how the utilisation of human resources within the Indonesian police is closely tied to the regime’s political interests, where the personnel system functions not to assess performance but to channel and consolidate loyalists of the ruling group through patronage networks and personal relationships.

Dimas (a male Police Brigadier Second Class in the position transfer sub-unit) frankly stated that promotions are more often driven by loyalty and willingness to offer gifts—both material and symbolic—to superiors, rather than by the objective needs and career interests of lower-ranking personnel. Strategic posts are consequently mobilised to reward officers with personal or political affiliations. Within this context, expectations of toughness and unquestioning compliance—hallmarks of dominant police masculinity—shape promotion dynamics, marginalising those misaligned with these norms through career stagnation or reassignment to remote or stigmatised roles.

"Officers loyal to their superiors are more likely to be recommended for better roles, especially if they're seen as competent and trustworthy. Without connections, one risks isolation...making it difficult to secure a good position to support one's income and career. Typically, if one does not align with a superior's expectations, the first consequence is a transfer. Of course there is discrimination. That's undeniable. Within the police force, we're expected to appear tough and commanding. If someone appears effeminate, they're bound to be marginalised, facing negative remarks and psychological pressure."

This statement is reinforced by Bimo (male Brigadier in career development and promotion sub-unit), who revealed that loyalty to superiors often becomes the primary indicator in performance assessments. Superiors frequently use these evaluations as tools for favouritism or internal political punishment. Consequently, loyal members receive positive evaluations, which can be utilised to secure not only promotion opportunities but also merit badges, honours, or awards.

"What we give to superiors matters—they appreciate our efforts, which makes us more noticeable than those who do nothing. Reward, in my opinion, is not equal for everyone, as perceptions vary. Those with strong networks have better chances of earning promotions or rewards compared to those without any connections"

The accounts reveal class inequalities in promotion processes, where political and economic capital decisively shape advancement. These dynamics are also gendered, as promotion criteria rooted in dominant masculine norms place additional barriers on female officers.

Helin (1st Sub-Inspector, female, District Police Unit) indicated that many women are motivated to join the police for social recognition, despite being aware of the structural barriers to their advancement.

"That was my aspiration. I thought, 'If I become a policewoman, I will be different from other women.' My motivation was not financial. I failed four times and only passed on the final attempt."

This orientation may help explain why many policewomen later feel pressure to align with corrupt norms to appear fully competitive within the organisation.

Other policewomen echoed Helin's observation. Asya (female Commissioner, recruitment) indicated that recruitment corruption operates systemically rather than in gender-exclusive ways, often occurring covertly through technical loopholes such as manipulating results or revealing candidate identities. She explained that while technical staff may provide recommendations, the ultimate decision rests with the highest-ranking officials.

"Some hold strategic positions and remain honest, while others take the opportunity to exploit the system. For example, in the past, physical fitness evaluations could be manipulated. Now we've got systems like coding, so no one knows the names, it keeps things fair. We've got a bit of freedom to act, yeah, but the final say's not ours — it's up to the higher-ups. All we can do is give our suggestions, like 'this might be a good idea', but whether they go ahead with it or not, that's their call."

Rizal (male Adjunct Commissioner, education and training selection sub-unit) confirmed senior-level intervention to pass certain candidates based on personal connections. It raises concerns that expanding policewomen recruitment may remain largely symbolic within a masculine power system.

"For example, in the police recruitment section, someone might say, 'Please help so this child can get in', and then offer money. The officer would then assign scores that don't follow the standard procedures — for instance, giving a running score of 7 when it should have been 6, or counting incomplete pull-ups as valid."

Bribery and favouritism in regular and specialised training selection appear even more systemic than in initial recruitment. Career progression education is regarded as essential to leadership advancement, yet access depends more on personal rapport with superiors than on merit.

“When allocating four career education slots, there may be ten eligible candidates with similar qualifications. The final choice often considers personal connections because trust plays a role: ‘I trust them because we have worked together before, and they are reliable. Superiors prefer not to gamble on unfamiliar candidates, even if qualifications are equal.’”

Corruption within the INP’s HR unit reflects broader organisational dynamics in which the career management system cultivates loyalty and obedience. This system operates through subjective and exclusionary practices grounded in hegemonic masculine norms of power and subordination, thereby marginalising those who do not conform to these expectations.

Messerschmidt (1997, pp. 5–6) emphasises that social structures reproduce power through repeated action. Here, corruption becomes part of “doing masculinity” in accordance with the hegemonic system, as knowledgeable agents understand that success depends on conforming to dominant masculine norms.

Superiors and subordinates co-construct the meaning of corruption in ways that reflect their respective positions within the hierarchy, both recognising that loyalty is rewarded while disloyalty or insubordination is overlooked. Corruption operates as a control mechanism across promotions, education, rank, and welfare.

These discretionary abuses imposed on subordinates are routinely framed as serving institutional interests, but in practice, they reproduce internal domination. Yet, despite holding greater authority, the agency of superiors remains constrained by their position as intermediaries between state interests and internal institutional dynamics.

Subordinates, conversely, are not passive; they observe, assess, and adapt to the system. They exhibit dilemma: aware that corruption is wrong yet accepting it as a necessity for survival and advancement. Corruption becomes a resource for building social position—a form of “doing loyalty” within subordinate masculinity. This ambivalence indicates that subordinates retain agency, rendering corruption a strategic choice for survival within a system that treats objectivity merely as procedural formality. Within this logic, corruption is no longer viewed purely as a moral deviation but rather as a relational symbol through which subordinates align themselves in harmony with authority holders.

As Messerschmidt (1997, p. 108) explains, masculine bureaucracies such as the police reproduce inequalities based on gender, class, and race. The state also maintains hegemonic practices within the HR unit of the INP as a tool of dominant groups to reproduce patriarchy, bureaucratic capitalism, and racial-cultural bias.

Local media (Perdani, 2013; World Bank, 2003, p. 83) report that position transfers within the police function as rituals to screen individuals deemed worthy of promotion—typically drawn from inner circles of power with political endorsement from the president or elite allies.

These informal power-sharing arrangements ultimately disadvantage lower-ranking personnel, especially those marginalised by class, gender, and ethnicity. Subordinates lacking economic capital, political connections, or elite internal backing often face career stagnation with limited vertical mobility. Such exclusivity also undermines gender equality.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that corruption within the INP's HR system structurally reproduces exclusion. Policewomen remain marginalised, comprising only 5.6% of the 436,000 personnel (Pusjarah Polri, 2021), despite women making up 140 million of the national population—nearly equal to the 143 million males (Statistics Indonesia (BPS), 2025). Similarly, subordinates from local ethnic or tribal minorities—though part of the institution—are often treated as outsiders. They face stereotyping and racial discrimination, as majority-dominated HR practices deny them equal recognition (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

B. Planning, Budgeting, and Logistics Units

This study finds that the power structure within the INP systematically deploys its authority to direct planning, budgeting, and logistics in ways that accommodate the political-economic interests of dominant groups within the organisation, rather than supporting legitimate operational needs in the execution of core policing duties.

The Budgeting Unit allocates funds to reinforce elite political and economic stability, while the Planning Unit aligns annual programmes with hegemonic agendas rather than subordinate needs. Similarly, the Logistics Unit prioritises procurement and distribution to strategically important regions for elite power consolidation, often at the expense of public needs, particularly in underdeveloped or opposition-leaning areas.

In the planning and budgeting unit, Candra (1st Inspector, male) revealed that superiors often impose personal agendas without involving subordinates, design programmes without funding, pressure staff to seek informal financing, and reward those who succeed in delivering these unofficially funded programmes.

“Corruption can come from any direction—top, bottom, or sides. During the Covid pandemic from 2019 to 2021, police were to oversee hundreds of daily mass vaccination events, despite having no budget support. Officers couldn’t fund it from their own salaries, as they had families to support, so they turned to social networks—often involving contacts linked to grey or illegal businesses—seeking reciprocal support from those they had previously helped.”

This account suggests the state has shifted funding burdens onto the police, increasing material pressures and pushing officers to rely on discretionary power and informal networks to secure resources.

Similarly, budget holders often cut operational funds, manipulate financial reports, and allocate resources based on loyalty rather than need, diverting the official operational budget for personal or collective gain.

“The funds allocated from the state budget for sectoral police stations (Polsek) are, for instance, distributed annually to cover the needs of various units, with a total allocation of around 100 million rupiah. In practice, however, the head of the police sector, who is responsible for distributing this budget among the units, often withholds a portion of it—sometimes reducing the amount by 30 to 50 per cent—before it reaches the intended recipients. Subordinate officers are left with no choice but to accept and divide what’s given from above.”

He also explained that superiors often impose charges when providing guidance, consultation, or training on budget management at the lower levels.

“Sometimes, when people are familiar with you, especially during the handover of the office budget or while filling out the forms, they might show up with a bit of cake, some ‘smoke money’, or small gestures like that. As budget overseers, we monitor the use of allocated funds to ensure that subordinate units spend them in accordance with approved plans. We are fortunate that additional income often comes from official travel. When conducting inspections at District Police (Polres), we also provide guidance, and occasionally, we are treated to meals or given cigarette money during these trips.”

Subordinate compliance is measured by their willingness to meet both operational and superiors' personal needs, even at their own expense. It aligns with a provider masculinity logic in which subordinates offer provision to their patrons not because the patron is weak, but as a loyalty cost in exchange for masculine recognition within the hierarchy.

"A loyal officer, in my view, is someone who fulfils all their superior's needs. That's how loyalty is judged today. At the sub-district level, it includes demands from the chief, deputy, and even the Bhayangkari (police wives' association). Monthly social obligations, such as attending local community events and contributing flower arrangements costing over a million rupiah, are not covered by the official budget (DIPA), and it's unrealistic to expect officers to fund them from their modest salaries."

Subordinates are also implicitly encouraged to offer gifts as a strategy to ensure their budget proposals are prioritised and approved for distribution.

"Although office construction or renovation requests formally from sub-district police units to district police, and then to the regional police headquarters, in practice, approval often depends on informal gestures or incentives. While our role is officially to evaluate and approve such requests, decisions are often subtly influenced by who submits the request and how it is presented."

Meanwhile, in the logistics unit, Pranav (1st Sub-Inspector, male) noted that while authority appears collective, key decisions—such as procurement and tender selection—are controlled by senior leaders.

"Even though we are subordinates in the procurement division and are tasked with carrying out our superior's directives, the decision to approve or reject still ultimately lies with them. For example, when a senior officer says, 'This must pass!', we are expected to comply."

He stated that such authority is often used to manipulate the process in favour of suppliers who are willing to provide informal rewards.

"There was a participant who took part in a tender process, but they lost... because this participant was not acquainted with the superior. The superior simply didn't approve... qualification alone cannot be a guarantee." In practice, "Business partners often provide assistance to the superior in hopes of reciprocation... they naturally expect to be prioritised and chosen as the winners."

Internally, logistics distribution is not based on operational urgency, but on loyalty and gift-giving practices.

"We also assist subordinates. Sometimes we receive tokens of appreciation, sometimes not. If they give something, we say 'Alhamdulillah'. If not, that's fine. In the warehouse and distribution, informal charges may apply, especially during pickups. Routine needs, like fuel or uniforms, are released automatically. But for items such as building repairs, vehicle maintenance, or the allocation of firearms and ammunition, active follow-up is required."

Within this system, subordinates merely serve as technical executors with no authority to challenge decisions while also playing a role in maintaining the continuity of such practices.

"Intervention makes us, as staff, feel like, 'I've put in the effort and done my job properly, yet it's still overridden by interference. We still have to comply with what our superiors say, even when it's clearly wrong or goes against the rules.'"

Pranav further added that gifts or money from suppliers are commonly received as "tokens of appreciation" for prioritisation, administrative facilitation, expedited contracts, and other preferential treatment.

"When a procurement process is completed and the superior's preferred candidate is selected, the gratitude is often directed towards the superior, not the staff... However, that money is usually controlled by the superior through a 'single gate' system, and it's entirely up to them whether it gets distributed to subordinates or kept for themselves. If we receive any token of appreciation or compensation directly from a bidder, we might instinctively decline it but the person offering may insist, saying, 'Just take it, maybe for cigarettes.'"

This systemic corruption reveals that high-ranking officials in these units often treat their positions as sources of legitimacy rather than roles subject to oversight. They view themselves as key decision-makers and providers of institutional needs, framing authority as a structural privilege in which higher rank brings greater control and less need to consult lower units.

Power becomes personalised, allowing superiors to demand loyalty and create subordinate dependence through their control of resources. As resource gatekeepers, they release budget access selectively, only when subordinates show loyalty.

“If subordinates do not escort the budget, it will not be approved. For example, in 2026 we may propose the renovation of Police Station X. Even if we submit formally through the Planning Bureau and then to the Assistant for Planning, the funds will not come down without someone overseeing the process. Even grants must be escorted.”

It reflects Messerschmidt's (2018, p. 152) assertion that male authority figures utilise provider roles to justify dominance and demand reciprocity, not merely as an economic status but as a principle of masculine identity. In this power dynamic, the capacity to provide financial resources legitimises hierarchical relations in which men occupy superior positions.

Conversely, subordinates perceive themselves merely as requesters, not decision-makers, as their voices lack structural space. Inequities in resource distribution are often viewed as consequences of strategic decisions, while the “flexibility” in managing those resources is interpreted as an expression of adaptive leadership.

Within this commodified system of authority, informal gift-giving is perceived as a moral recompense or token of gratitude. As a result, subordinates lose professional autonomy and are pushed to serve the hegemonic interests of their superiors in exchange for access to resources monopolised by those in power.

Linked to the national power structure, these power holders are not at the top of the hierarchy but are themselves subordinates required to remain loyal to the head of state. Caught between serving the hegemonic regime and caring for their personnel, they sustain masculine authority by displaying loyalty upward while maintaining dominance downward. Within this constrained autonomy, participation in systemic corruption becomes a rational survival strategy in a hegemonically normalised system.

As explained by Messerschmidt (1997, p. 107), actors in intermediary positions often face structural pressures from both above and below, forcing them to adjust their masculine identities situationally to appear accountable to dominant powers, even at the expense of their subordinates' interests.

Numerous studies (Haripin and Siregar, 2016; Sandiya and Basir, 2021; Darry and Asri, 2022) have documented regime interventions in the INP, ranging from capture over strategic planning, bureaucratic reform blockages, budget cuts or mobilisation for regime projects, collection of corporate donations, to the placement of loyalists in logistics procurement.

The structural elite's indifference towards the real needs of lower-ranking personnel has created social exclusion that exacerbates inequality along lines of class, gender, and ethnicity. This planning bias is evident in the institutional orientation, which prioritises protecting central power structures over equitable support for operational units in regional areas (Indonesian National Police Headquarters–General Planning and Budget Staff, 2023).

Bias in the INP's budget priorities is evident: more than half of the budget (55.94%) is allocated to goods and capital spending—primarily supporting regime stability and symbolic agendas—while personnel expenditure, directly affecting the welfare of 447,000 lower-level officers, receives a smaller share at only 44.06% (INP Headquarters, 2024, p. xi).

The INP budget allocation also reflects structural ethnic discrimination. In its State Budget Realisation Report, the INP (2023) reported that six provinces with minority ethnic populations—such as Papua, Maluku, and East Nusa Tenggara (NTT)—receive only 13% of the national police budget, far below the 41.6% concentrated in six regional police commands across Java Island. The disparity is particularly stark between East Java Regional Police (IDR 5.5 trillion) and North Kalimantan (IDR 500 million).

In parallel, gender disparities are exposed by the minimal allocation for the Women's Police School—a mere IDR 46.5 billion (5.78%) of the INP's total education budget of IDR 805 billion. It demonstrates the institution's half-hearted commitment to developing women's capacity, thereby reinforcing their exclusion from strategic structures within the police force.

Linked to the earlier interview evidence, this structural imbalance suggests that power structures within the INP use resource distribution as a mechanism of internal discipline and stratification. Rather than allocating budgets solely on institutional need, those in authority prioritise their own interests and loyal networks, leaving less strategic or less loyal personnel to operate with limited funds.

C. Inspectorate, Disciplinary, and Legal Units

Rather than functioning as neutral and impartial mechanisms of internal accountability, the Inspectorate Unit, the Internal Affairs Unit, and the Legal Unit operate as apparatuses of internal hegemony. Under dominant political regimes, internal oversight serves less to uncover systemic violations and more as a means of political cleansing—eliminating subordinates seen as threats to the prevailing power structure. Its primary role is not to ensure genuine accountability, but to manage public legitimacy for a corrupt system.

Similarly, the disciplinary unit acts as an internal watchtower, exerting silent pressure to keep the lower ranks aligned with the architecture of elite power interests. Meanwhile, the Legal Unit often serves as a vehicle for power-driven interpretation, providing legal justification for authoritarian decisions and corrupt institutional policies.

In maintaining internal order, Purwanta (Chief Commissioner, male, internal affairs unit) interprets gift-giving from subordinates as a social mechanism to strengthen loyalty and closeness with superiors. For him, such harmonious relationships are essential for preserving hierarchical stability and resolving conflicts without having to resort to rigid formal procedures.

“This whole culture of giving has been passed down through generations and really helps build strong social ties in the organisation. But the idea that you have to pay to get promoted isn’t completely true. In reality, your performance and track record still play a big part in how your superiors make decisions. That said, having a good network really does help. Getting along well with senior officers means you’ve got people to turn to for advice, info, or just someone to talk to when problems come up. It just makes things easier when you know who to go to. The key is to build those relationships from the start—not only when you need something. Giving people things just to solve your own problems isn’t the right way to go about it.”

When supervisors and those being supervised both accept this practice, the oversight system no longer functions as an independent control mechanism but becomes part of the very ecosystem it is meant to oversee. This power arrangement creates a subtle dependency between supervisors and subordinates, resulting in compromised oversight. Sisi (1st Inspector, female, Inspectorate General Unit) illustrates this dynamic:

“Any extra income usually just comes from the budget allocated for supervisory duties. It doesn’t require a large amount of money. What matters most is mutual understanding. We don’t ask for it; it is simply given as a token of appreciation, for example, when we carry out inspections or clarify public complaints in regional offices. When we visit regional units, sometimes they give it, and sometimes they don’t, but most of the time they do. It is just to cover travel expenses.”

Loyal subordinates with close personal ties to their superiors tend to receive favourable evaluations despite poor performance, while competent staff lacking such connections often receive low evaluations.

“To make things easier, smoother, and avoid delays. Public complaints go directly to the Head of Subdivision, not to me personally, making it possible for tokens of gratitude to be given. In my view, unless you try to approach and stay close to those in charge in the oversight division, you won’t be noticed. Public complaints often arise due to perceived police bias and unprofessionalism, particularly in stalled or unclear cases, and commonly concern illegal levies in licensing, recruitment, and pension disbursement beyond official charges.”

Disciplinary enforcement is likewise discriminatory. Pryan (1st Inspector, male, provost unit) noted that oversight is more lenient towards loyal subordinates.

“Corruption usually means stealing state money, right? But this is from someone’s own pocket. They give it because they feel guided or just out of that senior–junior bond. Sure, it’s our duty to guide them even without expecting anything in return—but if they show their appreciation through material gifts, I don’t see anything wrong with that. In our environment, subordinates are expected to be loyal. If you show loyalty, chances are you’ll get noticed by your superiors. But if you don’t, then just do your job properly, work objectively. What matters is you don’t bring shame to the unit.”

Although the statement appears neutral, it contains implicit pressure. Loyalty is constructed as a pathway to opportunity and recognition, while a lack of loyalty risks marginalisation. The phrase “don’t bring shame to the unit” functions as a boundary of tolerance and a subtle warning not to deviate from group norms.

Zayan (1st Inspector, male, complaint handling division) reported that abuses of power by loyalists are often overlooked or quietly dismissed without thorough investigation, whereas minor infractions by non-loyalists are met with swift and harsh penalties.

“We often see how people offer bribes to avoid scrutiny or cover up mistakes. There’s this idea that if someone has done you a favour, then you owe them support. You become tied—like, ‘Now that you’re indebted to me, you must help with my problem. If the gesture is sincere and there’s no expectation in return, some might say it’s acceptable to receive it. But if you refuse, you must do so politely. Still, what really bothers me in this division is how case follow-ups are judged. What we often see is that people are judged by how close they are to their superiors, or by what they give. Here, you can’t just say, ‘Sir, I didn’t do it, or that report isn’t true. That’s not how things work. You need someone—whether a peer, subordinate, or senior—to vouch for you. Without that, your career stalls.”

Ilmi (1st Inspector, female, Personnel Misconduct Investigation Division) similarly noted that, in complaint clarification—whether internal or public—loyalists are often shielded or handled informally, while non-loyalists are quickly referred to formal ethics hearings.

“Every gesture of appreciation should first be assessed. It should not be accepted simply because the giver is close to a high-ranking officer—this can enable favouritism and make the impossible appear possible. I disagree with such practices, particularly when the clarification process hasn’t even started, and the outcome remains unknown. Giving gifts beforehand could easily be seen as a bribe, especially if the giver later expects preferential treatment by referring to their previous generosity. However, if a token of appreciation is given after the process is completed and reported transparently to a superior, it may be considered acceptable. I do see that sometimes superiors behave that way. When subordinates regularly deliver contributions—whether money or other benefits—some leaders tend to become closer to them, regardless of their actual performance.”

Alon (Commissioner, male, code of ethics enforcement division) added that loyalists or those from elite backgrounds tend to be tried behind closed doors and with significant delays. Conversely, non-loyalists or those from non-elite backgrounds are publicly exposed and used as scapegoats to cover up the structural misconduct of their superiors.

“Subordinates facing ethics hearings often do whatever they can to protect themselves. In practice, the treatment differs based on career background. As a non-Akpol (police academy) graduate, I sometimes envy the privileges Akpol alumni receive—they’re often more protected, while those from the Brigadier track are left to struggle and more easily blamed.”

In fact, guilty loyalists often receive reduced penalties or are reinstated to strategic positions, while non-loyalists who commit minor infractions may face disproportionately severe sanctions.

“Some people resort to bribery to secure a lighter sentence, later worrying about how to recover the money spent. There’s a saying: ‘Guilty or not, what matters is having connections.’ It’s troubling—without a strong network, even capable or innocent individuals can be targeted or sacrificed if they’re not visible to those in power.”

This inequality is also evident in access to legal assistance. According to Sandro (Commissioner, male, Legal Affairs Unit), legal advocacy is provided exclusively to loyal subordinates, while those perceived as disloyal are often neglected or accompanied merely as a formality.

“In pretrial cases, the usual amount given is around ten million rupiah. Juniors who lack respect often offer less. We assist if the case looks winnable but avoid those that are too risky. The money isn’t demanded—it’s usually offered voluntarily. It is different from demanding ‘settlement money’, which is more direct. Our help is usually appreciated, so both sides are satisfied without needing to ask.”

Legal training is politicised as a site for informal income generation, where loyalists receive more flexible treatment than their non-loyal counterparts.

“Legal outreach programmes are funded annually through the office budget. Sometimes, we also earn extra income through these dialogues or events—especially when loyal subordinates in each regional unit genuinely appreciate our work. We don’t ask, but we don’t refuse if offered. The going rate is well known.”

In a system laden with symbolic authority, these units operate in a biased, selective, and manipulative manner. Although authority figures present themselves as guardians of morality and institutional honour, their role is largely symbolic rather than substantive. In practice, oversight becomes a tool to control loyalty rather than to uphold integrity. Rules and sanctions are not enforced fairly; instead, they are directed at those deemed disobedient or oppositional, while violations committed by loyalists or internal elites are often overlooked.

As Messerschmidt (1997, pp. 16, 33) argues, hegemonic systems sustain dominance not only through the reproduction of dominant masculinity via control and exclusion, but also through the active disciplining of subordinate groups constructed as disruptive. From performance supervision to disciplinary enforcement, hegemonic practices are a response to threats—particularly from subordinates seen as disrupting the stability of hierarchical power.

When internal corruption surfaces publicly, the authority does not perceive it merely as a threat to internal solidarity but also as a challenge to their own dominance. Consequently, decisions are no longer aimed at uncovering violations, but at restoring the institution's image and reasserting symbolic dominance through the institution's version of truth.

As a result, internal moral standards no longer rest on universal principles but rather yield to selectivity and the interest of supremacy. Justice becomes a symbolic reward for obedience rather than an equal right.

As Agam (1st Sub-Inspector, male, patrol division) explains, loyal subordinates, even those with mediocre or problematic performance, receive positive evaluations and escape sanctions. Conversely, those deemed undeserving are targeted with harsh judgments and sacrificed to cover up structural failures.

“One of my officers used to be in the military. They have many sub-units there as well, but because he was no longer wanted there, he was basically dumped here. Once he arrived here, he couldn’t really go anywhere else and ended up being overlooked, because he had already been labelled as problematic. So, when the yearly rotations and transfers came around, his name was never on the list. The question is, “Who’s really at fault?” In my view, if he genuinely wanted to change and improve himself, from being seen as bad to becoming better, people here would eventually notice it.”

Within this biased oversight system, subordinates internalise such practices as survival strategies to gain favourable evaluations and protection. As Messerschmidt (p. 115) notes, individuals continually monitor their behaviour to avoid negative judgment. Special treatment is therefore secured through transactional relationships, transforming internal control into a commodity where individuals are valued by their contribution to existing power structures (Pemberton, 2015, p. 40).

As a result, justice becomes accessible only to subordinates with material or symbolic capital. The structural issue lies here: as an extension of the state, internal authorities do not act autonomously but rather submit to hierarchical power and reproduce it downwards—ensuring continued compliance among subordinates.

This view aligns with Segal (1990, cited in Messerschmidts, 1997, p. 7), who argues that those in power can shape the actions of the powerless for their own interests, even though the latter still retain limited room for choice. These accounts from participants mirror wider structural conditions. Various civil society reports have likewise exposed the regime's systemic strategies to weaken monitoring and disciplinary mechanisms within the INP.

Civil society reports consistently highlight the systematic weakening of oversight within the INP. Yosarie et al. (2024) point to declining police accountability under presidential authority; Azeez (2024) identifies stalled reform and the marginalisation of external oversight; and YLBHI (2024) criticises the exclusion of public participation in police legislation.

The National Commission on Human Rights of the Republic of Indonesia (2024) and the Center for Indonesian Law and Policy Studies (PSHK) (2024) note that internal disciplinary mechanisms are increasingly deployed for political purposes—reactive in high-profile cases that attract media attention, yet largely ineffective in addressing routine violations.

Meanwhile, state oversight remains largely symbolic. Institutions such as the National Police Commission (2023), the Ombudsman (2023), the Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs (2023), and the Corruption Eradication Commission (2023; 2024) tend to reframe structural problems as matters of administrative inefficiency or isolated misconduct, thereby obscuring the systemic nature of power abuse within the INP.

Systemic corruption within these units reinforces internal dominance while materially harming subordinates, particularly those from lower social classes. Lacking access to “transactional justice”, they are most vulnerable to selective enforcement. According to the Public Affairs Division’s report (2023), nearly 6,000 disciplinary actions were recorded, yet only around 2.8% involved extortion, with none addressing its structural roots—revealing a disciplinary model that is harsh downward but avoids confronting higher-level abuses.

At the same time, authorities continue to project success through official performance acknowledgements and internal surveys on public satisfaction. Ironically, Transparency International (2020) lists the INP among institutions with the highest bribery rates (41%). This contradiction indicates that the structural elite prioritise public image or symbolic legitimacy, even if doing so means sacrificing and burdening the lowest ranks of the police.

5.3.2 Systemic Corruption in Operational Units

While corruption in administrative units of the INP often stems from hierarchical relations between superiors and subordinates, corruption in operational units more commonly arises from direct interactions between police officers and the public, as these units control access to public order or national security. Although these arenas appear distinct, they are closely linked in practice: corrupt arrangements within police hierarchy drive officers to extract benefits from citizens through discretionary authority, with gains flowing up the chain of command, forming an integrated system of corruption.

In Indonesia's historical context, dominant regimes have frequently deployed police operational units as instruments of political control rather than as institutions meant to protect marginalised communities, deliver inclusive public services, or uphold impartial justice. Police discretion is therefore selectively exercised to preserve the prevailing political and economic order, allowing policing to serve elite interests, suppress opposition, silence criticism, and secure compliance among grassroots communities—often framed as routine pre-emptive or preventive policing, proportional use of force, or even “excellent” public service.

A. Law Enforcement Units

Within law enforcement units, this study finds that hegemonic power structures often direct discretionary authority to protect the political-economic interests of dominant groups while suppressing those perceived as threatening the stability of the prevailing order.

The Special Criminal Investigation unit often shields elite corruptors and corporate offenders through compromise, while symbolic anti-corruption efforts target the vulnerable for public image, ignoring structural causes. Aksa (Adjunct Chief Commissioner, male, cybercrime investigator) does not view gifts or money from cooperative parties as a gratification. Rather, he sees them as social gestures—tokens of appreciation or goodwill.

“Helping people’s part of the job. If they say thanks with a bit of money, that’s just appreciation. Doing favours for bosses, mates, or anyone who needs a hand isn’t bribery, it’s just keeping good ties. Networking, inside or out, helps us get the job done. We help them, they help us. That’s how it works. If you’re not into helping people, don’t be a cop.”

Eros (Brigadier, male, anti-corruption investigator) believes that investigations must remain flexible, as law enforcement officers are public servants who should consider social values, rather than strictly adhering to procedural rules.

"When handling cases, people involved often offer something without being asked out of respect. In such cases, investigators never set expectations or force the issue because, these days, it's all about providing a service and receiving a thank-you. The question remains: Is it forbidden? In my view, it's not. Is it allowed? There's no definitive answer. Personally, I believe we should not refuse gifts outright, as I am a Muslim, and we are taught that blessings should not be rejected."

Alia (1st Inspector, female, industry and trade case investigator) similarly notes that personal relationships often influence the oversight of consumer protection. Illegal business operators who endanger consumer safety are frequently treated leniently if they are close to investigators. Meanwhile, compliant business owners without such connections risk becoming targets of harsh enforcement—even to the extent of being deliberately criminalised.

"As far as I know, giving a token of appreciation is fine—say, when we've provided a service and want to maintain good relations with business partners, as long as it's outside the scope of our official duties. If there's a personal connection that's not related to their dealings with the police, then that's totally fine. If it's purely personal and has nothing to do with any case or official matter, there's no problem with that."

In natural resources and environmental cases, Ina (2nd Inspector, female investigator) notes that suspects are often offered two resolution options: formal prosecution or an informal settlement through payment. She refers to this as a "semi-semi" practice—a grey area between legality and illegality, where money is viewed as informal compensation for leniency, such as halting the investigation or softening the narrative of the violation.

"Stuff like illegal levies, yeah, in our unit it's kind of a grey area. If someone wants their case sorted, they usually get two options: either jail time or paying a fine. That's how it is. It's more like a gift, right? I mean, we're not asking for it. But honestly, I don't think people give anything without expecting something in return. There's usually some kind of payback. I mean, no one just randomly gives something out of the goodness of their heart just to help."

In banking, taxation, and money laundering cases, Rehan (Adjunct Commissioner, male, investigator) states that gifts from the public are acceptable only after the case has been resolved both legally and administratively. However, he stresses the importance of assessing the giver's intention. If given sincerely and without the aim of influencing legal proceedings, such gifts may not constitute gratification.

"The difference is, gratification usually happens when a case isn't finished yet—like a way to smooth things over. But in some local customs, people genuinely feel grateful after getting good service from investigators. They give something on their own, without being asked or pressured. In some areas, this kind of awareness is high. Once the investigation's all done and dusted, they feel really thankful and just want to show their appreciation."

Similar practices are found in the General Crimes Division. The unit targets street-level crimes among the powerless, while trading protections to organised crime—such as gambling, prostitution, and extortion rackets—for informal benefits, and criminalising opposition to divert attention from deeper structural crises.

Sigra (1st Sub-Inspector, investigator of extortion, gambling, and sexual offences) notes that both complainants and suspects often offer money to influence the classification of a case. For instance, assault or adultery may be reframed as minor offences or redirected to civil court. While investigators are not permitted to guarantee outcomes, they may signal their best efforts—so long as the gift is given sincerely, without fixed expectations.

"When we handle a case, we don't set expectations. If someone gives money, fine—as long as it's voluntary and not requested. I always say, 'This won't affect the case—everything still goes by the book.' We assess the case first; I never promise outcomes. If the legal elements are there, we proceed. If not, I explain that's just how the system works. Gifts can be risky—they might be brought up later if someone's unhappy."

This view is reinforced by Fara (Brigadier, female, investigator of crimes against children, women, and human trafficking), who defines monetary offerings from involved parties as a "reward" or "blessing"—provided they are not solicited and are given sincerely, as expressions of satisfaction with the investigator's service, assistance, or goodwill.

"If people are happy with how we handled their case, I see it as a reward. As long as we don't ask for it and the case is handled fairly and properly, I consider it a blessing. I usually just read the situation. If the case can move forward properly, and we're being fair—I mean, if everything's done by the book—then I reckon that's a blessing too."

Meanwhile, the Narcotics Unit plays a dual role—on one hand, publicly fronting the war on drugs; on the other, criminalising victims of the very drug networks it hides in the shadows and quietly drains to sustain its informal power.

Ciro (Brigadier, male, narcotics intelligence officer) notes that individuals previously arrested in prior operations—such as dealers, traffickers, or entertainment venues facilitating drug transactions—frequently provide money or gifts to investigators as logistical support due to limited official operational funding.

"It's basically meant for operational needs. We get money from outside—from the public or our so-called "contacts" who sell or distribute drugs. Sometimes we've arrested a group of dealers or traffickers, and after that, we get to know them. Over time, we become familiar, and that makes it hard to take action. And to be fair, there are definitely certain places where our superiors have told us not to carry out drug raids. The money's often seen as part of coordination, not backing the business."

Haris (1st Inspector, male, psychotropics investigator) describes such giving as informal coordination, intended to build mutual understanding so that law enforcement can be carried out selectively, flexibly, or only on the surface, without exposing full criminal networks.

"When someone gives money to the enforcement team, it can affect how action is taken. The person might have already planned to use or deal drugs but now feels more confident. Since they get an early warning, they can be told things like, 'Don't go there, there's going to be a drug raid,' so they avoid getting caught."

Likewise, Mira (1st Sub-Inspector, female, narcotics investigator) reports that financially capable families often negotiate better outcomes for their relatives. When investigators have close ties with families, suspects often receive lenient treatment, and cases may be informally dropped before prosecution. Gifts in this context are seen as mutual help, as long as they do not impose a personal burden on the investigator.

“If someone close to us needs help and we can manage it, then it’s fine—as long as it’s not a burden. If a family member got arrested for drugs, I’d ask for help too. A friend who was jailed told me it cost her a lot just to get by inside. That’s why, if possible, I’d prefer the case stay at the police level. It’s mutual help—everyone benefits.”

The findings indicate that officers serve not only as law enforcers but also as moral gatekeepers, holding exclusive authority to define right and wrong based on their own power logic. They decide who deserves punishment, protection, or leniency according to hierarchical interests. The role is reinforced institutionally, placing the police not only as the final line of legal enforcement, but also as key agents of regime stability or the so-called “guardians” of the public. This structural position frames every police action as an act of maintaining law and order. As a result, any non-compliance with police enforcement is seen as a direct threat to legal supremacy or social order.

However, such dynamics serve to reinforce the existing power structures, relegating civil society—those excluded from dominant hierarchies—to a position of subjugation under state control. As hegemonic state agents, police investigators frequently claim their actions defend public morality. In practice, the law is enforced unevenly and selectively: privileged actors often receive special treatment and evade legal consequences, while marginalised groups become prime targets of prosecution.

In this context, access to justice is filtered through the police's hegemonic standards. Civil society is no longer just the subject of law enforcement but is symbolically required to submit to the investigator's moral interpretation—one that reproduces hegemonic masculine values. Ultimately, systemic corruption within the INP shifts law enforcement away from justice towards reinforcing the dominance of powerful groups.

The role of the police as enforcers of social norms aligns with what Messerschmidt (1997, p. 33) describes as a structural-situational mechanism deliberately institutionalised to uphold a social system that centralises power in patriarchal, capitalist, and racially or ethnically dominant actors—while defending it against the upward mobility of subordinated groups. Within this framework, the police play an ambivalent role as intermediaries of power: they exercise control over society while simultaneously being governed by the dominant regime that defines the direction and intent of law enforcement.

This ambivalence is reflected in many law enforcement actions by the INP, which are often used to divert public attention from the regime's failure to meet citizens' basic needs such as staple food prices, protection of the domestic economy, forest fire management, and recurring social conflicts (Indonesian National Police, 2024, pp. 18–32). As a result, Polri tends to adopt a top-down legal approach, prioritising stability over justice. Subordinate or minority groups who challenge the regime's stability or fail to align with the state's hegemonic morality are frequently targeted. Consequently, lower-class individuals—those without the means to bribe or exert influence — become the primary victims of systemic corruption within law enforcement.

This disparity is reflected in national crime statistics (Statistics Indonesia, 2023), which show that white-collar crimes—such as corruption, fraud, and embezzlement—account for just 12.5% of the 372,965 recorded cases, with corruption making up a mere 0.07% of these cases, despite its significant structural impact. In contrast, non-white-collar crimes, largely committed by the lower class, are met with far more aggressive responses (87.5%), even though their social impact is relatively minor.

Elite offenders are often treated leniently via political or economic channels, while those from marginalised communities are criminalised, and victims' reports are routinely ignored. Reports by the National Police Commission (Kompolnas) 2023) reinforce this pattern, with the CID (Reserse) consistently receiving the highest number of complaints from the public—97% in 2023—concerning legal delays and unprofessional or improper conduct.

In terms of gender, enforcement bias has eroded women's trust in the state's protection. When perpetrators possess economic capital or political ties, women's right to justice is often sacrificed. A 2024 survey by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection revealed that although violence against women rose from 8,764 cases in 2020 to 12,416 in 2024, only 0.02% of victims reported to the police. Studies (Nurfazilah et al., 2021; Sakinah et al., 2025) further show that dominant actors involved in local trafficking of women and children often use bribes to influence the case, from reducing charges and freeing suspects to speeding up or stalling investigations or even halting them altogether.

Meanwhile, discriminatory law enforcement continues to undermine state recognition of ethnic minorities and Indigenous communities, such as in Papua and Poso. Civilians in these regions are frequently stigmatised as separatists or terrorists rather than recognised as victims of systemic neglect. Their arrests are portrayed as victories for domestic security, rather than evidence of the state's failure to deliver fair and inclusive development (INP Annual Report, 2023). Crime statistics (Statistics Indonesia, 2024) reinforce these fears by labelling both areas as high-crime zones, without accounting for the structural or historical context behind such categorisations.

B. Public Service Units

This study finds that public administrative service units, formally designed to operate in a neutral and service-oriented manner, have been reshaped by hegemonic power structures into instruments of social, economic, and political control. Rather than addressing public needs, these units function as sites where resources are extracted from citizens—particularly from vulnerable groups—and redirected to serve the political and economic interests of dominant elites.

First, the Traffic unit has turned routine services such as driving licences and vehicle documents into off-budget revenues streams used to support elite operational needs, money politics, and regime control. In practice, stratified service delivery allows the police to define their authority as a privilege: they fast-track those with ties to power networks, while relegating ordinary citizens to informal channels of access for equal treatment.

In the new vehicle registration unit, Angkola (Chief Brigadier, male) disclosed that the unit generates revenue through vehicle taxes, physical inspections, ownership transfers, and registration relocations. In practice, funds collected via dealers or showrooms often exceed the official fees, with the surplus informally distributed according to rank. He noted that senior officers also benefit from this surplus under the justification of "organisational needs"—frequently receiving a larger share than all subordinates combined.

"I reckon the tax for new vehicles is sort of official, probably part of the Non-Tax State Revenue, since it goes straight through dealers or showrooms. The money gets split among the staff, though the higher-ups also take their share. These "contributions" are seen as something the organisation just needs, and they usually end up with the biggest portion. People expect quicker service, so the staff tend to check the documents more closely."

Regarding vehicle registration renewal, Ishan (1st Inspector, male) stated that taxpayers often request "assistance" to avoid queues and bureaucratic delays, typically through direct payments to staff or via service agents acting as intermediaries.

"Sometimes, vehicle taxpayers give a bit of money as a thank-you. It really depends on the officer—whether they choose to accept it or not. It's a bit of a grey area; some see it as a return for the service, even though we're not supposed to ask for anything. Service agents usually offer a win-win, since people either want to speed things up or simply can't make it themselves."

In the case of driving licences, Nasto (Adjunct Commissioner, male) explained that applicants who pay extra or have personal connections tend to pass more easily. In contrast, others must endure slower, more complicated procedures—often prompting them to seek unofficial assistance.

"One time, a mate of mine wanted to get a driving licence, but he was about to go through a fixer who would've marked up the cost. So I told him, 'See Officer A to sort it properly.' Then he asked, 'How much should I give, Sir?' I said, 'Just pay the official fee, but if you want to give more, that's entirely up to you.' Usually, at the district police level, whoever's in charge of the driving licence service reports all the earnings directly to the Police Chief".

Second, the Intelligence Unit has also shifted from a public security role to a tool of political and social control over ordinary citizens. Under a hegemonic regime, its authority is used not only to manage and manipulate information but also to commodify police clearance certificates and event permits to monitor civil society activities seen as threatening to the regime.

For the police clearance certificate, Reni (1st Inspector, female) admitted that the police clearance process is deliberately complex, making self-service difficult despite the availability of online applications. As a result, many applicants rely on informal intermediaries near service offices, where staff often facilitate the process through fixers who collect unofficial fees framed as tokens of appreciation or service assistance.

"We help them, and when they say thanks with a bit of money, we take it—to keep things friendly in case they need help again in the future. If we refuse, they might feel that what they gave wasn't enough. The SKCK fees are set by law, but many people ask the police to sort it out, turning it into a service. Officers often charge more—like 1 million rupiah instead of 500k—saying it's for transport or such. If people give extra by choice, that's fine. But setting a fixed fee upfront? That's corruption. The intention is to make money, and to be honest, a lot of officers here do that to earn extra cash."

Dira (Adjunct Commissioner, female), who oversees public event permits, explained that obtaining permits for social, cultural, religious, or political events are mandatory to maintain public order and security. Although the process is formally straightforward, cooperative applicants tend to receive faster processing, while those seen as uncooperative may face delays or rejection, sometimes accompanied by voluntary tokens of appreciation.

"I used to help with public event permits. Some people thought they had to pay a bribe, but I told them, 'Just follow the rules—it's simple.' Once they did, they realised there were no hidden costs. When someone asked why there wasn't an extra cost, I explained, 'Just follow the process and don't push officers to skip steps, especially if your documents aren't complete.' We have to be thorough for public events. We don't want anything improper that could become an issue later on. One person, grateful for the help, returned with a small gift. I said it wasn't necessary, but he insisted it was personal thanks, so I let him hand it to the officer who processed his permit."

Third, hegemonic power instrumentalises Binmas, the police unit that issues security and civil protection licences, to establish a cartelised security market. By controlling licensing and regulation, Binmas monopolise access, deciding who receive licences and who is excluded. This power creates strict hierarchies and dependencies within the sector, making commercial security permits and private security entry seem normal. As private capital enters, public security shifts from a collective right to a commodified service (Kartika, 2025).

In private security certification services, Rinai (1st Inspector, female) explained that private security certification services often generate unofficial payments from business owners and applicants. Those with police connections gain easier access to permits, while extra fees beyond official tariffs are normalised as compensation for staff. Officers typically prefer small, repeated payments to maintain trust and service continuity.

“Officers now earn a bit extra from running training for private security guards. Commercial security companies also apply for training permits and use our instructors. Things are more structured now—certifications and IDs are handled regionally. Our neighbourhood officers help gather locals wanting to become security guards. For ID renewals, the official fee is 85,000 rupiah, but we usually add a bit—say, 100,000 or 150,000. Still, we keep it reasonable. It’s better to take a small profit regularly, so people keep coming back every couple of years when they need a renewal.”

The commercialisation of public services reflects a structural reorientation of the INP from a guarantor of justice and equity into a conduit for dominant interests operating through market logics. Within hegemonic masculinity, this shift is structurally determined rather than individually driven, rooted in the INP’s subordinate position within the state. Although the police appear dominant over civilians, particularly marginalised groups, this authority is superficial, as they remain subordinated to hegemonic forces that dictate policy and resource allocation.

This structural dependency compels the institution to act strategically, reconfiguring its services to secure institutional survival and authority, often by privileging elites at the expense of subordinate groups. As James W. Messerschmidt (1997, p. 63) contends, shifts in masculinity arise not only from structural pressures but also from reflexive and strategic actions aimed at sustaining recognition as masculine authority.

In this light, the covert commercialisation of police services is not just a natural outcome of aligning with elite interests, but also a masculine achievement—a way for dominant actors to preserve hegemony. Corruption in the form of selective, stratified, and exclusive public services becomes informally legitimised, as long as it continues to benefit the dominant elite by maintaining the subordinate group's dependency.

As Pemberton (2015, p. 51) points out, when the state is subordinated to a hegemonic political economy, essential public services deteriorate in quality, access, transparency, and accountability, shifting from meeting social needs to generating profit for politically and economically dominant actors. This trend is evident in the INP's resistance to proposed reforms, such as lifetime driving licences and the removal of SKCK requirements—both of which are seen as potentially reducing official revenue, despite easing burdens for low-income citizens and reducing discrimination (Roring, 2025). Ironically, these police services record the highest bribery rates in Indonesia—nearly double the Asian average—meaning that citizens must pay unofficially at twice the rate of neighbouring countries (Transparency International, 2020, p. 42).

In this logic, the INP no longer views the public as an inclusive whole but instead narrows its focus to those who are politically or economically beneficial. As a result, subordinate groups are forced to "purchase" their basic rights. Essential needs—such as employment, mobility, legal identity, protection, and freedoms of assembly, religion, speech, and political participation—become vulnerable to exclusion and remain unmet.

The 2024 Anti-Corruption Behaviour Survey by Statistics Indonesia (BPS), involving 11,000 households, clearly illustrates this public disempowerment. Around 30.1% of respondents tolerated bribery within police services, and three out of four who had paid bribes described it as a “thank you” or a means of maintaining good relations. Although the majority (69.9%) viewed the practice as inappropriate, nearly all (98.69%) chose to stay silent—fearing backlash, complications, or other negative consequences—reflecting their subordinate position.

Ironically, most respondents came from low-income backgrounds, including individuals with less than a high school education, family responsibilities, and a modest monthly income of between 1 and 2.9 million rupiah. These are the citizens who rely most heavily on state services but also face the greatest risk of becoming victims of systemic corruption—simply because they lack the socio-economic bargaining power to push back.

C. Public Order and Community Policing Units

Under hegemonic rule, public safety is politicised shifting from inclusive protection for all to a tool shielding the powerful from perceived threats below. Within the INP, the Public Order (*Sabhara*) unit plays a key role in enforcing political order—guarding regime-backed ventures and sweeping aside perceived threats, from those labelled as social diseases to critical protesters (Sihombing et al., 2025). Meanwhile, the Community Policing (*Binmas*) unit portrays itself as a channel for citizen engagement but in practice acts as the regime’s messenger—disguising control as dialogue and steering communities toward compliance (Amin et al., 2025).

Within these units, authority is situational—repressive actions during protests, evictions, or patrols are not seen as abuses of power, but as ritual displays of loyalty to the chain of command. Conversely, refusing unethical orders or questioning superiors is often deemed deviant and punishable, even when morally motivated by a commitment to public protection. Authority becomes currency—citizens who serve as loyal allies of the police earn security and protection, while the noncompliant face targeted raids and repression.

Within the public reporting unit, Farel (Commissioner, male) admitted that officers tend to selectively filter public reports or complaints about threats to their safety. Complaints from people with high social status are often prioritised handled more quickly, taken more seriously, and even assisted in drafting the report, especially when accompanied by incentives. Meanwhile, reports from ordinary citizens are often delayed, complicated, rejected, or pushed towards informal settlements that favour those with priority.

“Police are meant to serve, but even filing reports can be a way to earn. There are numerous ways to lodge a police report—some cases are sorted informally, while others proceed formally, often with gifts to expedite the process. Helping should be genuine, but once you're in the job, you see it's rarely pure—there's always a return expected. But if it's just out of kindness—it's a grey area, really. Sometimes, people use their connections not just to get favours, but to pressure the police.”

Agam (1st Sub-Inspector, male, patrol division) acknowledged that patrol activities are based on subjective judgment and are often exploited for financial gain. In practice, inspections are selectively targeted and carried out in a repressive manner—sometimes merely to find faults for profit, not due to actual offences.

“We often set up fake checkpoints on the road. We'd be out on patrol, spot an overloaded truck, pull it over, and ask for cash—usually about 200k. It's just how things go here, you know—part of the local custom to smooth things over.”

He noted that lower-income drivers or regular citizens are often expected to pay to avoid having their vehicles seized or being disturbed, while large companies, elites, and government officials not only avoid sanctions but also receive special escorts via semi-commercial security services still under official command.

“Sometimes we'd just chill at a roadside café, and someone would drop by with cash. Then a patrol officer said, 'Hey, we're low on fuel—let's go somewhere else. The usual job is escorting money deliveries to ATMs. It's not off-duty work. There's an official assignment letter for it. Like, if today there's a request to move money from point A to point B, it'll be escorted. There is extra pay, but it's only for the escort team, not all Sabhara officers.”

He also mentioned that securing court-ordered evictions serves as a unit's primary income source, although most of the funds are allocated to higher-level officers rather than field officers.

“We'd often get guard duty during court evictions—like when the land's ordered to be cleared. But the pay gets skimmed from the top. It's meant to be 150k, but we'd only see 75. Court staff told us, 'It's supposed to be more, mate!' One time, we were getting 100, then it jumped to 250—turns out that was the real amount all along.”

Diani (Adjunct Commissioner, female, Traffic Fines Division) stated that fine payments do not go to the state treasury, but to the unit's internal fund for officer bonuses and the needs of superiors. The pressure to meet financial targets fuels repeated fining practices.

"Sometimes the boss says, 'Stop — anti-graft's watching,' so we pause issuing fines. But pressure from above doesn't stop. It's never for long. Eventually, we're back at it again because there's always some bigger need, and they can't cover it all. So even if they say stop fining, the demand for money keeps going. In here, we've got a budget from traffic tickets—they're seen as a right for officers. If they're paid fairly, they'll think twice before doing dodgy stuff. But when it keeps getting cut, we've got no say—we just take it. Then they start feeling like the money from tickets isn't enough, and that's when some of them start setting targets on the street."

According to her, requests for leniency from offenders are seen as regular social exchanges—as long as they're not excessive—since rejecting them might harm social ties.

"I don't see it as a big deal. Sometimes it's just about keeping in touch, building a bit of a connection. You become mates that way. As long as it doesn't harm your job or career, it's fine. People help each other out. Saying no can feel awkward, so you end up helping if it's someone you know."

Della (Adjunct Commissioner, female), who handles traffic safety campaigns, admitted that extra income often comes from partnerships with private vehicle companies, biker communities, and educational institutions. These contributions are viewed as fair compensation for their role as speakers or facilitators and are distributed hierarchically.

"It's all about keeping good connections. Dealers help with safety riding events — sometimes they give helmets or little gifts to schools. It's a give-and-take. When we're asked to speak, there's an envelope sometimes, and sometimes not. If there are two mil, I take one as the unit head, and the rest is split between the team. Without connections, no gigs, no extra money, no 'vitamins' for the lads. The money gets divided by rank—higher rank, bigger cut."

Similarly, dominant powers use community policing to create political legitimacy and secure public compliance. Social conditioning makes police authority serve regime interests, becoming accepted and seen as apolitical.

Arvat (Adjunct Commissioner, male, Community Policing Division) described his work as going door-to-door to solve local problems. He often gets money, gifts, or services from community leaders or residents who want support, protection, or faster police action.

"We keep in touch by visiting mates regularly. It brings us closer. Sometimes they've got issues that need looking after, and we help out by tagging along or keeping an eye on things. If it's a mate from afar, I just pop in, say hello, and have a quick 10–15-minute chat. It's all about friendship and being there for whoever we can support. Once the bond's there, they often hand something over without us needing to ask — and we put part of it into the team fund."

He views these as sincere gestures of goodwill aimed at strengthening social bonds.

"If you give sincerely out of friendship, it's just helping. Sometimes we do nothing, but people still feel close. Like, 'Your family's like my own family,' and next thing they say, 'Here, have some pocket money.' It's all about keeping good relations. What matters is the friendship. Blessings can come from anywhere."

These field findings show that the police's role as guardians of public safety is no longer carried out impartially. Instead, it's shaped by institutional logic that normalises corrupt practices. This logic drives officers to favour the interests of dominant groups rather than ensure equal protection for all—especially the poor or vulnerable. Public safety is treated as a private commodity, dependent on one's economic or political power, rather than a universal right guaranteed for all.

In the context of hegemonic masculinity, the core duties of the INP have become a performative arena for power-based masculinity—constantly negotiated between dominant and minority groups. As Messerschmidt (1997, pp. 73–74) notes, such arenas often see dominant groups asserting power over minorities, while any attempt by the latter to challenge or renegotiate their position is met with criminalisation, stigmatisation, or structural barriers.

Therefore, the police cannot be seen merely as a passive technical executor, nor as a fully autonomous actor. Instead, it operates as an intermediary agent—pulled between two structural pressures: the demands of the state and dominant groups for stability on the one hand, and the broader public's demand for equal protection on the other. Within this constrained space, officers don't simply follow orders mechanically—they interpret and improvise based on power context. Loyalty is not shown through neutrality, but through strategic alignment with whoever holds power at the time.

In practice, discretionary policing operates through selective decisions over who is protected and who is subjected to discipline in the name of social order. Such practices systematically privilege economically and politically dominant groups, while positioning vulnerable populations as threats to be contained or neglected—even in contexts where protection is effectively commodified through police-facilitated security services. As Messerschmidt (2018, p. 44) argues, hegemonic masculinity is sustained by discrediting and marginalising others to legitimise the authority of the “protector.” In this sense, selective protection constitutes a gendered performance of power, reinforcing the police's authority as both guardians of public order and instruments of dominant interests.

As a result of systemic corruption within these units, there is a growing indifference towards the physical insecurity faced by marginalised groups. Traffic law enforcement often lacks sensitivity to social inequality, leaving poor drivers especially vulnerable to being targeted during roadside checks—usually accompanied by demands for bribes.

INP Traffic Corps (2023) indicate that routine violations—such as helmet non-use or driving against traffic—are concentrated among low-income groups, reflecting how enforcement disproportionately burdens those with limited resources. Rather than functioning as neutral regulation, traffic fines often operate as mechanisms of extraction, especially for minority groups who report opaque and non-procedural practices, including the absence of formal charges and on-the-spot “settlements” (Mubashir et al., 2019; Populi Centre, 2023).

According to Statistics Indonesia (BPS) (2024, p. 73, 81), four in ten Indonesian households feel unsafe, particularly in highly unequal regions. Yet only 23% of victims report crimes, with most opting for silence or informal resolution. This reflects not ignorance, but a rational disengagement from a system perceived as unresponsive or hostile, shaped by material constraints and fears of intimidation or criminalisation (Handaningtias et al., 2022; Syahirah and Samodro, 2024). This vulnerability is further evident in land conflicts, where police act less as neutral mediators than as enforcers of corporate and state interests, routinely suppressing farmers, rural communities, Indigenous peoples, and land rights activists (ANGOC and LWA, 2023).

All of these patterns suggest that the meaning of corruption within the INP is not merely structurally imposed but continuously reproduced through everyday institutional life. What counts as legitimate or illegitimate conduct is continuously shaped through ongoing social interactions, as officers come to internalise definitions that align with and sustain dominant power interests. The following section therefore examines how these definitions are learned, normalised, and transmitted across both institutional and social terrains.

5.4 The Hegemonic Socialisations of Police Corruption

After recognising that power defines corruption within its specific context, this chapter analyses how the Indonesian National Police (INP) systematically reproduce hegemonic values through the lens of Differential Association. Field findings demonstrate that ruling social groups in Indonesia sustain their dominance over the INP by systematically embedding their values through two primary channels: internal and external socialisation. These pathways act as symbolic mechanisms through which the police institution normalises and legitimises existing power hierarchies.

Internalisation begins early in the process of professional identity formation, where INP officers are gradually conditioned to obey not only formal commands but also informal, everyday power relations that serve the interests of those in control. Through this continuous internalisation, hegemonic values become embedded in daily routines, fostering selective obedience and loyalty—directed not toward universal ethical principles, but toward power figures perceived as moral exemplars.

Referring to Gramsci (2000, pp. 234, 306), dominant social groups sustain their power not primarily through coercion, but through intellectual and moral hegemony embedded within institutional apparatuses. By presenting their moral values as “universal truths,” these groups uphold a social structure that ultimately serves their own interests. Institutions such as education, media, and religion become key instruments in the socialisation of these values, gradually shaping them into “common sense” narratives that are internalised and accepted uncritically by subordinate and minority groups. As a result, the existing social order is perceived not only as legitimate but also as natural—a reflection of moral authority and rationality.

However, moral rationality, which should be reflective and critical, becomes displaced by procedural rationality: an adherence to rules and hierarchies defined by the dominant. In this way, hegemony operates subtly but powerfully—not through direct repression, but by moulding collective consciousness, leading subordinated groups to defend the very structures that limit their autonomy.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony finds a micro-sociological articulation in Sutherland (1983, pp. 221, 236, 251), who demonstrates how dominant groups disseminate hegemonic values and cultivate obedience through systematic, multi-layered strategies. These begin early in socialisation, with education and propaganda used to instil beliefs and values that align with the ruling class's interests. Mass media is controlled to shape public opinion in favour of dominant groups, while intellectuals and civil society are often co-opted to maintain the elite's moral image.

Through ideology and social stereotypes, dominant groups present themselves as embodiments of success, discipline, and integrity. In contrast, subordinate groups are systematically stigmatised through narratives that frame them as morally inferior depicted as undisciplined, immoral, and untrustworthy. These discursive constructions legitimise social hierarchies and reinforce the perceived naturalness of elite dominance. Success is framed as moral virtue and social achievement, while manipulative power dynamics are normalised—and even celebrated—if aligned with dominant social norms. Meanwhile, critiques of injustice or inequality stemming from an elite-serving, corrupt order are often ideologically delegitimised, framed as threats to social harmony or national stability.

Simultaneously, regulatory and oversight institutions are frequently co-opted or manipulated to exclude elite misconduct from official definitions of corruption. This strategic exclusion shields the powerful from both social accountability and moral condemnation, reinforcing a system in which structural injustice is rendered invisible under the guise of order and legitimacy.

In this context, Sutherland (1978, pp. 80–81) argues that individuals, particularly from lower social strata, internalise both structural and symbolic subordination through socialisation. Through interactions with dominant groups, they internalise submission as both expected and appropriate. In everyday encounters, they learn to comply with authority figures while simultaneously developing motives and moral justifications that privilege obedience over critical reflection or ethical reasoning. This internalisation is further reinforced through close relationships with authority figures such as superiors, teachers, religious leaders, cultural icons, and family members. Over time, subordination comes to be seen not merely as strategic, but as morally legitimate.

At the macro level, studies in Indonesia show that hierarchical values are internalised as 'common sense' through normative social conditioning. Under such conditions, loyalty and conformity to hierarchy are actively naturalised and valorised as socially desirable, often at the expense of commitments to justice and equality (Brown, 2019; Noor, 2022; Jasmisari et al., 2024). Consequently, subordinate groups may unwittingly participate in sustaining the very hegemonic order that marginalises them. Hegemony thus extends beyond material structures, operating within symbolic and moral domains to normalise corrupt obedience and render systemic inequality both morally legitimate and socially inevitable. In such a context, domination appears natural, unquestioned, and rarely contested.

5.4.1 Internal Socialisation

Within the INP, the values of dominance and obedience are systematically and intensively instilled, beginning from recruitment and continuing through daily field assignments. Over time, this process has evolved into a deeply rooted institutional tradition, reinforced through everyday interactions where senior officers assert authority over junior members—who, in turn, often lack the capacity to question or challenge this established hierarchy.

“Maybe it’s just been passed down over the years, but they’ve copied all the wrong examples. There are still plenty of good officers around — it’s just that some fall in with the wrong crowd and pick up bad habits.” (Alia, Adjunct Commissioner, Male, Community Development Unit).

Through these interactions, long-standing routines—including those aligned with organisational standards—are passed down from one generation to the next.

“Orders come down from the seniors, and we just do as we’re told. Some of it doesn’t always make sense, but it’s passed off as ‘duty’ or ‘security reasons’. In the end, what gets passed down first is whatever suits those above.” (Arvat, Adjunct Commissioner, Male, Community Development Unit).

However, alongside these inherited routines, pragmatic practices—such as leveraging one’s position to accumulate material resources and symbolic capital—are also absorbed and gradually normalised within the institution’s hegemonic daily order.

“That’s because it’s passed down from the seniors. A senior might say, ‘If you want to earn a bit extra, here’s what you need to do.’ Then he retires, and those he trained keep it going. It’s a mindset that’s been handed down from generation to generation.” (Rinai, First Inspector, female, Community Development Unit).

Senior officers, as agents of symbolic transmission reinforcing hegemonic masculinity, play a key role in embedding values of loyalty, obedience, and submission to authority—framed as virtues that guide new members to internalise institutional norms, emulate established leadership models, perform commendably, seek recognition, and refrain from challenging those very values.

“There needs to be a clear hierarchy, so we know exactly who we’re dealing with. Seniors are meant to guide us — to show us how to behave and handle superiors. That kind of senior-junior system actually works well, especially during rotations, when a few seniors stay behind to train newcomers and keep things running smoothly. Still, it can be tough — at the Police Academy, as far as I know, juniors can’t really refuse or go against seniors.” (Cakri, 1st Sub-Inspector, male, Traffic Unit).

However, the internalisation of hegemonic values often occurs informally, with many officers learning independently by observing experienced colleagues—highlighting that transmission is not solely tied to rank or formal authority.

“I learned everything on my own. When I first joined the police, I worked under several different patrol heads, and later, in the Criminal Investigation Unit, the leadership style changed again. There are lessons I’ll carry if I ever lead a team or unit myself. I’ve also learned a lot from my own team members. Maybe it’s because I was seen as more experienced — even older than the station chief — that the leadership didn’t really bother to guide me.” (Endah, 1st inspector, male, headquarters service unit).

Police education serves not merely to deliver technical and formal knowledge, but to mould the cognitive and affective dispositions through which officers internalise, legitimise, and perpetuate existing systems of authority, loyalty, and hierarchy.

“If you look closely, it all starts back in police training. I noticed it early on—even when it wasn’t that common yet. Trainees would offer small favours or tokens to instructors, hoping for a bit of special treatment. That kind of behaviour was already embedded in the training culture. It wasn’t blatant during basic training, but it became much more pronounced in the later stages—that’s where the habit of giving to superiors really takes hold,” (Marzio, 1st Inspector, male, Operations Unit).

This internal socialisation process extends well beyond graduation, as officers integrate into their assigned units and experience an ongoing acculturation that further consolidates hegemonic values and embeds them more profoundly within the institutional culture.

"I think it really depends on the work environment. Different units have different cultures. So once someone joins a particular unit, they automatically must adapt to their colleagues, their superiors, and the environment where they're assigned." (Darwin, Adjunct Commissioner, male, Public Relations Unit).

In daily practice, INP actors embody these values as defining traits of a successful officer, implicitly positioning superiors as role models whose behaviour sets the standard for juniors to internalise.

"If you're lucky to get a good senior, they'll teach you the ropes. Since we don't report directly to higher-ups, newcomers shouldn't come in thinking about extra money. It's better to show loyalty and focus on doing the job well first. If you start off chasing money, people won't like it — they'll think, 'Why's the new guy already thinking that way?' (Angkola, Chief Brigadier, male, Traffic Unit).

Within this framework, hierarchical obedience to superiors' interests is deemed the highest integrity, even when it conflicts with objective standards grounded in public interest or substantive justice.

"From the very beginning of our training, we were shaped to think that way. In my opinion, ethics, respect for our superiors, seniors, and those older than us, and hierarchy are more important than hierarchy alone. Having good ethics and doing the right thing — that's what truly matters," (Aksa, Adjunct Chief Commissioner, male, Special Crimes Unit).

Over time, harmful displays of authority exercised in the service of superiors—such as corrupt arrangements that channel public resources into the hands of higher-ranking officers—become normalised as legitimate expressions of obedience and loyalty. Within this framework, the dominant group perceives new members who appear passive or hesitant to adapt as threats to institutional order. As a result, these individuals are often directed—or subtly coerced—into conforming to the unwritten rules that sustain the existing power structure.

"Newcomers don't always grasp the organisation's culture—they don't really know how things work, even with formal rules in place. But that's not enough. The real issue is two-sided: newcomers don't want to learn, and the old hands don't want to teach." (Sinar, Adjunct Chief Commissioner, male, Narcotics Unit).

Individuals who are overly idealistic or who resist entrenched institutional values are frequently marginalised, as the system privileges conformity to inherited norms over individual merit or achievement.

"Honestly, he's only hurting himself. He doesn't even see how things have changed. I've been there — back at the local station, we were working without direction. You end up worn out, lost, and pushed aside. Maybe one in a thousand makes it through. Most just follow the system, go with the flow, and hope lucks on their side. Merit alone won't get you far." (Ciro, Brigadier, male, Narcotics Unit).

In specific units—particularly those serving strategic political or profit-driven institutional interests—unquestioning obedience to superiors, even at the expense of the public good, gradually shifts from a personal compromise to a structural obligation. Refusal to fulfil this obligation often results in social exclusion and marginalisation within the institution's internal power networks.

"Yes, whether we like it or not, that's just the way things are. There's a saying—money is never enough, whether you're wealthy or not. If a junior were to say, 'No, I don't want to be involved in that,' they'd end up isolated. No one would want to be friends with them, because that's just how the culture works. Clearly, what's been happening is part of a long-standing tradition—a culture that's been passed down over generations." (Agam, 1st Sub-Inspector, male, Patrol Unit).

As Sutherland (1945, p. 137) observes, dominant values are embraced through shared cultural backgrounds, rendering them taken for granted and difficult to contest. Many studies show that white-collar crime and corruption spread through work networks, including peers, colleagues, and outside lobbyists (Alpert and Dunham, 2004; Chappell and Piquero, 2004; Matsueda, 2006; Brooks, 2016). Within such contexts, compliance with power structures operates less through coercion than through the uncritical acceptance of hegemonic norms, rendering corrupt practices routine, legitimate, and detached from moral scrutiny.

5.4.2 External Socialisation

Police officers are also situated within broader socialisation processes that instil hierarchical obedience through seemingly neutral domains—family, education, religion, culture, peer networks, and retired INP circles—where dominant groups shape values and normalise deference to authority.

As Sutherland (1978, p. 100) highlights, these domains function as key sites of moral learning, embedding norms of conduct to which individuals are expected to conform. While his framework allows for tensions between competing norms, in the Indonesian context such values largely converge, reinforcing a coherent moral order rather than producing conflict. This alignment normalises loyalty and conformity to hierarchy, constraining alternative ethical orientations. Consequently, officers are not navigating competing value systems but are consistently channelled towards definitions of acceptable conduct that sustain dominant power relations.

Within the family, parenting emphasises authority and respect through symbolic acts—such as offering items to elders or superiors—as expressions of politeness. Such habits promote courtesy yet naturalise inequality, presenting hierarchical relations as morally and socially legitimate and sustaining dominant power structures from an early age.

“I’ve seen it since childhood. Whenever my parents took me to visit my grandparents, we’d always bring something — fruit or food — as a sign of respect. So if that tradition still exists today, it’s because it’s been passed down through generations. Visiting someone without any agenda is perfectly fine, in my view. It only becomes an issue when there’s a hidden motive—that’s a different matter altogether.” (Dira, Commissioner, female, Human Resources Unit).

Self-worth is tied to constant achievement, fostering conformity to systems of relentless productivity, despite personal cost.

“My parents always told me—you should never be satisfied. You’ve got to keep pushing yourself to achieve even more.” (Asya, Commissioner, female, Human Resources Unit).

Simultaneously, reciprocity is taught as a moral duty, especially to one’s parents. Yet, this value can degrade into ends-based reasoning, where repaying support justifies unethical means, including the misuse of authority for familial obligation.

“If someone joins the police after a bit of money has changed hands but their parents never breathe a word about it, they’ll probably just get on with life as usual. But if they know that their way into the force was paved with money, then they’ll feel a moral debt to their parents. They’ll think, ‘I got into the police because my family spent money on me, so one day I must reciprocate—it’s only right to give something back.’” (Endah, 1st inspector, male, headquarters service unit).

Parents often instil values of status and honour in their children, viewing certain professions—like the police—as symbols of family pride. The INP role becomes more than a job—it symbolises the family’s legitimacy within a hierarchical social order.

“It all comes back to the parents. Raising a child takes effort and money, so their success becomes a source of pride, especially if they become police officers who play positive roles in society. For example, a good-looking officer who can recite the Qur’an earns admiration. People say, ‘Wow, this officer isn’t just in uniform but also devout.’ With that background, their children are often invited to give talks or lead religious events, and afterwards, people usually give small gifts as a gesture of appreciation.” (Ilmi, 1st Inspector, female, Security and Internal Affairs Unit).

Retired INP officers even raise their children to follow in their footsteps or prepare them as future breadwinners, internalising the INP role as a key path to personal and familial economic stability.

“It often comes down to the parents’ mindset. The child’s interest is sometimes half-hearted. Most parents I’ve seen are former traffic officers, so they know the ropes. If a father’s a Police Inspector and his child joins the force, they’re usually steered into traffic.” (Angkola, Chief Brigadier, male, Traffic Unit).

Formal education deepens hierarchical conditioning through disciplinary systems that equate obedience and deference to authority with moral virtue and success.

Within the school environment, teachers are positioned as dominant figures who instil submission, compliance, and respect, shaping superior–inferior dynamics from an early age. This perception—of teachers as inherently virtuous and students as dependent—is gradually normalised, laying the groundwork for acceptance of authority even before entering the police. Practices such as gift-giving to teachers, while presented as politeness or gratitude, quietly sustain hegemonic relations that normalise subordination.

"Even back when I was still in school—long before I joined the police—we were already taught how to show appreciation to others. For instance, as students nearing graduation, we would give what we could to the school. It was our way of showing our gratitude for our teachers' dedication. That's one early example, and it was usually done collectively, as a group effort." (Bimo, Brigadier, male, Human Resources Unit).

Upon deployment, officers internalise local social habits, signalling not mere adjustment but the absorption of dominant cultural values that uphold existing hierarchies within the community.

"Back in my village, helping meant just that—lending a hand without expecting anything back. When I was posted in Eastern Indonesia, I still saw a bit of that, though not often. But when I moved to City X, it was a whole different ball game. At first, I was taken aback, but in time, I learned to go with the flow. As a police officer, you've got to adapt to your surroundings—stick out too much, and people won't warm to you." (Farel, commissioner, male, operations unit).

As community members, they do not stand apart from these value systems but adapt to them to secure acceptance and avoid exclusion, reflecting a broader socialisation of dominant norms in which conformity is framed as a moral virtue essential to social harmony.

"It's often down to community influence. During training, we were never taught that—only to be grateful. But once you step into the real world, you see how things really work. People offer small favours to stay in an officer's good books, and some officers do the same to stay on their superior's good side." (Alon, commissioner, male, security and internal affairs unit).

Through close social networks, such as friends and neighbours, officers similarly internalise dominant values of reciprocity and cohesion, framed as expressions of solidarity and mutual care. Within this informal reciprocity, giving is never neutral—it carries implicit expectations that recipients will respond with loyalty, assistance, or deference. In return, givers accumulate symbolic capital in the form of respect and obedience. These subtle exchanges reproduce social obligation and indebtedness, transforming solidarity from a space of equality into a mechanism for legitimising dominance.

“Well, Indonesia is rich in culture, and the tradition of giving has been passed down through generations. It’s a form of silaturahmi—social bonding that continues naturally, often without us realising it. People share what they can, like bringing food and saying, ‘Sir, my wife made some gado-gado, would you like some?’ That’s how relationships are built—through simple gestures that connect families, friends, and communities. Everyone contributes based on what they’re able to give, and it happens across all levels of society.” (Purwanta, chief commissioner, male, security and internal affairs unit).

Religious institutions often model hierarchical structures that officers internalise, framing authority as divinely ordained and morally justified. It normalises obedience and legitimises deference—including material offerings or symbolic recognition from subordinate groups—as signs of divine goodwill. These moralised hierarchies readily transfer into policing, where power is seen as natural, virtuous, and inherently deserving of respect.

“The culture of giving to those in need runs deep—and from a religious point of view, it’s even encouraged. Although it’s clearly stated that giving money to a police officer, even after receiving help, isn’t allowed, many still do it. That’s because this habit of giving is ingrained from childhood and tied to religious values. People think, ‘I’ve got a bit to spare, so why not give?’ It’s part of our culture.” (Zayan, 1st inspector, male, security and internal affairs unit).

Police officers are socialised to revere religious leaders as moral authorities, often feeling obliged to comply to maintain proximity and gain moral legitimacy.

"Because that kind of support really helps a police officer carry out their duties. For example, if they're assigned to a particular area and have close ties with a religious leader or a local business figure, it can be a huge advantage. If any issues arise, those people will often step in to help." (Rizal, Adjunct Commissioner, male, Human Resources Unit).

Thus, external socialisation is as significant as internal processes, functioning as an ideological apparatus that conditions compliance even with corrupt authority, producing a subordinated consciousness that legitimises obedience and constrains resistance. As Sutherland (1978, p. 99) suggests, in cohesive societies, individuals are socialised from an early stage to conform to group norms, internalising them as authoritative even when they sustain unequal power relations.

This hegemonic logic conceals the reality that such harmful practices are not merely individual moral failures but structural conditions—embedded within a system that legitimises and perpetuates hierarchical obedience through continuous socialisation and habituation. In this light, and consistent with the preceding analysis, the resulting social harm is not incidental but actively generated by a moral order that elevates superiors as unquestionable authorities while conditioning subordinates into passive compliance.

Within such a system, authoritarian morality displaces moral autonomy, recasting critical judgement and resistance to unethical orders as deviant or counterproductive. Conformity, deference, and the subordination of personal interests are elevated as moral virtues, while acts of critique are stigmatised as disloyal—or even corrupt. Corruption, therefore, should not be seen as an individual deviation from moral norms, but as the manifestation of norms socially mediated by a power-laden system—a normalisation of systemic abuse hidden beneath the façade of public morality.

5.5. Conclusion

This chapter has unveiled how dominant regimes in Indonesia have not only tolerated but have woven systemic corruption into the very fabric of police power. To ensure regime continuity, those in power strategically orchestrate the exercise of police authority—underscoring that the problem stems not from isolated moral failings or personal gain, but from the deliberate integration of hegemonic values into the architecture of police governance itself, even at the expense of politically expendable populations. Dominant actors define corruption situationally and relationally, rendering its meaning relative across ranks and units.

This chapter begins by tracing the historical roots of systemic corruption within the INP. Since its inception, the institution has never been autonomous, operating instead within the orbit of political and economic power. In its early formation, corruption functioned as a mechanism of survival. Despite shifts in regime from Independence to the New Order, the police remained embedded in a logic of power centred on security and stability—a legacy that has evolved into an increasingly entrenched system of corruption in the Reform era. Over time, this trajectory has transformed the police into a “state within a state,” sustaining itself through unchecked authority that both feeds on democratic institutions and erodes human rights.

Building on this historical foundation, the chapter then examines how such conditions shape the ways in which police understand and enact power. The INP emerges not as a neutral institution but as one structurally oriented towards serving dominant elites, prioritising their interests over those of the public.

Within this framework, authority is no longer conceived as a public mandate grounded in justice, equality, or humanity, but as an expression of loyalty to power. Discretionary authority is thus mobilised to preserve existing hierarchies and sustain elite interests, rather than to uphold the principles it ostensibly serves.

They use law enforcement to repress and control the lower class, turning public service into a privilege reserved for those with access to power. Corruption is often tolerated if it serves to maintain police authority. The police definition of corruption becomes distorted. They no longer see it as an ethical violation that harms the public, but as a legitimate duty to maintain stability in line with the ruling power's demands.

However, they apply this selectively, strictly enforcing the law against outsiders—especially when acts threaten the regime's legitimacy. Under such conditions, the regime enables the police to normalise corruption and conditions them to overlook their own power as part of systemic abuse. Worse still, the authorities direct them to reproduce this decay by criminalising social groups—and even their own members—seen as threats to the corrupt order. As a result, vulnerable groups face deeper exclusion and greater harm.

Through Differential Association, the chapter concludes that the regime reproduces power values within the INP both institutionally and culturally, as officers internalise corrupt norms via seniority ties and external influences. Integration into corrupt networks signals both competence and obedience, while institutional taboos and loyalty norms suppress resistance.

CHAPTER 6: POLICE PRESSURES ON CORRUPTION

6.1. Introduction

After examining how the Indonesian National Police (INP) normalise corruption through hegemonic structures, Chapter Six will examine how these same structures generate pressures that shape the conduct of police personnel. It will argue that police corruption stems not from individual pressure, but from a power configuration that enforces hegemonic masculinity to sustain dominance in domestic security.

To explain how hegemonic structures shape corrupt police conduct, this chapter will first situate these pressures within a broader political-economic context. This is important because hegemonic structures are not autonomous but are produced and reproduced through power relations and material interests that generate and sustain such pressures. In this regard, the chapter will show how post-independence state formation positions the police as an ideological apparatus sustaining the dominant political and economic order. Under authoritarian expectations of loyalty, institutional neutrality becomes untenable, with pressures displaced onto police personnel while elite interests are prioritised. Corruption thus emerges not as a deviation, but as a functional means of managing these tensions, despite its costs to public legitimacy.

Before turning to the conclusion, the chapter will present empirical findings on how police personnel experience economic and political pressures. Drawing on General Strain Theory (GST), it will show how material and symbolic conditions within a hegemonic system—such as inadequate pay, unequal allowances, excessive workloads, and systemic misrecognition—contribute to harmful uses of power.

6.2. The Political Economy of Police Pressures

The hierarchical social order in Indonesia is not merely a cultural backdrop but a structuring condition that generates pressures normalising corruption within the police. Drawing on Agnew (2015), such a context is characterised by high power distance, where deference to authority and acceptance of hierarchy are normalised, limiting individual agency and discouraging autonomous decision-making. The prioritisation of collective over individual interests further conditions responses to structural pressures, fostering the internalisation of negative emotions rather than their open expression, thereby reinforcing compliance within existing power structures.

Crucially, these conditions do not operate in isolation but are sustained through hegemonic coalitions that reproduce elite dominance across successive regimes. By framing “stability” as the preservation of the status quo rather than the protection of all citizens (Aspinall et al., 2015, p. 7), such coalitions normalise and legitimise unequal power relations, making them more readily tolerated within society. In this context, the INP functions less as a neutral institution and more as an instrument of regime interests, protecting elite projects while repressing marginalised groups.

These pressures have reshaped the police to sustain ruling power. Politically, leadership is increasingly politicised and loyalty-based, distancing the INP from its democratic role (Mietzner, 2006; Siregar, 2025). Economically, it remains tied to elite-oriented policies, while limited budgets drive reliance on informal income such as illegal levies and commodified services (Baker, 2012; 2013; 2015; Muradi, 2014). Within this system, senior officers with regime ties access privileged resources, while lower ranks face overwork and low pay, making corruption a survival strategy in which compliance is rewarded and resistance punished.

Through state law, which subordinates the INP to presidential authority and institutionalises a vertically integrated chain of command, coercive power is centralised within a rigid hierarchy. By concentrating authority at the apex while enforcing strict subordination below, the law entrenches a command culture privileging loyalty over accountability (Sahwahitaa et al., 2024). This arrangement enables dominant elites to refashion the police into a microcosm of state power—pyramidal, extractive, and increasingly detached from social justice. This elite-driven system places structural pressure on lower-ranking officers, legitimising inequality and framing the resulting injustice as necessary for regime-maintained order (Petlach and Říčanová, 2025). Within this climate, conformity to a corrupt order emerges as a means of survival.

Quah (2018) shows that officers in “wet” posts are informally required to channel funds upward, with sanctions for non-compliance, creating a tiered system where burdens fall on lower ranks while benefits flow to the top. Similarly, Ahmad (2025) finds that lower-ranking officers engage in partisan politics, especially during elections, as part of elite patronage strategies—undermining professionalism, yet effectively securing elite control over the informal economy once their candidates come to power.

Agnew (2005, p. 27) conceptualises structural strain as unjust and often irresolvable pressures embedded in social conditions, creating space for corruption as an adaptive response. Such strain is reinforced by dominant structures that impose unrealistic ideals, reflecting Gramsci’s notion of hegemony (2000, pp. 204–206) in which power is maintained through coercion and consent. Within this dynamic, elites struggle to preserve authority while subordinates are compelled both to survive within the system and to seek upward mobility.

In the INP, rhetorical commitments to inclusivity mask an elitist, top-down structure that suppresses dissent and sustains hierarchical corruption. While elites monetise authority, lower-ranking officers are marginalised under a system prioritising power over justice (Ramadhan and Al Haq, 2025; Harun, 2026).

Pemberton (2015, pp. 28–39) argues that such institutional strain is an inherent mechanism of hegemonic systems for their self-preservation. Inequality is reproduced deliberately, placing individuals in roles of either control or submission. Those who reject hegemonic roles are disciplined and conditioned to endure structural limitations, with little opportunity to challenge the system. Meanwhile, those who comply are rewarded and encouraged to normalise hegemonic practices in the name of stability. Consequently, hegemonic interests override collective needs, such as welfare. Structural pressure benefits dominant groups while subjecting the powerless to the greatest strain.

As Agnew (2005, p. 26) notes, structural strain arises when social systems block goal attainment, restrict access to valued resources, or impose harmful conditions. This strain is unevenly distributed and closely tied to one's position within the social hierarchy (ibid., p. 156), with dominant groups tending to shift its burden onto subordinates. Consequently, those at the lower levels experience the greatest pressure due to limited access to power and opportunities.

Within the INP, this imbalance is clear: lower-ranking personnel face material strains such as poverty and lack of upward mobility, often internalised as personal failure under dominant ideology. It leads to passive compliance, while elites—facing only symbolic prestige pressures—exploit the system to retain power through privileged access and control.

This divergence shows that needs—both material and symbolic—are not universal but shaped by one’s position within hierarchical power relations. In hegemonic systems, while all actors pursue economic well-being and status recognition, the urgency, pathways, and barriers vary depending on their position in the hierarchy (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 124). Subordinate groups face greater urgency and barriers due to systemic exclusion, whereas dominant groups more easily fulfil prestige-based needs (*ibid.*, pp. 65, 366). Thus, as rank increases, needs become more complex—not due to new demands, but because social structures raise expectations. Within the INP, pressures intensify up the hierarchy: systemic corruption concentrates at higher levels, where greater authority brings greater demands, while at lower ranks it manifests as petty practices driven by structural constraints and the need for survival.

6.2.1. Economic Pressure

Lower-ranking police officers are structurally subjected to financial pressure within the INP’s top-heavy system, where senior elites monopolize control over resource distribution and decision-making. Despite the appearance of formalised procedures, allocation remains opaque and exclusionary, ensuring that outcomes reflect elite interests rather than frontline needs. As Reiner (2010, p. 71) suggests, such arrangements consolidate hierarchical domination by confining lower-ranking officers to high-risk roles with inadequate compensation. This, in turn, generates systemic dependence on superiors for access to resources and compels compliance—including corrupt practices—as a necessary strategy for meeting basic needs.

The INP's hegemonic order mirrors the regime's hierarchical and centralised economic structure. National-level policies tend to favour the interests of the regime's elite supporters over the collective needs of the broader population, particularly those in lower positions.

From the New Order to the post-Reformasi era, economic policies have subordinated the bureaucracy—including the police—to political-economic oligarchies. The rhetoric of nationalism, patriotism, and public-welfare-driven development has obscured the reality that low wages, uneven benefits, and politicised budgets are part of a deliberate system of power that positions the bureaucracy as an instrument of vertical control, rather than as a servant of the public (Hicks, 2004, p. 13).

Within the police institution, minimum wage policies perpetuate in-work poverty, pushing lower-ranking personnel into dependence on informal economic practices. It reflects a colonial legacy in which officials from the majority ethnic group (*Bumiputera*) were underpaid and placed beneath their European counterparts as a mechanism of racial control (Jones, 2013, p. 42).

Post-1998 reforms did not dismantle this logic; instead, inequalities in resource distribution and police organisation have been reproduced in new forms, with material benefits concentrated among elites (International Crisis Group, 2012). Under the banner of a “professional and independent” police, officers remain compelled to uphold regime stability while operating within an unequal structure that reproduces colonial-era racial and class hierarchies within an authoritarian framework.

Gender dynamics follow the same logic. As discussed in Chapter 5, the New Order framed women primarily as wives and mothers, devaluing their labour as secondary to men's income. This ideology enabled both the state and capital elites to justify low wages for women. In the Reform era, decentralisation allowed discriminatory local laws that limited women's political participation and visibility, while police were also deployed to suppress female workers demanding fair wages or rights (Robinson, 2009).

As Messerschmidt (2018, p. 28) explains, dominant groups shape hierarchies of interest to reflect their own ideology, elevating their needs as collective priorities while marginalising those of subordinate groups. This hegemonic order secures consent by presenting dominant discourses as universal, yet in practice restricts access and makes compliance a condition for meeting basic needs (Foucault, 1980, p. 97). In this context, the state no longer unifies or guarantees justice, but actively reproduces inequality—controlling resources, monopolising welfare, and demanding loyalty from institutions now serving regime interests over the marginalised public.

Pemberton (2015, pp. 50–53) argues that neoliberalism has led the state to reconfigure its role—from a protector of public interests to a facilitator of elite economic agendas, particularly those of the market and capital owners. Rather than redistributing wealth to achieve social justice, the state has actively restructured fiscal policy to benefit the upper classes—from budget efficiency measures to subsidy cuts for essential social services, which are in fact most needed by vulnerable groups.

Within its institutions, the state no longer acts as a welfare provider but facilitates exploitation through wage suppression, reduced allowances, weakened labour protections, and reliance on informal income. Budget allocations reflect short-term political calculations rather than institutional needs, primarily to secure the loyalty of state apparatuses that sustain an economic order benefiting the dominant class. In this hierarchy, loyal institutions receive greater funding but remain structurally dependent, while less loyal ones are disciplined through budget cuts or the removal of key powers.

In Indonesia, the state budget functions as a tool of political control, used to consolidate power and preserve the political-economic status quo. This politicisation is evident in the deliberate suppression of civil servant salaries and the diversion of funds from public institutions to “strategic” projects that serve regime interests (McLeod, 2008, pp. 212–213).

The INP has received annual budget increases, yet most funds are allocated to defence modernisation rather than personnel welfare (Ministry of Finance, 2025, p. 35). In 2023, only 44% of the IDR 121.79 trillion budget was spent on personnel, with the majority going to goods and capital. Salaries were revised only after a 2.31% budget cut, and despite increased operational funding, basic needs remain unmet, pushing officers toward alternative income sources. Baker (2015, p. 264) argues that the state has effectively offloaded financial responsibility onto the police while maintaining political expectations, thereby enabling commercialised practices and informal revenue streams, and normalising corruption as a structural response to chronic underfunding.

Pemberton (1997, pp. 36–37) describes this economic arrangement as structural exploitation, where the state extracts loyalty without fair compensation. Aligned with regime interests, the INP faces similar pressures—expected to work extra hours under low pay and uneven allowances, while tacitly permitted to rely on informal practices to fill the gap. Those deemed disloyal, however, risk marginalisation. In the end, the regime-designed economic system privileges elites and burdens lower-ranking officers, pushing both the police and the public further to the margins of state priorities.

A. Insufficient Pay

This study finds that the wage policy within the INP has, from its inception, been designed to benefit the institutional elite while exploiting those in lower ranks. Messerschmidt (1997, p. 6) notes that exploitative relations become systemic when the power imbalance stemming from the division of labour is not only left unchallenged but is also socially legitimised. Such exploitation endures insofar as it serves the interests of those at the top who represent the “ideal” masculinity, granting them both financial and symbolic rewards, while rendering subordinate workers less worthy and materially undercompensated.

Within the INP, this inequality is particularly stark: lower-ranking officers perform high-risk, front-line duties and interact directly with the public, yet they are paid significantly less than high-ranking officials, whose roles are privileged for their strategic authority and state-representing function.

According to Pemberton (2015, pp. 36–37), labour exploitation occurs when authoritative actors systematically extract disproportionate gains from those beneath them, providing incentives that may appear legitimate yet are fundamentally unjust when weighed against the actual risks or contributions involved. It enables those in dominant positions to continue accumulating profits, while workers remain economically vulnerable. Ironically, the inequality stemming from such arrangements often go unnoticed, as hegemonic norms blur the line between capital interests and collective needs.

Within the police, the systemic exploitation stems from a wage structure deliberately designed by its elite, who control access to key resources. In their hierarchical pay system, rank and position are the main determinants of salary and allowances, rather than actual contribution or productivity—the higher one's rank, the greater the rewards.

Through such structuring, a small elite at the top of the institution's hierarchy can secure their own welfare by relying on the labour of lower-ranking personnel—who, in turn, receive compensation that is not commensurate with their contributions. This situation also reveals how, in such a hierarchical arrangement, institutional welfare is never distributed, as the system consistently prioritises the interests of the dominant group over the collective well-being.

The salary structure within the INP, as outlined in Government Regulation No. 7/2024 and Presidential Regulation No. 103/2018, clearly reveals a deep-rooted structural inequality between lower-ranking and higher-ranking personnel. The lowest-ranking officer, a 2nd *Bhayangkara*, an entry-level rank, earns a basic monthly salary of just IDR 1.7 million. In contrast, a General—the highest rank—receives up to IDR 6.4 million, nearly four times more.

This disparity becomes even more striking when performance allowances are considered, ranging from IDR 1.96 million at the lowest level to IDR 34.9 million at the highest—an 18-fold difference. This wage stratification persists into retirement, with the highest-ranking retirees receiving pensions of up to IDR 5.93 million—almost four times greater than those at the lowest rank, who receive only IDR 1.56 million (Government Regulation No. 20/2019).

Although a low-ranking officer who receives the full allowance (totalling IDR 3.66 million per month) exceeds the national minimum living standard (IDR 1.03 million) and is slightly above the national average formal wage (IDR 3.26 million) (BPS, 2025, p. 71), it does not necessarily indicate fair or sufficient welfare. While a small number of Generals enjoy a combination of salary and benefits far exceeding the decent living threshold, most police officers—especially those without posts or under disciplinary sanctions—receive only the basic wage, which barely meets the basic needs threshold.

This inequality is even more troubling, given that many low-ranking officers support families, yet their income is based on an individual wage structure with minimal family allowances that fail to keep pace with the growing needs of households, especially considering the slow pace of promotion. These low wages become an even heavier burden for officers stationed in high-cost areas. In Jakarta—the province with the highest expenditure standard in Indonesia at IDR 1.6 million per month (BPS, 2025, p. 92)—the earnings of a low-ranking officer are barely enough for a decent life, let alone a dignified one.

The income gap between ranks in the INP is not merely a reflection of unequal distribution—it is part of a deliberate system of domination engineered by internal elites to consolidate economic accumulation and control over resources in their own hands. Under this hegemonic scheme, while a handful of top-ranking elites enjoy a surplus of wealth from various sources—both official and unofficial—the vast majority at the lower levels, who receive meagre and inadequate pay, are left to bear the immense pressure of living in dual vulnerability: relative poverty and financial insecurity.

As Pemberton (2015, pp. 106; 115) explains, relative poverty is not just about material deprivation, but also the inability to achieve a decent standard of living necessary for full participation in society. Meanwhile, financial insecurity refers to the anxiety and uncertainty brought on by unstable and unreliable income that cannot meet daily financial needs.

Agnew (2006, p. 166) highlights that in societies marked by stark income inequality, lower social groups are constantly exposed to the more affluent lifestyles of the elite, triggering social comparisons in which they come to view their own economic situation as being left behind. This exposure fosters a sense of injustice—a belief that they have been excluded from access to a standard of well-being that should be within reach. Such perceptions give rise to deep psychosocial strain.

Within the INP, inequality in wages, benefits, and institutional support is often normalised within a hierarchical system that links well-being to rank advancement. Personal poverty or lack of well-being, on the other hand, tends to be misinterpreted as a matter of personal weakness or failure to climb the career ladder or meet dominant standards, rather than being recognised as a product of a hegemonic system that reproduces structural inequality.

Interviews with lower-ranking members of the INP confirm that many experience frustration due to consistently spending more than they earn. Their modest salaries force them to live frugally—often below what is considered a decent standard of living.

“My salary only covers basic household needs. Any additional income I get comes from outside—from people who give me small ‘tokens of appreciation.’ I still rely on that, even though it’s not much, but at least it helps cover my transport costs. If we had to rely solely on our salary to meet all our essential needs, it just wouldn’t be enough. It’s simply not decent.” (Rinai, First Inspector, female, Community Development Unit).

In such circumstances, they struggle to meet what society generally sees as acceptable living standards.

“Daily needs are still pretty basic—below average. Everyone has different standards. For me, a 5,000-rupee milk is good enough because it fits my salary. Not everyone can live simply, and for others, that same milk might seem lacking. In the end, it comes down to whether we want premium or non-premium quality.” (Dira, Adjunct Commissioner, female, Intelligence and Security Unit).

For low-ranking policewomen, a portion of their salary must be set aside to cover the lack of institutional support for beauty allowances, despite the institutional expectation of a polished appearance as part of professional conduct.

“Policewomen only receive 50,000 rupiah for make-up, but we need lipstick, face powder, lotion, and skincare—none of which are cheap. The allowance hasn’t increased, and some even borrow from internal funds to cover it. If we rely only on our base salary, it’s still not enough to last a full month. So we just try to make ends meet.” (Reni, 1st Inspector, female, Intelligence and Security Unit).

Difficulties in meeting basic needs are a direct result of the low wages they receive. A limited income narrows their choices when it comes to food, making it hard for them to maintain a healthy lifestyle regularly.

“For officers with more than two children, one way to cope is by making do with whatever food is available. It’s not as if we can expect to have chicken or beef every day—everyone knows how expensive that is. Instant noodles, eggs, tofu, or tempeh will do, as long as there’s some fibre, protein, and carbohydrates.” (Ilmi, 1st Inspector, female, Security and Internal Affairs Unit).

Nutritious food is often seen as a luxury—something they can only afford immediately after payday—leaving them to rely on cheap meals despite being aware of the health risks associated with them.

“Honestly, we don’t really think about nutrition—as long as there’s something to go with rice. Sometimes it’s fish, and if we’ve just received our salary, maybe some meat. Supermarket fish is better but expensive, while the cheaper fish from local stalls often isn’t fresh, so we don’t know how nutritious it still is.” (Farel, commissioner, male, operations unit).

The low salary is further strained by daily transport expenses, particularly for officers who must travel long distances to work, narrowing their already limited financial capacity for a decent life. Officers without private vehicles are sometimes forced to rely on relatively costly public transport to reduce risk and vulnerability during long commutes.

"I have five children, and my total salary is around five million rupiah. The point is, it's just not enough. I live on the edge of the city, about 30 kilometres round trip from the office. For transport, I use a car, motorbike, or the bus—often through the toll road. If I'm too tired, I leave the motorbike somewhere and take the bus. That's what I have to spend every day." (Sigra, 1st Sub-Inspector, male, General Crimes Unit).

Field officers are also frequently required to use their own vehicles and pay for fuel out of pocket due to the unavailability of official vehicles and minimal operational gasoline support.

"From Monday to Saturday, we're still on duty—managing traffic from one traffic congestion hotspot to another. Sometimes, even just covering the daily cost of getting to work feels like more than our salary can handle." (Angkola, Chief Brigadier, male, Traffic Unit).

Transport costs become even more burdensome when other family members, such as children who have become active in daily activities, also require mobility.

"My needs include paying for my children's university and school fees, as well as their daily transport costs—like petrol—which are the same as ours. Just driving a vehicle requires fuel and an e-toll card, plus there are electricity bills and other household needs to pay for. If you ask whether that salary is enough, then no—it really isn't. But we try to accept it. Somehow, I manage to make it stretch for the month." (Rinai, First Inspector, female, Community Development Unit).

Family responsibilities are indeed a significant source of pressure for married police officers. Many struggle to afford their children's education as they grow older, particularly due to the high cost of university tuition.

"I earn around five million with allowances, but expenses are much higher—especially my child's private uni fees, twelve million per semester. I set aside 1.7 million monthly, but it's not enough. Luckily, one of my kids has graduated and now helps out." (Helin, 1st Sub-Inspector, Female, District Police Unit).

At the same time, numerous officers admit they are unable to set aside money for family recreation—highlighting how emotional well-being is often sidelined.

“When money’s tight, we just stay home as a family. Visiting amusement parks helps alleviate stress, but it’s costly. Some officers prefer a trip out of town, while others are fine with the mall. In the end, it depends on how each person copes.” (Dimas, 2nd brigadier, male, human resources unit).

Anxiety about future uncertainties also weighs heavily on many lower-ranking members. Low wages, combined with the rising cost of living in large cities, have led to growing fears of falling into poverty.

“Not having enough is relative. Even when you try to manage, it’s still often not enough. You can’t apply standard police salaries across Indonesia—living costs vary, so pay should match local conditions.” (Sinar, Adjunct Chief Commissioner, male, Narcotics Unit).

They worry about their inability to plan for the future, as limited income is consumed by immediate routine expenses, leaving no room for savings and reflecting the fragility of long-term life stability.

“In remote areas, where living costs are modest, a police salary might be enough to live on and even save for our children or grandchildren. But in big cities, earning 7–8 million rupiah is a struggle—2 million might go to rent, and with meals costing about 1 million per week, there’s barely anything left to save, especially before factoring in fuel or transport costs.” (Nasto, Adjunct Commissioner, male, Headquarters Service Unit).

Meanwhile, a sense of shame—stemming from the perception of having failed in their role as providers—emerges as a repeating theme in many narratives. Some feel powerless, having to sacrifice family needs merely to survive.

“Sometimes we really want to give our children premium-quality milk. It’s heartbreaking when we have to cut the budget from Procal Gold Premium down to the regular Procal Gold. At one point, someone even said, ‘To save money, why not just switch to Dancow? It’s cheaper.’ I replied, ‘That just makes me even sadder.’ My dad once said, ‘You grew up on SGM—same lower-quality milk—and you turned out just fine, didn’t you?’” (Della, Adjunct Commissioner, Female, Traffic Unit).

Others cope by choosing to be grateful—as a way of masking feelings of disappointment or inadequacy about their situation.

“Nowadays, we do receive remuneration, and thankfully, it has helped. In my region, however, our salaries as Brigadiers are still below double digits, while the cost of living is quite high here. It’s not that we’re ungrateful—we are grateful for the remuneration—but if you ask whether it’s enough, I’d say it’s still not sufficient.” (Fara, Brigadier, female, General Crimes Unit).

They admit to feeling insecure or envious when witnessing peers with the same salary appear more successful and able to bring happiness to their families—something they themselves may not be able to achieve.

“Success is often tied to what you own and how others see you. Even if you feel at peace with it, your family might not. When a colleague buys their child a bike while you can’t, it becomes a burden.” (Ishan, 1st Inspector, male, Traffic Unit).

Such aspirations are not purely self-serving but also reflect a desire to fulfil the ideal provider role—not only for the immediate family but also for parents and the broader social circles.

“Sometimes, the burden comes from the fact that a police officer isn’t just working to support themselves. They often become the backbone of the family—providing for their parents, covering their siblings’ education—because they’re seen as the more capable ones. If they don’t yet have a wife or children, I’d say the salary might be enough, as long as there are no extra responsibilities. But in Indonesia, it’s difficult to avoid such obligations.” (Purwanta, chief commissioner, male, security and internal affairs unit).

At the same time, many of them aspire for a better life—with higher income and improved living standards—something they believe can only be achieved through career advancement.

“Success for an officer can mean a fast-track career—rapid promotion to strategic roles, early entry into police leadership school, and quickly rising through the ranks. It’s not uncommon that once your rank and career progress, financial benefits tend to follow. In the end, every officer has the ambition to succeed—and in my view, that’s only natural. People in all professions strive for the same.” (Pryan, 1st Inspector, Male, Security and Internal Affairs Unit).

However, the ambition is often overshadowed by fear—that the desire for a better life might be judged negatively, perceived as status-seeking, overly ambitious, or simply self-indulgent.

“If someone earns a good salary but still struggles, something’s wrong with their lifestyle—maybe they’re living beyond their means, trying to look wealthy, or just want to be admired or seen as impressive.” (Eros, Brigadier, male, Special Crimes Unit).

B. Unfair Benefit

This study finds that the welfare system within the Indonesian National Police is elitist and structurally unequal, reflecting hegemonic power relations in which access to resources depends on proximity to authority rather than formal entitlement. In response, subordinate officers engage in bribery as a survival strategy to access benefits denied by the system. The funds used are extracted from the public through frontline authority, illustrating how institutional inequality is sustained through a chain of exploitation linking citizens and internal hierarchies.

According to Pemberton (2015, pp. 48, 50), in states governed by pro-neoliberal regimes, social services are deliberately made scarce, of low quality, and unequal. To protect the interests of capital, social welfare programmes are no longer treated as universal rights but as exclusive entitlements with restricted access. Public services have undergone a process of commodification, with a primary focus on efficiency and profit. As a result, access to the best services increasingly depends on an individual's financial capacity, assistance is narrowed in reach, generosity is reduced, and distribution is selectively administered through eligibility assessments.

In this context, the INP, as part of the state apparatus, not only implements such policies but also internalises neoliberal logic by providing housing, healthcare, and education for children based on a power hierarchy rather than the actual needs of its members. Welfare is commodified into a privilege rather than upheld as a collective right, serving to reinforce loyalty to institutional elites.

Regulations governing service housing, barracks, and subsidised homes within the INP—such as Chief of Police Regulation No. 13/2018 on official housing and barracks, and No. 4/2016 on procedures for applying for and granting housing down-payment loans—entrench an exclusionary and rank-based welfare regime. Rather than addressing the needs of lower-ranking officers, access is mediated through hierarchical control and bureaucratic gatekeeping: official housing and vehicles are reserved for senior officers and loyalists, while lower-ranking personnel are relegated to substandard units, issued used vehicles, and face restricted access to subsidies, with discretionary allowance allocations enabling “gift-giving.”

Similar inequalities characterise the INP’s internal healthcare services, as regulated by Chief of Police Regulation No. 14/2017 and No. 8/2018, which institutionalise rank-based disparities in care. Senior officers receive first-class treatment, while lower-ranking personnel are confined to basic services, with access to better care contingent on self-payment.

Internal healthcare services are even opened to the public to generate extra income, despite limited capacity. As a result, lower-ranking members without capital or connections are further marginalised, as access to quality care depends on prioritisation set by the institutional elite, at the expense of distributive fairness.

Based on interview findings, lower-ranking members of the INP perceive the distribution of official housing to be unfair. Access to official dormitories or residences often hinges on informal mechanisms, leaving them feeling forced to rely on personal connections or bribe their superiors merely to secure, or upgrade, their accommodation.

"House prices are far beyond what we can afford on a police salary. Access to police housing remains minimal compared to the number of officers, and many officers are left out. I believe that building good relationships with superiors is often key to achieving mutual understanding. That kind of connection might be needed to gain access to these facilities." (Bimo, Brigadier, male, Human Resources Unit).

Without such informal contributions, they often end up in official or subsidised housing that falls below minimum living standards, which is seen as standard or appropriate for their lower status within the institutional hierarchy.

"Paying off a subsidised house depends on the property—some cost 1.5 million a month over 20 years. It might not have been seen as decent before, but for a Brigadier, it's acceptable. Lower ranks should live within the means of their position." (Agam, 1st Sub-Inspector, male, Patrol Unit).

As a result, many are left with no choice but to live in cramped spaces, stay with their parents, or rent private accommodation that consumes a significant portion of their salary.

"I manage by living with my in-laws, but some colleagues have to rent and even pawn their police certificates to afford a house, sometimes just to cover the down payment. Prices are high, with instalments reaching 3–4 million, even for small houses on the city's edge." (Mira, 1st Sub-Inspector, female, Narcotics Unit).

Some officers are forced to live on the outskirts of cities where housing is more affordable, but this leads to longer commutes and greater physical exhaustion.

“A police officer can’t afford to live in the city centre on their salary, so they often have to live far from the city. But the long commute can take around an hour each way. It definitely affects their work and adds mental stress.” (Rizal, Adjunct Commissioner, male, Human Resources Unit).

For those renting, anxiety over high monthly costs adds further strain—particularly when faced with the dilemma of choosing between affordable accommodation far from their workplace or city centre, and the higher costs of more accessible housing.

“The cost of living in the city is high. Renting a flat or house can easily reach 8–10 million rupiah a month if you don’t own one. How much does a police officer really earn? Even living on the outskirts still means high commuting costs.” (Asya, Commissioner, female, Human Resources Unit).

Some even remain in official residences after retirement, as their housing needs were never adequately addressed by their superiors.

“It’s honestly hard to own a house on that kind of salary. Many seniors’ nearing retirement still don’t have a place of their own and are still living in official housing.” (Haris, 1st Inspector, male, Narcotics Unit).

In addition, members expressed concerns about the poor quality of internal healthcare services, as the best facilities are often concentrated in major cities or at national headquarters, making them inaccessible to lower-ranking personnel stationed in remote areas. According to the INP’s Health Division 2024 performance report, out of 43 police hospitals across Indonesia, only one qualifies as a top-tier facility, while the rest fall into the medium-to-low category.

Eight provinces still lack a police hospital, forcing officers and their families to rely on clinics, government hospitals, or private facilities—often at their own expense. It illustrates a significant inequality in healthcare provisions, with quality facilities concentrated in big cities and central headquarters.

According to interviewees, while decent healthcare services are available, limited capacity and bureaucratic hurdles complicate access—forcing some members to resort to bribery or rely on personal connections to secure care.

"I was once referred to the National Police Hospital, but even though I was unwell, I couldn't get a room straight away. There were long waits and loads of paperwork, even though government health insurance is supposed to make things easier. In the end, I needed to know someone at the hospital to get a room quickly—that's just how it works." (Candra, 1st inspector, male, general planning and budget unit).

Those who attempt to go through official channels without offering bribes often end up covering the costs of healthcare themselves, including when they fall ill or when family members require treatment.

"We do have health insurance, but when a family member is ill, we want the best care. I've seen private sector workers access better hospitals in big cities, while with police hospitals, the quality matches what you pay. So we often pay extra to upgrade for comfort." (Alon, commissioner, male, security and internal affairs unit).

Due to these limitations, many ultimately opt for private healthcare services, which, although of better quality, come at a high cost—placing an additional burden on their already stretched finances.

"My youngest was diagnosed with autism, so we need extra money for private therapy. I pay in instalments from my salary, but it only covers the basics. There's nothing left to save. My parents help, and I still have to find extra income." (Sisi, 1st inspector, female, general inspectorate unit).

Those who receive only the most basic care are often not prioritised for follow-up treatment, are frequently misdiagnosed due to the absence of essential procedures, and are left feeling like a burden rather than patients deserving of proper care.

“I went to the police hospital during the Covid-19 pandemic with a confirmed case but was discharged after a few days with a negative result, which felt odd. A second opinion showed I was still positive, so I isolated at home. I wondered if they discharged me quickly just to free up the bed for someone else. I was relying on health insurance from the office, and once the coverage hits its limit, they sometimes tell you to go home and return later.” (Diani, Adjunct Commissioner, female, Traffic Unit).

Members also raised concerns about the poor quality of education provided by both their institution and the state. Many are compelled to enrol their children in fee-paying private schools, as quality public schools are only available in city centres, far from where they live.

“I earn around ten million rupiah, but it’s not enough to cover my three children’s school fees. With zoning restrictions and few public schools nearby, we’re left with no option but to send them to private schools that charge tuition.” (Darwin, adjunct commissioner, male, public relations unit).

Unable to afford a good-quality education, some have no choice but to send their children to public schools, despite knowing these often fall short of expectations.

“The salary is only enough to cover daily living expenses and public school for the kids. If it’s a private school, it becomes a real burden. Public schools are free from the state, but yeah—the quality’s way behind compared to private ones.” (Ina, 2nd Inspector, female, Special Crimes Unit).

Many are willing to make personal financial sacrifices to support their children’s higher education, in the hope that it will improve their long-term prospects and uplift their family’s socioeconomic status.

“School fees are high and keep going up every year. It becomes even more difficult when one child is starting school while another needs medical care at the same time. If that child eventually becomes a police officer, it’s probably a real source of pride for the parents—especially if they only sell crackers for a living.” (Pranav, 1st Sub-inspector, male, logistics unit).

From the foregoing, the economic pressures faced by police personnel are not merely individual but rooted in an institutional design that systematically produces vulnerability. When access to welfare—housing, healthcare, and allowances—is mediated by hierarchy, proximity, and discretionary authority, officers are effectively driven to seek alternatives beyond formal mechanisms. In this context, corruption emerges not as a moral aberration but as a structural response to a system that uses its control over authority and resources to exert pressure and reproduce power relations. It should therefore be understood as a consequence of internal governance arrangements that inherently generate and sustain economic strain.

6.2.2. Political Pressure

The study shows that INP personnel face relational pressure within a political hierarchy that allocates recognition based on loyalty and proximity to power rather than merit. This produces a repressive order in which subordinates must conform to superiors to secure legitimacy.

Messerschmidt (2018, p. 59) contends that hegemonic social structures regulate recognition through hierarchical standards defined by dominant groups, granting legitimacy only to those who conform while excluding others. This dynamic generates acute relational pressure on marginalised individuals, who may internalise inadequacy and pursue imposed ideals, resulting in alienation and stigmatisation when conformity fails.

Despite leadership changes, Indonesia's macropolitical landscape remains defined by an exclusive and selective system of political recognition (Winters, 2013). Various regimes often deploy recognition as a tool to control rather than a universal right of citizenship. These regimes grant recognition based on ideological loyalty to their ideal values, rather than on public solidarity or meaningful contribution, effectively turning recognition into a commodity accessible only through obedience and sacrifice to their hegemonic projects.

The state instrumentalises recognition to secure political loyalty, tying promotions and rewards to alignment with power rather than principles of equality or inclusion. Loyalty is constructed as patriotism, while dissent is cast as a threat to stability. In this way, recognition is allocated not on merit or rights, but on conformity to state ideology and regime allegiance (Kristiansen and Ramli, 2006), thereby entrenching structural inequality, constraining democratic space, and legitimising corruption as a pathway to recognition.

Within the INP, selective recognition policies function as instruments of political control, enabling the regime to shape the institution along ideological lines. Advancement is contingent on loyalty, with promoted officers reproducing this logic down the hierarchy. As a result, the INP operates less as a neutral body than as a political apparatus embedded in the ruling order. Existing police law further legitimises this dynamic by centralising authority in the head of state, allowing the regime to appoint or remove key figures—such as the Chief of Police—and to pressure elites to reward loyalists while marginalising dissenters.

Privilege in the INP is evident in the appointment of senior officials to strategic civilian roles without open competition, and in politically timed promotions ahead of elections (Kaban et al., 2023; Saptohutomo, 2024; Raihan, 2025). Data from the Ministry of State Apparatus Utilisation (Polri, 2023) confirms regime-driven politicisation. Performance is sidelined, with unstandardised accountability, opaque promotions, and entrenched patronage ensuring recognition is reserved for loyalists aligned with ruling interests.

INP reward distribution data (Polri, 2023, pp. 130–132) reveal a exclusionary recognition system. Of 464,137 personnel, only 1,604 (0.34%) received strategic rewards such as promotions or accelerated rank—granted without transparent evaluation and solely by senior authorities. As a result, prestigious recognition is concentrated among a small elite, while most officers receive only routine administrative recognition such as long-service awards.

This pattern reveals that the INP's structure aligns with hegemonic, not democratic, logic—prioritising regime interests over member welfare. The ruling regime deliberately maintains this design to enforce conformity with its values, fostering hierarchy-based corruption as an adaptive response. The politicised distribution of recognition reproduces structural pressures, pushing lower- and mid-ranking officers into patronage-driven compliance.

In this contested institutional landscape, absolute loyalty to the ruling regime—and to internal elites who control access to power—often outweighs commitment to the public or marginalised groups. As a result, officers are driven to seek political protection through elite networks, political parties, military networks, or personal ties with national political and economic elites.

It is not uncommon for officers to support, finance, or carry out their patrons' agendas to secure recognition and career advancement. Those lacking political capital are sidelined despite their integrity, as exclusion from patronage networks limits promotion opportunities. This dynamic not only entrenches internal inequality but also harms low-income citizens, who are exploited as police services are used to sustain these patronage structures.

Agnew (2005, p. 23) argues that the pursuit of recognition from dominant groups generates intense psychological pressure and reinforces hegemonic norms. Individuals face moral pressure to conform to idealised standards to avoid exclusion. When they adapt—often through corrupt or manipulative means—and gain institutional recognition, the initial pressure turns into positive reinforcement. This cycle motivates repeated conformity, sustaining hegemonic structures.

Social recognition constitutes what Pemberton (2015, p. 30) defines as relational needs—a fundamental dimension of human existence, essential for both everyday functioning and self-actualisation in social life. When such needs are denied, individuals experience relational harms, including social exclusion and identity misrecognition. Within hegemonic structures that legitimise and idealise only identities aligned with dominant power, failure to conform generates acute emotional and moral pressures. Consequently, social recognition becomes not a universal entitlement but a conditional privilege, contingent upon adherence to norms that reproduce corrupt power relations. Those who fall short of these expectations face stigmatisation, diminished self-worth, and restricted social participation.

A. Exploitative Workload

The interviews in this study revealed that internal political hegemony within the INP deliberately engineers exploitative and undemocratic working conditions, enabling corruption to emerge as the primary means of escaping inhumane workloads it produces.

In Indonesia, social recognition legitimizes regime control, securing political stability and economic gains from flexible, efficient labour (Wulansari, 2021, p. 428). Within this logic, individuals are treated as human capital—valued for delivering maximum output at minimal cost, often at the expense of their well-being. A reward-and-punishment system fuels competition, making loyalty and productivity the basis for recognition, contingent on compliance with exploitative work demands. Loyalty is now seen not as an ethical commitment or a genuine social bond, but as ideological conformity and readiness to meet demanding, flexible work expectations. Compliant, work-hard, and silent workers are idealised, while critics of overwork are labelled disloyal and face punishment or exclusion (Hauf, 2016, p. 138).

This political logic permeates the INP's structure, where senior personnel legitimise excessive workloads without fair compensation under the pretext of efficiency. Overwork is normalised while the social well-being of lower-ranking officers is systematically disregarded. Reduced to expendable productive assets, they are stripped of bargaining power and coerced into accepting exploitative conditions as proof of loyalty and a prerequisite for mobility.

As a result, many officers suffer exhaustion, mental stress, and alienation. The INP Pusdokes report (2024) notes that only 13.07% are in good health, while over 65% are in poor condition. Prevalent illnesses include respiratory infections, obesity, high cholesterol, and diabetes. Heart disease and stroke are the leading causes of death, indicating the cumulative effects of chronic stress and an unhealthy lifestyle.

As Pemberton (2004, p. 120) argues, this situation reflects systemic exploitation, where extended working hours and rising productivity demands serve as tools to extract maximum labour at minimal cost. Those in power aim to increase surplus by drawing more time and energy from workers without proportional compensation. Meanwhile, those lower in the hierarchy are often left with no choice but to endure these conditions to meet basic needs or avoid economic and social insecurity. This exploitation disregards fairness, erodes autonomy, and undermines workers' health and quality of life.

Within the INP, Regulation No. 1/2025 on performance assessment and work management sets a 40-hour workweek—either a five-day (07:00–15:00) or six-day (07:00–14:00) schedule. However, in practice, its implementation is uneven and selectively enforced. Superiors enjoy flexible working hours, while subordinates regularly endure excessive, unpaid overtime. Their extra hours go unrecorded and uncompensated, yet any shortfall is swiftly punished. This asymmetry exposes an exploitative power dynamic where the heaviest burdens fall on those at the bottom of the police hierarchy.

Superiors allocate workloads at their discretion, frequently overlooking principles of fairness, proportionality, and personnel welfare.

“Our workload is heavy due to overlapping duties. We’re often tasked with patrols and other responsibilities outside our unit, even when exhausted from protest or match security. Sometimes, we handle tasks that should fall under other units.” (Agam, 1st Sub-Inspector, male, Patrol Unit).

Tasks assigned to subordinates frequently blur the lines between institutional responsibilities and the political interests of their superiors—often being interpreted as a demonstration of loyalty.

“In intelligence, relationships with political figures and community networks are vital, but access often depends on funding. Subordinates who show loyalty and have strong ties tend to gain superiors’ trust. We stay committed beyond working hours, believing that dedication will be repaid when we need support.” (Reni, 1st Inspector, female, Intelligence and Security Unit).

Indeed, subordinates are often covertly mobilised under formal mandates to support elite agendas rather than public interests, leading to increased workloads as they are instrumentalised in the exercise of power.

“The police bear a heavy burden due to their close ties to political dynamics. As a state institution, they must ensure national security while adapting to political shifts — especially in Region X, which is central to these changes.” (Nasto, Adjunct Commissioner, male, Headquarters Service Unit).

The internal elite reinforces this by pressuring symbolic labour to project the institution as a vigilant protector, always ready to serve the state. As a result, they assign subordinates tasks that go beyond their official job descriptions, including non-policing roles.

“We’re often assigned tasks beyond our scope — from guarding vaccines during Covid-19 to responding to fires or floods, which are duties of other agencies. The police are expected to handle everything, often at the cost of our own time. Though we have set hours, late-night duties mean skipping the next morning.” (Ina, 2nd Inspector, female, Special Crimes Unit).

Such task expansion reflects the superiors' efforts to demonstrate their capability as guardians of domestic security to the regime, although this results in overlapping responsibilities that ultimately diminish the welfare of lower-ranking personnel.

"Networks with political, religious, or business figures are crucial to police work. These connections help manage public order during social unrest. Maintaining effective communication is an important part of the job. And when we carry out our duties properly, that in itself shows loyalty to our superiors." (Rizal, Adjunct Commissioner, male, Human Resources Unit).

In their efforts to display loyalty to the regime, INP superiors often utilise corruption as a tool to manage political relationships and as a strategy to alleviate the operational burdens of subordinates.

"In Community Policing, especially locally, there are no fixed hours — we're available 24/7. We also engage with religious leaders, who have a strong influence. When a religious leader is close to the police, their followers feel the same, helping the wider community feel safe and keeping public order intact. Even small informal gifts can strengthen these relationships, contributing to peace and stability." (Rinai, 1st Inspector, female, Community Development Unit).

Superiors frame the institution as a tough crime fighter by imposing unrealistic targets and demanding constant productivity, immediate results, and quick responses.

"The city's high crime rate makes our workload intense. We receive 30–50 reports daily across various crimes, but with limited investigators, managing the volume is a constant challenge." (Aksha, Adjunct Chief Commissioner, male, Special Crimes Unit).

In portraying themselves as resilient state servants despite limited resources, superiors often issue orders without sufficient support, using subordinates' compliance with unrealistic commands as a measure of loyalty.

"Superiors often expect results without providing the necessary budget, launching unfunded 'innovation' programmes that become mandatory. It creates pressure on subordinates to contribute informally, justified as being 'for the common good.' We're left relying on local networks, like businesspeople, just to get the job done." (Bimo, brigadier, male, human resources unit).

Subordinates' workloads gain recognition only through obedience to superior's agenda rather than professional or objective measures, as performance evaluations rely heavily on subjective judgment.

"It's all about getting the job done. If you deliver fast, you're seen as capable and get more trust. If you don't, people think you're unreliable. Rank doesn't matter—what matters is results." (Purwanta, chief commissioner, male, security and internal affairs unit).

As a result, to meet their superiors' demands, lower-ranking officers—including policewomen—often feel compelled to make personal sacrifices, working long hours with no clear limits, staying late into the night, and even sleeping at the workplace to complete their assignments.

"Operations can go all night, so we often back each other up. Sometimes the guys tell us to head home first out of concern. When it's quiet, we rest at the office, sometimes at our desks, but we're always ready to jump back in if needed." (Mira, 1st Sub-Inspector, female, Narcotics Unit).

When workloads increase, they tend to sacrifice their personal and family time rather than postpone tasks, showing how career demands often take precedence over personal well-being. Even during rest periods, weekends, or outside official hours, they remain on standby, ready to be called upon by their superiors at any moment.

"Region X is intense—sometimes it goes non-stop for 24 hours. Even at home, we're on call. If the commander calls, we drop everything and go, like when a fight breaks out. Even visiting family needs approval from superiors—that's just how it is." (Arvat, Adjunct Commissioner, Male, Community Development Unit).

Despite the lack of proper incentives, subordinates willingly take on additional duties—including demanding fieldwork and politically driven tasks that are not formally acknowledged—without much complaint.

"In my experience, there are no real days off — not even on holidays. Superiors demand things without thinking about the budget or how to get them done. They call anytime, and our overtime isn't counted. It's seen as dedication, but never truly recognised." (Asya, Commissioner, female, Human Resources Unit).

Working shifts of up to 12 hours a day makes it difficult for many police officers to maintain a personal life outside of their job. Rather than complain or protest, however, they tend to adapt. The institution frames the issue as a matter of individual time management, rather than recognising it as the result of an exploitative work system.

“Extra duties often push the day past eight hours. Personally, as long as I manage my time — like going straight home after work — it’s still doable. Roll call’s at 7 am, and I’m usually done by 7 or 8 pm. I save weekends for proper rest, unless there’s a sudden assignment. Weekdays are mostly all work.” (Alia, 1st Inspector, female, Special Crimes Unit).

The lack of leisure time makes it difficult for them to fulfil their roles as partners or parents, leaving them with feelings of guilt for not being there for their children or missing out on quality time with their families.

“We rarely spend time at home because the staff often have to work overtime. In the police, duty always comes first. I mostly stay in touch with my family by phone. My kids are asleep when I leave and when I get home, and when I’m finally at home, my wife’s usually out working, since my rest hours are unpredictable.” (Ciro, Brigadier, male, Narcotics Unit).

Irregular working hours erode officers’ autonomy, as their rest time rarely aligns with family life, stripping days off of meaningful relational value and subordinating their personal lives to the demands of superiors.

“Government hours may be eight a day, but that doesn’t apply to police. Sabhara unit deals with protests almost daily, and Traffic works weekends too. We don’t have fixed days off—sometimes we get a weekday off, but our partner’s working and the kids are at school, so we still miss family time.” (Marzio, 1st Inspector, male, Operations Unit).

This situation also disrupts physical recovery, rest, and personal activities, such as exercise, worship, and maintaining daily social interactions outside of work.

“Sometimes I must exercise at night after long shifts, but exhaustion and irregular hours mess with routines and eating habits. During protests in Region X, we had roll calls at midnight or 2 am—hardly any sleep and poor meals. So, it’s on us to manage our health whenever we get a moment.” (Angkola, Chief Brigadier, male, Traffic Unit).

However, superiors often view exercise merely as a routine physical activity, rather than a vital part of maintaining personnel resilience. As a result, the health of lower-ranking officers is often treated as secondary—something that should be set aside in favour of the institution's broader goals.

"We have scheduled exercise twice a week, and that's enough. Health is important, but duty comes first. In the police, we follow what superiors decide — it's about the organisation, not personal preference. If we exercised daily, we'd be the Ministry of Sports." (Dira, Adjunct Commissioner, female, Intelligence and Security Unit).

Some officers even feel compelled to lie to secure time off or spend time with their families—highlighting how self-care is viewed not as a right, but as a luxury.

"Every community issue lands at the station, and we're expected to handle it all. In Criminal Investigation, it's a 24/7 job with constant pressure and no real rest. Some fake illness to get a break, but those risks getting labelled by superiors—and the stigma sticks." (Sandro, commissioner, male, legal affairs unit).

Simply taking official leave is difficult, leading to chronic exhaustion and increased risks of both physical and mental health issues.

"We're entitled to annual leave, but it's almost impossible to take. Superiors rarely approve time off—even during major religious holidays—unless we make up an excuse like a sick parent. Real breaks only happen during government-declared collective leave." (Zayan, 1st inspector, male, security and internal affairs unit).

This situation also illustrates how hegemony operates through relational control: superiors not only exploit subordinates materially but also limit their access to basic needs, such as the right to rest. Subordinates have little room to voice concerns or negotiate their conditions. When they express fatigue, moral discomfort, or safety worries, they are often referred to psychological services—framing the issue as a personal failing rather than a systemic problem.

“Officers facing stress can go to the police psychology unit for counselling and even be referred to a psychiatrist if needed. With the right support, issues can be resolved. Ideally, officers should also feel safe speaking to their superiors instead of keeping it all in. It’s better to speak up and find a solution.” (Rehan, Adjunct Commissioner, male, Special Crimes Unit).

Subordinates don’t passively endure excessive strain—they actively navigate an exploitative structure that also offers informal opportunities. By leveraging its contradictions, they seek relief and survival within a hierarchy that withholds recognition and fair reward.

“Some officers see side money as a bonus, thinking, ‘I’ve gone above and beyond what the state expects from me.’ The truth is, salaries don’t meet real needs, and operational costs aren’t fully covered. The workload is often unreasonable—like today, I was in a disciplinary hearing from 9 am to 7 pm.” (Alon, commissioner, male, security and internal affairs unit).

In strategic units, excessive workloads are normalised, justified by their informal association with access to unofficial benefits.

“Traffic work, especially in vehicle registration, is exhausting. It brings extra income but takes extra effort—morning at the post, then the licensing office, then back again. It’s a trade-off: more money, more work. If you’re still young, it’s better to go for it. You’re investing in your future, whatever that might look like, because we never really know what lies ahead. In the police, it’s all about loyalty—there’s no overtime pay. If there were, I’d be rich by now.” (Cakri, 1st Sub-Inspector, male, Traffic Unit).

By contrast, those in non-strategic positions carry similarly heavy burdens but without access to any additional compensation.

“I’m in a staff role now, so I work from 6 am to around 4 pm. Alhamdulillah, as they say, ‘The more you work, the more you earn; rest too much and your wallet stays thin.’ That’s how it is. Our base salary is low since we don’t deal with the public. We’re just serving our own headquarters. I earn extra by helping locals fast-track licences using my network in other units in my spare time.” (Endah, 1st inspector, male, headquarters services unit).

For some subordinates, the burden becomes intolerable leading them to engage in corrupt practices not simply for gain, but as a means of escape, using illicit networks to secure transfers into positions that offer psychological relief or lighter duties.

“I’m grateful, especially as a woman with a supportive husband. After becoming an inspector, things got easier. I actively reached out to the HR unit and requested lesser demanding roles, as long as they still allowed me to move up to Chief Inspector. I mostly worked in staff positions—PR, Traffic education, and then budgeting. After becoming Chief Inspector, I took on roles, which was also relaxed. There’s no pressure to bring in money like in Regident unit. HQ is calm—weekends and public holidays off, and my kids are grown up.” (Della, Adjunct Commissioner, Female, Traffic Unit).

From the interviews, it is evident that workload pressure on lower-ranking police personnel is not a neutral organisational outcome, but a direct effect of politically constructed priorities. As argued by Lloyd (2018b), to consolidate power, ruling regimes advance neoliberal agendas that embed business logics within public bureaucracy, which in this study are actively reproduced by police actors in structural positions aligned with regime interests. Through this process, public service is reconfigured away from social needs and subordinated to an imposed economic rationality centred on efficiency, productivity, and target compliance.

In parallel, Garland (2001, p. 26) highlights how fiscal restraint and cuts in public expenditure operate as mechanisms through which the state extends control over the autonomy of its workforce. The systematic reduction of resources and personnel compels remaining officers to absorb escalating demands imposed by political superiors, thereby normalising intensified workloads and embedding exploitation in the name of efficiency and state-defined success. Within this configuration, workload, therefore, functions as a disciplinary instrument that translates political imperatives into everyday institutional demands, intensifying control over personnel while obscuring its political origins.

B. Exclusive Recognition

The politicisation of recognition within the INP renders access to positions, ranks, awards, and education exclusive and competitive, no longer grounded in equal respect for human dignity. In this context, corruption operates as a means of purchasing recognition from those who control the system, enabling individuals to navigate and survive a structure that values dignity only through formal status.

According to Fraser (1997, p. 74, 79), in a hegemonic system, dominant groups turn social recognition from a universal right into a privilege, making people compete for it to their advantage. Those in power enforce this kind of competition in an atmosphere of insecurity, individualism, and eroded solidarity, triggering a fragmented, fragile rivalry prone to destructive consequences.

As a result, what should be a fair competition ends up encouraging ethical compromise and corrupt practices. Recognition is, in turn, weaponised as a tool of control, granted only to those who meet hegemonic standards, while subordinate groups are forced to submit and constantly prove their worth under rules, they had no part in creating (Pemberton, 2015, p. 49).

To maintain stability, the regime granted the INP significant internal autonomy while restricting open competition, then reinforced a centralised and exclusive recognition system that placed career control in the hands of the Chief of Police. Recognition flows top-down, excluding lower ranks and external oversight, thereby entrenching systemic corruption and rendering claims of transparency largely symbolic.

Internal regulations were deliberately designed to cultivate a pro-regime climate, normalising hierarchical corruption as a basis for legitimacy and career advancement. One such regulation, Chief of Police Regulation No. 9 of 2016 on the police career development system, institutionalises seniority and loyalty over merit in promotion processes. The closed nature of oversight mechanisms further enables non-transparent promotions, fostering collusion and political bargaining. As a result, positions within the police become commodified, particularly those linked to financial flows or strategic electoral regions.

“Let’s be real. Everyone’s trying to get into the lucrative public service units. People are scrambling for it, but not everyone can make it. You’ll hear there are dozens already waiting. Meanwhile, the less popular posts are wide open, but no one wants them. No one’s asking for general HQ services. They’d rather pull strings to get into Criminal Investigation, Narcotics, or Traffic—that’s where everyone wants to be.” (Diani, Adjunct Commissioner, female, Traffic Unit).

Job transfers are also used as a tool of coercion to secure obedience to politically motivated orders, reducing formal selection processes to hollow formalities.

“If a boss doesn’t like someone, they’ll often just send their name to HR to get them moved. That’s why we’re expected to go along with whatever they want. Sometimes it’s as direct as, “This mate of mine must pass,” and we’re told to make it happen. Not being seen as loyal can count against you—even if you’ve done your job well, you might still get transferred. It happens.” (Pranav, 1st sub inspector, male, logistics unit).

Superiors often exploit their authority to dismiss politically inconvenient subordinates, creating an intimidating climate that undermines fairness and reinforces authoritarian tendencies.

“What usually happens is, if a subordinate doesn’t go along with the boss, they get transferred to less desirable posts. It’s seen as normal when someone doesn’t meet their superior’s expectations. Most higher-ups have their own inner circle. The boss might quietly say, “Don’t work with that one, they’re no good,” and that kind of talk ends up blocking careers. Once someone’s labelled as not good at their job, it sticks. It’s hard to recover, especially in a competitive environment where you’re no longer seen as capable.” (Dimas, 2nd brigadier, male, human resources unit).

In the end, career advancement decisions are frequently shaped less by merit or integrity than by corrupt payment, patronage networks, and conformity to the political agenda of those in power.

“In this organisation, job transfers are often handled behind the scenes. Loyalty and connections become essential. There are inner circles of power, and if you’re not part of them or don’t play by their rules, you get left behind—like missing the last train. Rewards and punishments are meant to be based on performance, but in reality, it’s still very subjective.” (Ishan, 1st Inspector, male, Traffic Unit).

In turn, subordinates within elite circles are favoured for strategic roles in capital-rich, politically significant areas, while outsiders are posted to remote, less commercially attractive regions.

“There’s always some level of closeness with superiors. Without it, your career tends to stay average. You might get a role, but not the key, strategic ones. Those top posts usually come with certain “obligations” to the boss, if you know what I mean. Positions like head of operations come with power and often, financial perks too. But if you’re in a back-office role with no public contact, you’ve got no influence. It’s not just about money as strategic roles build your network, reputation, and reach.” (Darwin, adjunct commissioner, male, public relations unit).

Police Regulation No. 14 of 2015 on the police education system further entrenches this exclusivity by privileging graduates of the Police Academy (Akpól) within INP’s educational caste system. To cultivate loyal cadres and consolidate political power, those in authority allocate strategic leadership roles based more on educational background than actual competence, systematically blocking non-Akpól advancement.

“From the start, opportunities aren’t equal. I began as a non-commissioned officer, and yeah, I did feel a bit jealous of mates from the Police Academy (Akpól) or Inspector School (SEPA). They go straight into top-tier leadership paths. I tried three times, but the rules changed and we were no longer eligible. Where you start really shapes your chances. The system’s not fair. For those of us from Brigadier School, the gap’s huge. The rigid rank structure still holds people back.” (Alon, commissioner, male, security and internal affairs unit).

These dynamic concentrates power within an elite group, reinforcing internal stratification based on loyalty and seniority. As a result, superiors marginalise subordinate groups, deepening the polarisation between insiders and those excluded from the system. Education serves as a tool of political selection, with those selected or sent for training often chosen for political proximity and patronage rather than merit.

“Not long ago, my son applied to the police academy but didn’t get in. These days, it’s hard to get into the force. From what I’ve seen, kids with academy alumni parents seem to get preferential treatment.” (Sisi, 1st inspector, female, general inspectorate unit).

Police Regulation No. 3 of 2016 on the administration of police ranks intensifies structural inequality by centralising the authority to approve rank promotions in the hands of structural elites—such as the Chief of Police, internal HR elites, and even the President—particularly for middle and high-ranking officers. Promotions at the top levels can be fast-tracked for those with access to the highest authorities. In contrast, brigadier and lower ranks (*Tamtama*) are structurally locked in and must wait longer, as approvals remain under central control.

“My own boss couldn’t help with my promotion. The real power was with people above him, so I had to take matters into my own hands. Now it’s about “financial loyalty” too. If you don’t show up and speak to the HR bosses yourself, you won’t move up. In practice, every junior officer still has to go in person to the personnel unit whenever they’re up for a rank promotion.” (Sinar, Adjunct Chief Commissioner, male, Narcotics Unit).

Institutional elites often exploit this discretionary authority to exclude those outside their political alliances—by denying equal recognition, labelling dissenters, and blocking rank promotions.

“One big reason someone’s rank doesn’t move up is a lack of backing. To go from Second to First Inspector, you need a proper post. Officers feel stuck—jealous, unsupported, unmotivated. Sometimes, past issues, like disciplinary cases, still hang over them unresolved. In the end, who else can they turn to but their superior? Leaders should guide, support, and show the way—but many are too focused on their own success. And that leaves their subordinates disappointed—even heartbroken.” (Ilmi, 1st Inspector, female, Security and Internal Affairs Unit).

Police Regulation No. 3 of 2011 on the awarding of commendations institutionalises a centralised reward regime, granting superiors near-absolute authority over recognition processes without public participation or external oversight. Consequently, subordinates must compete under one-sided rules set entirely by those in authority.

“Performance gets rewarded here—if you deliver, the higher-ups notice. Cracking a big case might get you something, but you still have to apply for it yourself. I’m not one to show off or brown-nose, though plenty do. Everyone has their own way — that’s just not mine. Some try to get close to the top to move up, but without the right connections, it’s tough.” (Fara, Brigadier, female, General Crimes Unit).

With ambiguous criteria and assessments conducted by an internally homogeneous board, authorities often misuse awards to reward loyalty or political favours rather than to recognise meaningful contributions from lower-ranking personnel.

“The rules and reality often don’t match. I saw it firsthand in a conflict zone. Those who truly did the work often went unrecognised. Meanwhile, others suddenly appeared on award lists, getting medals out of nowhere. The real performers were overlooked—no promotion, no thanks, sometimes even blamed.” (Farel, commissioner, male, operations unit).

The INP’s exclusive, hierarchical recognition system generates systemic tension that police subordinates collectively experience. Institutional elites often label those who fail to get promoted or rewarded as not only disloyal but also apathetic or unmotivated. It is a tactic to silence criticism and stigmatise demands for fairness as threats—so their voices are dismissed instead of heard.

"I feel embarrassed when I see someone lazy—not because they lack talent, but because they choose not to grow. They've settled, they've become too comfortable, and it all comes down to laziness and a closed mindset. They'll say things like, 'Alhamdulillah, I'm fine as I am. I don't want to become an officer, I'm happy with my life now.' And that's it — they've closed themselves off to any chance of growing beyond where they are." (Eros, Brigadier, male, Special Crimes Unit).

When the system fails to provide fair recognition, subordinates are left with no choice but to "buy" their structural positions—less out of ambition than as a defence against stigma, isolation, and professional doubts within a politically infiltrated institution.

"In the police, success means rank. Back in 2020, I was still a Brigadier, and honestly, I feel stuck. I've got a house, some of my kids are independent, but others from my batch are already Inspectors. One mate I used to hang out with made it—and you wonder, "How did he get ahead?" Being smart isn't enough. Without the right connections—and money—it's tough. To move up, you need brains, networks, and capital. With money, more doors open." (Sigra, 1st Sub-Inspector, male, General Crimes Unit).

Subordinates experience an identity crisis, as the institution instils the idea that a police officer's worth is tied to their rank. Without promotion, their self-esteem suffers, and they're seen as less worthy to interact with higher-ranking colleagues.

"When you've got rank, you feel you can speak freely—like, 'This is me, I've earned it.' That's how it is. If I'm with motorbike taxi drivers, they respect me. But when you're around senior officers, things feel different. They don't look down on you, but the way they treat you changes—like officers should stick to their own level. Sometimes people think I'm weak just because of my rank. Even friends from the same batch talk to me differently once they outrank me." (Helin, 1st Sub-Inspector, Female, District Police Unit).

Many strive to succeed in their careers simply to make their families proud, making recognition not only about status, but also about personal and family honour.

"When it's our own family, like our wife or cousins, they'll usually understand and say things like, 'Wow, his career's really going well right now.' When we see someone succeed, we often know there's an 'X factor' behind it—mostly closeness and loyalty. And for those who don't get the same opportunities, or even a position just below that level, of course, they'll feel discouraged. That's just how it is—officers will feel disheartened as their superiors' judgments often hinge on those factors." (Helin, 1st Sub-Inspector, Female, District Police Unit).

In this situation, subordinates who feel alienated or unwelcome in their work units often end up blaming themselves, as if their failure to adapt is entirely a personal flaw—when in fact, it's the result of an exclusive system that deliberately sidelines those who refuse to play by the rules of power.

"Officers feel ashamed when their roles don't match their abilities. But in the end, it's on the individual. If you don't improve yourself, you won't get far. Underperformers won't get chances unless a boss can say, 'They're doing well in our way.' That's why networking matters. You need others to recognise and speak up for your work. Strong relationships show your character, and that's what earns trust for bigger roles." (Zayan, 1st inspector, male, security and internal affairs unit).

Promotion rights rest solely with superiors, lacking any consultative process, while complaint channels are either absent or pose serious risks to one's career. The absence of any mechanism for expressing concerns, combined with the obligation to prove loyalty in a closed system, makes fair promotions nearly impossible—leaving subordinates with no option but to accept one-sided decisions from above.

"Of course it hurts. I'd be lying if I said it didn't. But what can you do? There's not much you can do to fight it, especially when rank promotions keep getting delayed. With time, you just learn to live with it. Still, deep down, you wonder, 'Why me? Why am I the one being sacrificed?' In the end, it all feels like luck—either you've got it, or you don't." (Haris, 1st Inspector, male, Narcotics Unit).

Fear of transfer, unwritten sanctions, and career stagnation create a deep sense of institutional insecurity. Still, subordinates are not entirely passive—they begin to navigate structural pressures strategically: adapting to the hegemonic logic, building personal connections, and resorting to informal methods such as bribery or lobbying as survival strategies in an unfair system.

“Not everyone can get the same position—roles are limited. If ten officers compete for five posts, only five will be chosen. Selection depends on how others perceive you, making relationships and reputation essential. Today, connections can be built through small gestures like treating someone to a meal, but not everyone can afford to do that often.” (Purwanta, chief commissioner, male, security and internal affairs unit).

Some even go so far as to sacrifice the careers they’ve built, hoping that their act of loyalty will be seen as a ticket to recognition from their superiors.

“When we can’t show loyalty through money, we show it through hard work—but that often means being given risky or nearly impossible tasks. We’re still expected to complete them, and even when we do, those tasks can later cause problems. In the end, we’re the ones who pay the price.” (Candra, 1st inspector, male, general planning and budget unit).

Others choose to remain loyal and work hard, even when their superiors’ decisions are clearly unjust trapped in a hegemonic mindset that teaches them loyalty will eventually be rewarded, even though the reality often says otherwise.

“Assignments to “money-making” or less desirable roles are the leader’s decision, and subordinates must respect and support that. Loyalty goes beyond money — it’s shown through time, effort, and sincere hard work. When juniors perform consistently and honestly, superiors notice, and opportunities like training or promotion follow. Hard work is expected; recognition should be earned through results, not words.” (Pryan, 1st Inspector, Male, Security and Internal Affairs Unit).

All these findings reveal that recognition functions as a scarce, power-laden resource that structures and intensifies hierarchical masculinity. Dominant actors must continuously reaffirm their authority to secure recognition from below, while subordinates face acute pressure to access restricted recognition. Within this unequal terrain, compliance and loyalty become strategic means of performing masculinity where legitimate pathways are blocked (Fontaine, 2019).

This dynamic reinforces Messerschmidt's (2019, p. 35) argument that masculinity is not an inherent trait, but a contingent social accomplishment that must be continuously performed and secured. Crucially, institutional arrangements themselves operate as active structuring forces that stabilise hierarchy, systematically distributing recognition in unequal ways that reproduce domination and subordination.

Within this configuration, corruption in the INP emerges as a collective response to structural produced strain, expressed in differentiated ways across the hierarchy: Superiors mobilise corruption as a marker of authority, while subordinates—in navigating conditions of constraint and survival—become implicated in sustaining the very structures that oppress them.

Within this deeply corrupt system, corruption is consciously used to offset low pay, heavy workloads, unmet expectations of fairness, and the pursuit of symbolic legitimacy, all within an institutional logic that normalises inequality. Recruits quickly learn that survival depends on conformity, as resistance is eroded and non-compliance leads to marginalisation. As a result, corruption becomes a self-reinforcing cycle that sustains the structure and functions as a mechanism of political control within the INP.

6.3. Conclusion

This chapter concludes that police corruption in Indonesia stems less from individual moral failure than from systemic pressures within hegemonic structures. The INP is subject to ongoing economic and political tensions, caught in the crossfire between the competing interests of dominant regimes and those of subordinate social groups. Politically, the ruling regime demands the unwavering loyalty of the police, leaving lower-ranking personnel trapped in labour exploitation and politicised duties. Economically, inadequate incentives relative to delegated duties pressure personnel to exploit their power to ease the strain.

This chapter has revealed that institutional policies within the police force function as mechanisms of hegemonic control—privileging dominant groups at the expense of lower-ranking personnel, whose basic needs often go unmet. The resulting injustice and inequality are not accidental but deliberately produced to enforce submission and trap personnel in corrupt routines, as structural constraints leave little room for legitimate alternatives. In short, the suffering of those at the bottom becomes the price paid to protect the authority and comfort of a dominant minority.

Using the framework of GST, this chapter has shown that lower-ranking personnel face dual structural pressures—both material and symbolic—manifested through low wages, inadequate social compensation, exploitative workloads, and discriminatory recognition. Altogether, these reflect a broader lack of institutional support for their fundamental well-being. However, they are not entirely passive. They respond to structural pressure opportunistically—by adapting, reinterpreting situations, and even redistributing the pressure through the continuation of hegemonic practices, as a strategy for self-validation within an oppressive system.

Thus, they are not merely victims, but also agents who—knowingly or unknowingly—contribute to reinforcing the very hegemonic order that oppresses them, thereby perpetuating a deeply rooted cycle of corruption. The outcome is a self-reinforcing mechanism, in which both superiors and subordinates reproduce pressures that normalise corruption in the daily routines of the INP.

CHAPTER 7: POLICE RATIONALISATION OF CORRUPTION

7.1. Introduction

Previous chapters have shown that the Indonesian regime's prioritisation of national stability operates not as a neutral governance objective, but as a political strategy to preserve its economic and political hegemony, thereby fuelling systemic corruption within the Indonesian National Police (INP) (see Chapters 5). Through alliances with elites, the state rhetorically promotes welfare for lower ranks while concentrating resources at the centre level, deepening structural inequality and limiting the ability of most personnel to meet basic needs.

As demonstrated in Chapter 6, these structural pressures persist, making corruption a means of survival within a system that disempowers lower ranks while entrenching elite control. In this sense, corruption is not merely individual deviance but structurally produced. Ironically, efforts to survive within this system ultimately reproduce the very inequalities imposed by the regime, leaving the public trapped in a cycle of power-preserving corruption.

This chapter shifts focus to how the INP, as both protector and servant of the regime, erodes moral sensitivity and institutionalises indifference to social suffering, particularly among marginalised communities. This indifference is not a product of individual neglect, but of institutional arrangements that serve the political interests of dominant elites. To sustain this order, the police deploy systemic neutralisation mechanisms that signal loyalty to the regime while legitimising control over lower-class populations, thereby consolidating their role as the state's trusted security force.

Accordingly, this chapter explores how the police engineer public consensus to make turning a blind eye to corruption seem not just normal, but beneficial to the nation. At the same time, the INP aligns with the regime's hegemonic consensus, uncritically accepting inequality and injustice as unquestionable—especially for those in subordinate positions. Within this logic, using authority to uphold the dominant order is not only justified but celebrated as institutional loyalty in the eyes of those in power.

The chapter begins by examining how the INP, when in subordinate positions, invokes the 'appeal to higher loyalties' to legitimise corrupt allegiance to regime interests. It closes by revealing how the INP, as a dominant authority over the lower classes, crafts neutralisation narratives to excuse the complicity of marginalised groups and erase their structural suffering from public concern.

7.2. Appeal to Higher Loyalties

The Indonesian National Police has been reshaped into an extension of political power, operating within a hegemonic political-economic order in which profit and elite stability override its duty to serve the public. Within this system, police actors often justify corrupt practices as expressions of loyalty to so-called “higher” interests, directing this loyalty towards political authority rather than the welfare of the public or marginalised groups. As Hildreth et al. (2016, p. 17) suggest, in contexts where group loyalty is elevated as the highest value, such actions are no longer perceived as ethical breaches but are reframed as political responsibilities or moral obligations to defend the perceived best interests of the group, even at the expense of ordinary people's lives.

In Indonesia, scholars have argued that state institutions, including the police, tend to equate loyalty with political obedience, a process reinforced through nationalist and patriotic rhetoric in official discourse (Leifer, 2000, p. 159; Aspinall, 2015, p. 73). Such narratives frame compliance as essential to maintaining political stability, economic growth, and public order, often legitimising the exercise of power in the name of the national interest. In practice, however, these constructions of “the state” may function to sustain elite dominance.

Interview findings show that within the INP, loyalty is practiced as submission to government direction, often prioritising state interests over those of ordinary citizens.

“Healthy loyalty is fine—but this has gone too far. Loyalty isn’t based on performance anymore, but on how close you are to senior officials and how often you bring gifts. In the end, it’s the government that drives all of this. Where the police are headed really depends on the government, because we’re just carrying out their policies.” (Alon, Commissioner, male, Security and Internal Affairs Unit).

In disaster response, serving the “state” is often articulated through centrally mandated targets and institutional performance pressures, justifying the bypassing of formal procedures, such as unofficial fundraising, to support government programs.

“During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us felt the need to support the centrally mandated vaccination targets—even before the budget was disbursed. Some gave their time, used personal funds, or asked partners for help—thinking, “It’s for the greater good, for the Police’s image, and our core mission.” Missing targets back then could count as poor performance.” (Rizal, Adjunct Commissioner, male, Human Resources Unit).

This rhetoric, however, extends beyond state-driven initiatives to encompass the operational needs of the police institution itself. Routine practices—such as giving money or sharing profits with superiors—are frequently rationalised as expressions of loyalty or respect for the chain of command, including senior and immediate superiors.

“In police training, loyalty means respecting seniors and obeying superiors. But in practice, that doesn’t hold up. Loyalty often means money. If you give, even with poor performance, you’re still seen as good. But if you work hard and give nothing, you stay stuck. It all depends on the boss—whether they want to keep you or let you go.” (Farel, Commissioner, male, Operations Unit).

According to Abdussalam (2023, p. 67), the INP indoctrinates its officers with “Satya Haprabu”—a principle of loyalty to the state. However, the meaning of “the state” in this context is not fixed. While it is formally articulated as loyalty to the abstract state, in practice it is often interpreted as obedience to specific state actors, particularly the head of state and the national police chief. Moreover, this loyalty tends to be enacted at a more immediate and personal level, where officers demonstrate allegiance to their direct superiors.

In processes such as promotions or educational selections, this is reflected in support for a superior’s preferred candidate, even when that candidate may not be the most qualified.

“Promotion slots are limited, and those with connections usually stand a better chance. Once a task gets a superior’s attention, it often feels mandatory. While Satya Haprabu is important, I would refuse commands that go against my conscience. Still, some people comply simply because they’re already too involved, even if they know the risks. Not everyone can accept such orders, but someone always will.” (Bimo, Brigadier, male, Human Resources Unit).

Loyalty is also reduced to a readiness to take care of a superior’s personal matters—including using one’s position to extract money to meet their needs.

“Sometimes, they know the boss is under pressure or dealing with a lot. They’ll immediately ask how they can help—what needs to be done. The ideal officer is someone who can handle everything the boss needs. That all costs money—so we turn to friends, connections, or people we’ve helped in the past.” (Candra, 1st Inspector, male, General Planning and Budget Unit).

Superiors often use loyalty as a key performance indicator, expecting subordinates to express it symbolically through gifts or cash.

“It often comes down to connections and money. Even with good performance, it’s hard without them. I doubt leadership even reads the regulations, so they likely don’t know what ‘good’ really means for us. They mostly judge what’s visible: showing up, obeying orders, finishing tasks. That’s it. The culture of paying superiors could change if orders from the top were clear and honest. Then we’d naturally follow.” (Ina, 2nd Inspector, female, Special Crimes Unit).

Performance is often judged not by results but by obedience. In practice, loyalty means meeting a superior’s expectations, even if it involves criminalising subordinates seen as threatening their interests, placing personal allegiance above justice.

“For leaders, success comes second. Loyalty is measured by absolute readiness to follow orders without objection—no matter the situation. In the CID, for example, investigators who act quickly and manage to crack high-profile cases—especially those that align with what the bosses want—are often seen as loyal and rewarded with promotions.” (Rehan, Adjunct Commissioner, male, Special Crimes Unit).

Interviewees indicated that loyalty to superiors is constructed as absolute and non-negotiable, particularly in units with organised extraction systems such as traffic licensing. Within these settings, loyalty becomes a localised subcultural norm, enacted through obedience and compliance with informal money collection practices, where deviation is discouraged.

“We just follow the boss’s lead. “If you want to stay, stick to the system—don’t cause trouble.” Loyalty means following instructions like “don’t charge extra” or “don’t ask for money.” The boss says, “If they give, take it. If not, don’t ask.” Everything’s already organised through third-party agents, so we know what we’ll get. The message is clear: “You’ve got your share—don’t step out of line.” If you’re not loyal, you’ll end up extorting on your own.” (Helin, 1st Sub-Inspector, Female, District Police Unit).

INP personnel associate loyalty with an unwritten code that governs profit-sharing, requiring openness towards superiors and compliance with limits defined by rank.

“I tried everything to get my team to contribute financially, but it didn’t work. So, I created a family-like atmosphere “If we have money, we share it together.” I believe in sharing by percentage. Once a unit agrees to that, there’s no issue with whoever manages or receives it, because I’m transparent. Thankfully, I share with everyone, from top leaders to the parking staff. It’s not based on fixed rules—just sharing when there’s extra.” (Endah, 1st inspector, male, headquarters service unit).

When corruption is exposed, loyalty compels subordinates to absorb the risks of enforcement, with the expectation that their status will be restored or even promoted once the punishment ends or the issue fades from public attention.

“I used to believe loyalty was non-negotiable—every order from a superior felt like a duty under the law. That’s what we were taught: loyalty at all costs, respect the chain of command. But in practice, we’re sometimes pushed to follow things that feel wrong. And when things go wrong, the blame usually falls on lower ranks. The thinking is, “Well, it’s the higher-ups who give out promotions anyway.” So, if someone junior gets caught, they’re told, “Just be patient—we’ll sort it out later.” (Nasto, Adjunct Commissioner, male, Headquarters Service Unit).

Ultimately, loyalty is defined as the willingness to accept any decision made by a superior—even at personal cost, such as losing a promotion one has paid for to someone with stronger connections or a larger payment.

“If you're loyal to the boss, you'll likely get more in return. If not, you probably won't get protection, promotions or similar opportunities. As subordinates, there's not much we can do—we just accept it. Some might think, “Just go along with it. The commander won't be here long—maybe two years at most.” So, they choose to wait it out. Most people take that path because pushing back often leads to trouble for themselves.” (Diani, Adjunct Commissioner, female, Traffic Unit).

This account suggests that loyalty is shaped by proximity to hegemonic power, compelling lower-ranking officers to prioritise dominant interests over public needs. This pattern reinforces Pemberton's (2004) argument that when political power overrides human needs, institutions cultivate moral indifference towards the consequences of their practices. Within this framework, loyalty and compliance, including gift-giving, are not individual misconduct but expressions of an institutional logic that normalises and legitimises such practices as necessary for maintaining hierarchy. As a result, ethical considerations are subordinated to institutional survival, reinforcing silence and compliance where dissent carries professional risks.

As Gresham Sykes and David Matza (1957, p. 669) argue, within a broader social system that demands loyalty to power, such norms are reproduced within organisational contexts, where individuals rationalise their involvement in harmful practices as serving a higher purpose, rendering them morally acceptable within dominant organisational values. In this sense, neutralisation extends beyond an individual coping strategy and becomes a structurally conditioned response, shaped by one's position in the hierarchy, where those in subordinate positions are more likely to rely on it to navigate systemic pressures.

7.3. Denial of Deviance

Having shown how the INP justifies its subordination to the regime through loyalty, this study examines how it secures compliance from subordinate groups through the discourse of denial of deviance. In doing so, the INP presents two faces: performing loyalty upward to secure power while deploying denial downward to manufacture legitimacy. This dual strategy reveals how the INP dominates the public while consolidating loyalty to the regime, flexibly reworking its collective rationalisations through everyday practices to sustain and legitimise its power.

In this context, the use of religious and cultural moral rhetoric to legitimise authority is not unique to the police but reflects a broader pattern in which moral frameworks are embedded within projects of social order and state power. Rather than serving emancipatory ends, they are instrumentalised as moral veils that confer symbolic immunity, obscuring abuses of power by dominant actors while reframing the harm inflicted on less powerful groups as morally virtuous and noble (Feener and Wu, 2020; Salama and Chikudate, 2021). Consequently, the police normalise discretionary practices as ethical obligations, eroding their sensitivity to public suffering and enabling moral disengagement that denies responsibility for harm.

These cultural and spiritual justifications may temper public anger, encouraging accommodation rather than confrontation (Bubandt, 2014). As a result, the systemic abuse of power within the police becomes normalised and at times morally justified in response to structural pressures. Positioned as subordinate, the public may come to interpret bribery as compliance, even virtue, thereby becoming complicit in accepting police discretion as routine and beyond challenge. This study finds that the INP mobilises religious and cultural justifications to deny the harmfulness of its practices.

7.3.1. Religious Rationalisation

The INP has politicised religious symbols, values, and teachings—especially Islam, the majority religion in Indonesia—to sanctify its structural position, justify its corrupt practices, and mask the social harm it causes. Several members stated in interviews that they joined the police out of a desire to serve or show devotion.

“Many join the police with noble aims—serving others, living out their faith, helping the community, or making their parents proud. But as time goes on, life can either keep them grounded or steer them off course.” (Reni, 1st Inspector, female, Intelligence and Security Unit).

For them, fulfilling the state's mandate is religious devotion, seeing leadership as worship to seek God's pleasure and reward.

“In Islam, a good deed can earn you a reward. If we serve the community well and they show appreciation in their own way, that's fine. What's not on is setting fixed amounts—that's clearly extortion. But if it's freely given, based on what they can afford, then Wallahu'alam—God knows best.” (Zaiyan, 1st inspector, male, security and internal affairs unit).

This view echoes Alimin et al. (2018), who describe leadership responsibility (*amana*) as a form of worship, reflecting both obedience to God and service to society. However, these religious narratives are often exploited to justify power abuse, so long as it is framed as obeying a divine command.

“Someone who has been entrusted with a position, status, and success should actually support and encourage their peers who are still finding their way—not isolate them, look down on them, or leave them behind.” (Ilmi, 1st Inspector, female, Security and Internal Affairs Unit).

Police officers often view their position as a “blessing from God” and perceive their power as a trust that they repay with loyalty and gratitude to those who supported them along the way.

"I'm not someone special. I'm just an ordinary person. Back then, I was ready to be placed anywhere. Maybe it was Allah's will that I got the chance when someone left, even though I had no background in Narcotics Investigation." (Endah, 1st inspector, male, headquarters services unit).

They are taught to work hard while believing outcomes rest with God—viewing their duties as an endeavour (*ikhtiar*) towards a good destiny (*takdir*), or as enduring hardship with His blessing and acceptance.

"Positions are up to superiors but also depend on ikhtiar. In this organisation, roles often need to be 'taken care of'. With prayer, effort, achievements, and loyalty, even destiny can shift." (Ishan, 1st Inspector, Male, Traffic Unit).

As hard work is seen as worship, believers are expected to act sincerely (*ikhlas*)—for God, not material gain—even if it means going beyond formal duties (Nadeem, 2022).

"People have different minds, ambitions, and intentions. But when we work with ikhlas (sincerity), opportunities will find their way to us." (Aksa, Adjunct Chief Commissioner, male, Special Crimes Unit).

In practice, however, officers who offer help often expect material returns, framing monetary gifts as sincere expressions of gratitude.

"When friends help us, there's always that hope we'll return the favour. So when they're the ones in need, we naturally feel the need to help. That's how mutual relationships work." (Dimas, 2nd brigadier, male, human resources unit).

Here, sincerity is used to justify the selective granting of access—especially to those who are familiar, helpful, loyal, or obedient. As long as the giving is perceived as sincere, the source of the money is not seen as violating religious teachings, and the income is therefore considered legitimate (*halal*).

"If someone wants to build a good relationship with us by giving gifts, that's fine—as long as it's sincere. We don't ask or push for it. It isn't about whether it's halal or haram—but if someone gives money with reluctance, even to the point of tears, it makes us uncomfortable too." (Mira, 1st Sub-Inspector, female, Narcotics Unit).

In turn, citizens receiving such selective help often feel obliged to reciprocate with gifts or money—framed as sincere tokens of appreciation.

“We don’t ask, but people are used to giving because they see the police as making things easier. Over time, it became routine — especially with processes that need multi-level approval.” (Ciro, Brigadier, male, Narcotics Unit).

Consequently, police officers justify accepting them as long as they are not given under pressure or coercion, making the ‘sincere exchange’ appear natural rather than transactional.

“So, I choose to think positively—that they’re giving sincerely without pressure. When it’s forced or fixed, it becomes a burden. But if it’s done freely and with good intent, it shouldn’t be misunderstood.” (Dira, Adjunct Commissioner, female, Intelligence and Security Unit).

This mindset leads actors to frame their assistance to citizens as charity that brings both spiritual and material rewards, as long as they offer it sincerely and not in response to explicit requests. They are taught not to see their duties as burdens, so any money received is seen as a divine blessing (*barakah*)—a sacred gift that brings both material and spiritual benefit.

“As long as we don’t ask for it, it’s a barakah. When we serve with a sincere heart, blessings follow. Helping others brings ease in many things, and the job no longer feels like a burden.” (Fara, Brigadier, female, General Crimes Unit).

In their belief, sustenance (*rizq*) is granted by God, and cannot be taken by anyone else.

“If all we think about is ‘I must make money!’, then what’s the purpose of our profession? We don’t need to chase money—Our sustenance is already written and won’t go to anyone else.” (Agam, 1st Sub-Inspector, male, Patrol Unit).

Because of this, they are convinced that as long as they genuinely work to help others, *rizq* will come as a reward for their good deeds.

“Personally, I focus on doing my job well and helping others first. I believe provision follows performance. Just do your job properly, see it through, and rewards will come—one way or another.” (Dimas, 2nd brigadier, male, human resources unit).

Their faith also encourages them to share any surplus *rizq*, even with strangers, as they believe that helping others brings spiritual reward.

"Faith teaches us to share when we have more, and that the giving hand is better than the receiving one. If I have extra, I'm happy to share even with strangers, let alone those I know. Refusing a sincere gift can be seen as an insult, as if rejecting an act of kindness. Giving is their right—it's not the same as asking." (Zayan, 1st inspector, male, security and internal affairs unit).

Conversely, they see refusing a gift as rejecting *rizq*—a potentially insulting or even sinful act, as it may suggest looking down on the giver.

"Is it forbidden? I don't think so. But in my view, can we refuse when someone offers us something? As a Muslim, I believe provision shouldn't be rejected." (Eros, Brigadier, male, Special Crimes Unit).

It creates room for the view that citizens supported by the police may feel a moral duty to reciprocate if they are financially able to do so.

Even police officers of non-Islamic faiths often believe that blessings from God can come through others and thus should not be refused.

"When someone suddenly helps or gives us something, that's a blessing. That's provision. God doesn't come down Himself; He sends people to help us." (Farel, commissioner, male, operations unit).

For Muslims, if sustenance (*rizq*) has not yet arrived, they believe it is simply not the right time. Since sustenance is considered God's domain, their duty is merely to strive and accept the outcome with sincerity (*ikhlas*), whatever it may be.

"My former boss said, 'Provision is already arranged. What matters is your willingness to help.' And it's true, help may not come from the same person, but God sends it through others." (Cakri, 1st Sub-Inspector, male, Traffic Unit).

All sustenance is seen as a blessing from God and should be received with thankfulness (*syukur*), regardless of its value.

"For those of us at the lower level, if we receive some provision, then Alhamdulillah. If not, that's fine too. Usually, everything goes through one door—the boss. Suppose they decide to share it downwards, Alhamdulillah. If they keep it, well, that's their choice." (Pranav, 1st Sub-Inspector, male, Logistics Unit).

Furthermore, they believe that every position carries its own share of *rizq*.

"When I was assigned to the vehicle registration unit, it wasn't unusual for me to receive provision every week. Alhamdulillah." (Della, Adjunct Commissioner, Female, Traffic Unit).

Higher ranks are seen as bringing greater sustenance, with career advancement and income viewed as rewards for greater dedication and good deeds.

"Provision follows your career. Once you become an inspector, it tends to follow. That's why I try to stay grateful." (Sigra, 1st Sub-Inspector, male, General Crimes Unit).

Religious teachings promote social connection (*silaturahmi*), which they maintain in positions of power, believing it brings blessings and enhances sustenance.

"Silaturahmi brings rizq. The more we connect sincerely, the more blessings come—not just money, but health too. And when bonds are strong, friends may give without us even asking." (Arvat, Adjunct Commissioner, Male, Community Development Unit).

It motivates them to welcome *silaturahmi*, especially during religious festivals, where money given through these visits is seen as a festive allowance, not a bribe.

"Silaturahmi among familiar people is perfectly fine. During Eid, we give to family too. To me, it's simply a way to show care for others. Unless the amount is large, it shouldn't be seen as gratification. If it's just something like festive cookies or a modest amount of money, it's simply a normal gesture of goodwill." (Asya, Commissioner, female, Human Resources Unit).

Within this logic, there is an implicit expectation that those in a lower position should initiate *silaturahmi*. The police believe that maintaining regular *silaturahmi* sustains the flow of *rizq*, so citizens are expected to uphold such personal ties whenever they are willing.

"In my view, it's better to gain a little and keep them coming back, rather than ask for a lot and end it there." (Rinai, Commissioner, female, Human Resources Unit).

This pattern illustrates how *silaturahmi* serves as an informal channel for nurturing emotional ties between those in superior and subordinate positions.

"Good communication keeps superiors informed of your work. To reach higher positions with wider networks, you need to be active in silaturahmi to open up those opportunities." (Rizal, Adjunct Commissioner, male, Human Resources Unit).

Silaturahmi forums offer an opportunity to build closeness with superiors and share the *rizq* gained through their position.

"I believe those who collect extra for a superior always take a share too. Once the boss gets theirs, the rest is seen as their own provision." (Angkola, Chief Brigadier, male, Traffic Unit).

This logic also applies downward, where special treatment from the police is seen as sustenance for citizens who maintain *silaturahmi* with them.

"When people visit us through silaturahmi and bring gifts, things naturally become easier when they need our help. That closeness helps smooth things out." (Haris, 1st Inspector, male, Narcotics Unit).

Therefore, gifts given during *silaturahmi* are deemed acceptable, so long as they do not compromise the police's official duties or authority.

"If a citizen gives something out of personal or emotional closeness, and it has nothing to do with the officer's direct authority, then it's generally acceptable." (Alia, 1st Inspector, female, Special Crimes Unit).

Police justify accepting money from citizens they consider partners, believing they take pride in contributing to police work.

"Many feel proud to have a close bond with the police. They make donations during police-led community events as a way to contribute. But sometimes, some officers take advantage of that friendship, asking for more when they need help later on." (Pryan, 1st Inspector, Male, Security and Internal Affairs Unit).

Conversely, they justify rejecting opportunistic or short-term *silaturahmi*, seeing it as insincere and inconsistent with the values of long-term, mutually beneficial relationships.

"If a gift is given purely out of friendship, it's not a problem. But if it's to protect illegal business or avoid legal action, that's corruption." (Marzio, 1st Inspector, male, Operations Unit).

This dynamic reflects an institutionalised form of denial of deviance, in which harmful practices are no longer recognised as deviant but are redefined as normal and legitimate (Whyte, 2016, p. 175). Disobedience is seen as ungrateful and antisocial, while submission is framed as worship.

In this sense, religious narratives function as a depoliticising discourse that disciplines subordinate groups into accepting existing power relations as natural and beyond contestation. Operating at the level of belief, they cultivate an internalised acceptance of unequal power relations as divinely sanctioned or as the will of God, rather than as ethically problematic (Mensah, 2014, p. 258).

Within this framework, the suffering of subordinate groups is not recognised as a product of structural inequality, but is instead reframed as a test of patience, sincerity, or spiritual duty. In doing so, religious discourse obscures the structural nature of corruption while simultaneously legitimising the actions of dominant actors, rendering harmful practices both normalised and morally defensible.

7.3.2. Cultural Rationalisation

Having once relied on religious legitimacy, the INP now strategically appropriates local values, particularly those shaped by dominant Javanese cultural norms, to reproduce corrupt compliance among subordinate groups. These norms—rooted in collectivism and rigid hierarchy—condition individuals (*wong cilik*) to defer unquestioningly to authority (*wong gede*), avoid direct confrontation, accept their decisions without protest (*nrimo*), and resolve disputes through subtle, non-confrontational means designed to preserve social harmony (*guyub rukun*) (Irawanto et al., 2011).

“In our Eastern culture, there’s still this belief that if we’re good to those above us, they’ll treat us well in return—and eventually, we’ll earn a better place. It’s a mindset that’s been passed down for generations and is deeply rooted in us.” (Agam, 1st Sub-Inspector, male, Patrol Unit).

Building on these norms, the INP frames unequal relations and unjust policies as rightful privileges of leadership. Access to protection and permits is framed as a favour, making citizens obedient and even grateful for police abuse, despite the harm it causes.

"We often say the budget's tight, so officers turn to informal sources to supplement their income. Technically, it's corruption, but some acts are still quietly tolerated. It's not right, but I believe the state is aware of it." (Sinar, Adjunct Chief Commissioner, male, Narcotics Unit).

Police often frame monetary gifts as tokens of appreciation for their help.

"I think it comes from Indonesian culture. When someone helps you, you show gratitude. And that's not always just words; sometimes it's a small material gift. It's a way to maintain the relationship so that help might come again in the future." (Reni, 1st Inspector, female, Intelligence and Security Unit).

Citizens often return to show gratitude—especially if they gave nothing initially—to ease discomfort or avoid seeming disrespectful to authority.

"When people can't show gratitude with a gift, they often help in other ways — I've experienced that myself. I once refused a gift, but a year later, when my wife gave birth, someone unexpectedly sent money to cover the costs. That deep sense of gratitude shows how much people value the effort others make to ease their burden." (Cakri, 1st Sub-Inspector, male, Traffic Unit).

This gratitude need not be monetary; those unable to give financially may offer their time, practical help, or valuable connections instead.

"People give not because they're pressured, but because they'd feel awkward if they didn't. In some places, communities genuinely appreciate what local police do. It's mutual. If an official is building a house or a village head is putting up a hall, people often help with labour as a way of saying thanks. No one asks, they just show up on their own." (Rehan, Adjunct Commissioner, male, Special Crimes Unit).

On the other hand, not showing gratitude is seen as socially inappropriate, but if a gift has already been given and the police ask for more, it's considered excessive and unacceptable.

"In our culture, it feels wrong if someone helps you and you don't express any gratitude. It's almost taboo. But if people have already shown appreciation and the police still ask for more, that's when it becomes a problem. That's why there's this saying: 'If you're given money or a gift, just accept it. Don't ask for more.' That way, it's seen as halal." (Alon, Commissioner, male, Security and Internal Affairs Unit).

The police frequently associate Eastern values of politeness and respect (*sopan santun*) with the practice of exchanging small gifts, whether when visiting others or receiving visits from citizens.

"Without communication, there's no real connection—and that makes it harder to work together when needed. Our role requires us to be present in the community, not just sitting in the office. What matters is staying respectful and offering support where we can, even small material help, when we can't always be directly involved." (Pryan, 1st Inspector, Male, Security and Internal Affairs Unit).

In local cultures, arriving empty-handed is considered impolite; thus, giving a gift to the police is regarded as a sign of respect and proper etiquette (*tata krama*).

"When we visit someone, we bring food. It's just how we show respect. We don't ask, we just give. Same with neighbours. If we have more, we share it. As a Muslim, I was also taught to give, even if it's just a little." (Dira, Adjunct Commissioner, female, Intelligence and Security Unit).

The police also frame gift-giving as an expression of collective solidarity (*gotong royong*) to maintain social harmony.

"Well, here in our country, gotong royong is just a way of life. It's what we're used to. Honestly, people still tend to see loyalty as royalty, as if someone's in a higher position, they should be treated like royalty. And in a developing country like ours, where the gap between rich and poor is still quite big, people really do rely on each other." (Sandro, commissioner, male, legal affairs unit).

They often call it a contribution to the common good, though it mainly serves their own or elite interests.

"If an officer accepts money or a gift and claims it's for the organisation or official needs, but it's actually for personal use, then they've clearly gone off track. They're not being honest with themselves or the institution." (Eros, Brigadier, male, Special Crimes Unit).

For some officers, *gotong royong* reflects public support for police efforts to maintain security, especially amid limited official funding.

"Some police activities still need funding, ideally from the official budget — but in reality, many aren't covered. Some don't even need to happen, yet they go ahead and justify extra costs. The public takes advantage, really, because the police have opened the door for it. In the end, it feels quite human — people offer something, hoping the police will also help with their matters." (Darwin, Adjunct Commissioner, male, Public Relations Unit).

Meanwhile, the public may see it as communal care or a social duty toward police welfare, despite the institution's dominant position.

"It's never about the amount. In our culture, refusing a gift can be seen as arrogance—like we're not valuing the giver's kindness. It comes from traditions like gotong royong. People feel the government doesn't really look after us, so they step in to offer what they can." (Bimo, Brigadier, male, Human Resources Unit).

Police see their role as reliant on close social ties, seeing communal effort as a means to build emotional bonds with the community through regular gatherings.

"Maybe it's because our culture is rooted in gotong royong. We're used to working together and staying in touch. In this job, regular communication is part of it, since we're here to serve the community." (Rizal, Adjunct Commissioner, male, Human Resources Unit).

These meetings serve as opportunities to cultivate togetherness, familial bonds, and mutual care—voluntarily helping one another through both hardship and prosperity.

"We need each other. Sometimes the giver might also need something in return. Technically, it's wrong, but culturally, it's part of our habit of giving. If we have a bit more to share, we give, so the relationship stays warm and communication remains smooth." (Haris, 1st Inspector, male, Narcotics Unit).

To preserve social harmony, the police invoke values such as *tepo seliro* (empathy and mutual consideration) to discipline subordinates into restraint and deference, discouraging them from challenging elders, superiors, or benefactors.

"We've always been taught that juniors should respect seniors—it's something drilled into us from school. We were encouraged to connect with them, listen, and learn, because if you don't take their advice, you miss out on valuable knowledge." (Purwanta, chief commissioner, male, security and internal affairs unit).

They justify accepting gifts to ease awkwardness, honour goodwill, and prevent familiar citizens from losing face if their gestures of gratitude or reciprocity are declined.

"You become friends that way. There's often a mutual need. It might start as silaturahmi, but saying no can feel awkward for both sides. You think, 'I'd feel bad not helping, so I'll just do it since I know them.' It's that sense of not wanting to offend. So, in the end, I offer a bit of help, and that's okay." (Diani, Adjunct Commissioner, female, Traffic Unit).

Conversely, to avoid rejection, citizens often anticipate police needs by complying with their every request.

"There's this mutual understanding in the community because people rely on each other, they're friends, they've helped each other. So, you feel bad if you don't give something in return." (Sisi, 1st Inspector, female, General Inspectorate Unit).

This dynamic also occurs internally, as police subordinates prioritise harmony and avoid conflict with their superiors to keep the workplace peaceful and harmonious.

"Some superiors make subtle jabs, but if we truly understand silaturahmi, there's no need to feel small. We're all equal. In the end, we just want to live in peace and calm." (Arvat, Adjunct Commissioner, Male, Community Development Unit).

Therefore, the police regard these unequal ties with citizens as mutually beneficial, interpreting them as reciprocal exchanges grounded in mutual respect and social obligation.

"It's more of a take and give. Networking isn't just internal. We also need external connections to support our work. They might need help, and we'll step in. When we need help, they'll do the same. It's mutual." (Aksa, Adjunct Chief Commissioner, male, Special Crimes Unit).

To avoid making such exchanges feel transactional, police often frame them as gestures of returning favours (*balas budi*) or repaying moral debts (*hutang budi*)—a deeply rooted cultural obligation to return kindness.

"Ideally, it shouldn't be accepted because gifts often come with strings attached. Even if it seems sincere, there's usually an unspoken expectation: 'I helped you, so help me later.' Unless it's truly given without pressure and not for personal gain, it's best to avoid it to prevent future obligations." (Ilmi, 1st Inspector, female, Security and Internal Affairs Unit).

The logic of reciprocity also extends to the police hierarchy, where superiors and subordinates express moral obligations through personal, emotionally grounded exchanges. These interactions go beyond formal duty, shaped by mutual understanding and a shared commitment to support each other in both hardship and joy.

“Some see loyalty as regularly giving money to their superiors—but it’s rarely without reason. There’s always something expected in return. Someone who got promoted might keep sending money every month out of a sense of obligation, feeling indebted because they were once helped. That kind of loyalty is tied to payback.” (Rinai, Commissioner, female, Human Resources Unit).

The findings suggest that the INP rely on cultural rationalisation to legitimise structural dominance by presenting the inequality it produces as consistent with collective values, tradition, and customs, thereby deflecting criticism and sustaining public tolerance.

This reflects Messerschmidt (2018, p. 28), who contends that cultural ascendancy operates by elevating particular ways of life into normative ideals, through which both dominant and subordinate groups are induced to consent to unequal power relations. Accordingly, cultural rationalisation is not neutral, but operates ideologically to regulate the recognition of harm, marginalising the harms of corruption experienced by the public while privileging those linked to police interests and the elite interests above them.

In turn, compliance with elite interests is reframed as a moral duty grounded in collective values of harmony, cohesion, and unity, while non-compliance is cast as a disruption to these values. Consequently, resistance weakens not due to the absence of injustice, but because it is normalised as an inherent feature of the social order.

7.4. Denial of Responsibility

The Indonesian National Police (INP), particularly its elite ranks, deny that their alignment with the ruling political bloc enables systemic corruption, instead relying on denial-of-responsibility tactics to deflect criticism and evade accountability. Under this strategy, police may acknowledge corruption but demonstrate little commitment to meaningful institutional reform.

Structural evaluations thus far have remained symbolic, underscoring the police's elite reluctance to acknowledge their complicity—whether through active involvement or passive negligence—in sustaining systemic corruption.

“Oversight needs to be taken seriously, because so far, it’s felt more like a half-hearted effort—loud at the start, then stalling halfway and quietly fading away. In the police force, it’s often like, ‘Oh right, there’s a clean-up operation,’ but once it’s over, things go right back to business as usual.” (Marzio, 1st Inspector, male, Operations Unit).

Rather than addressing corruption as a systemic issue, the police frequently frame it as the fault of low-level rogue officers (*oknum*) to shield the institution from moral responsibility. As a result, the system tends to protect those at the top who embed hegemonic values, while scapegoating field officers who merely follow orders.

“When we’re in the spotlight, someone always ends up as the scapegoat, usually a lower-ranking member. They’re sacrificed to protect the organisation’s image. If they don’t have strong connections, the system quickly turns on them. Meanwhile, those with powerful backing are protected. The rot goes all the way to the top, but the rotten ones are the ones being protected. They just quietly moved elsewhere.” (Nasto, Adjunct Commissioner, male, Headquarters Service Unit).

The police majority strategically deflect blame from the hegemonic structure—understood as a taken-for-granted configuration of hierarchical power relations—onto a small number of individuals, often labelled as a few 'bad apples'.

“It may start with a few bad apples, but when there are too many, the whole system seems rotten. The system isn’t the problem. It’s the people running it.” (Sinar, Adjunct Chief Commissioner, male, Narcotics Unit).

Such framing echoes dominant police narratives that downplay structural corruption by showcasing the enduring integrity of a far greater number of upright officers and ongoing reform-driven initiatives, reinforcing the illusion of an inherently virtuous, impartial, neutral and immune to political manoeuvring.

"Some may look lavish just because they're caught on camera, but many officers lead humble lives. They just don't get the spotlight. It all comes down to the person. Some in high positions remain honest and work to improve the system." (Asya, Commissioner, female, Human Resources Unit).

"I think many police officers are still doing the right thing. The leadership is also making efforts to push internal reforms and fix things from within." (Pryan, 1st Inspector, Male, Security and Internal Affairs Unit).

Many police reject the "corrupt police" label, individualising wrongdoing as isolated, standalone incidents. This obscures the wrongdoing's connection to wider institutional dynamics.

"I don't quite agree with labelling the police as corrupt, as not all officers are as they've been accused or portrayed." (Ilmi, 1st Inspector, female, Security and Internal Affairs Unit).

"At the end of the day, it really comes down to the person. When someone drifts away from God, the chances of them doing the wrong thing just get bigger." (Eros, Brigadier, male, Special Crimes Unit).

Under superiors' logic, subordinates labelled as corrupt are cast as morally deficient, while those who escape such labels are constructed as "clean" officers. This framing selectively defines power abuse, confining it to individuals outside the dominant circle.

"Some people become greedy or unsatisfied, even with a decent income—especially if they're trying to maintain an above-average lifestyle." (Bimo, Brigadier, male, Human Resources Unit).

"Maybe it's just a matter of expectations being too high, chasing a hedonistic lifestyle. If that's what you follow, it'll never feel enough." (Alia, 1st Inspector, female, Special Crimes Unit).

By depicting morally 'fallen' individuals as self-serving actors, the dominant narrative reduces corruption to personal vice rather than systemic failure. However, behaviour is only labelled as 'corruption' upon exposure—when individuals are reported, visible, or targeted by superiors.

Here, corruption is constructed as a threat to organisational order, signalling a breakdown of loyalty. Thus, the label 'corrupt' reflects not whether one is more or less greedy, but whether one loses protection within hierarchical power relations, where loyal subordinates are shielded while others are rendered punishable.

"It's often down to a hedonistic lifestyle—spending more than they earn to live the high life. People need to tighten their belts and accept that a modest life is enough. No need to live in the lap of luxury." (Mira, 1st Sub-Inspector, female, Narcotics Unit).

"Some say their salary isn't enough or that certain activities aren't fully funded. But often, it's just an excuse. They claim it's for the organisation, but in the end, they enjoy it for themselves." (Alon, commissioner, male, security and internal affairs unit).

Personal vice is depicted as resistance to hierarchical values, casting those who refuse to comply with corrupt orders as disobedient, insubordinate, disloyal, and acting outside the chain of command.

"We have leaders who constantly remind us about the rules. It's usually just certain individuals who say, "Just do it this way." Maybe it seems harmless once or twice, but over time, it can easily cross the line." (Reni, 1st Inspector, female, Intelligence and Security Unit).

"Some officers go solo outside, which clearly crosses the line and isn't something superiors can cover. Any items seized during enforcement operations should be handed over to the office first. If you choose to operate outside the system, don't expect your superiors to back you up." (Ciro, Brigadier, male, Narcotics Unit).

This narrative legitimises punitive measures to discipline corrupt subordinates and protect the institution's image, while leaving the regime-driven hegemonic order that incentivises corruption intact and unquestioned.

"There's no excuse. If someone still does it, firm action must be taken. We must be strict—no grey areas. If they're wrong, they should admit it and take responsibility." (Dira, Adjunct Commissioner, female, Intelligence and Security Unit).

Such neutralisation emerges when dominant groups, feeling threatened, deflect blame onto weaker actors to preserve power. Subordinates, in turn, adopt similar strategies when constrained by dominant narratives, denying responsibility and shifting blame upward to the system or superiors.

Those in lower positions often reinforce this by portraying corruption as collective and systemic rather than the result of individual intent. Thus, denial of responsibility operates flexibly, shaped by actors' positions and interests within the power structure.

"It really depends on the case. The police aren't just one person; there are thousands, even millions, of individuals involved. Perhaps the system just isn't strong enough yet to keep us from falling into corruption." (Asya, Commissioner, female, Human Resources Unit).

"These superiors have too many ideas and will do whatever it takes to push their innovations through. Usually, it's those chasing positions who come up with such ideas—whether for security or something else—and that's often where extortion or illegal fees start." (Arvat, Adjunct Commissioner, Male, Community Development Unit).

They described the culture as a long-standing legacy, passed down over time rather than as sudden or sporadic occurrences.

"It's because of the environment at work. If that kind of behaviour has been the norm for generations, people eventually end up doing the same." (Ina, 2nd Inspector, female, Special Crimes Unit).

As a result, responsibility becomes vague and abstract, with no clear moral subject to hold accountable. Subordinates are not seen as acting autonomously, but rather as merely following orders under pressures beyond their control.

"It's very hard for subordinates to say no. That's why so many violations happen. It all depends on whether the leader is willing to take responsibility for their actions. If the leader commits to being clean, then of course it's clean. As subordinates, we're just the tail—we follow wherever the head leads." (Ishan, 1st Inspector, Male, Traffic Unit).

Demands from above create a sense of obligation among lower-ranking officers to prioritise their superiors' interests, making corrupt acts appear less as personal moral failure and more as a duty to the greater good.

"Superiors constantly demand kickbacks from their subordinates. If that stopped, the culture would gradually fade. So, in my view, it can disappear—but it's difficult, because change has to come from the top. Subordinates will simply follow their lead." (Sigra, 1st Sub-Inspector, male, General Crimes Unit).

Yet when scandals surface, subordinates are sacrificed to absorb responsibility for failures rooted at the top. This functions as a mechanism for producing 'bad apples', individualising blame while obscuring the systemic and collective nature of corruption.

"The kickback system is collective, usually run by the most senior officer—but it all ultimately depends on who's at the top. What disappointed me most was that when things went public, it was the subordinates who took the blame. I'd hoped my seniors would back me, but once they, too, were exposed, there was no one left to protect me. Top leaders are rarely blamed." (Angkola, Chief Brigadier, male, Traffic Unit).

Superiors often evade responsibility and abandon subordinates, revealing institutional indifference even toward those who have fulfilled their duties. In doing so, dominant groups preserve their power, while subordinates bear the burden of a system they neither created nor control.

"As subordinates, we often have no choice but to go along. Sometimes we think, 'If my superior turns right, I'll follow—though deep down, we worry, what if it all goes wrong? If this causes problems, will they take responsibility?' These thoughts come up a lot. In the end, we're stuck. Every move feels wrong." (Diani, Adjunct Commissioner, female, Traffic Unit).

Lower-ranking or frontline officers present themselves as victims of a corrupt relational system, claiming they must stay "visible at the window" through everyday acts—greetings, presence, and personal ties with superiors—to survive within the system.

"If a subordinate isn't visible or never shows up, their chances are small. It's like a window system. If you're never around, how can a superior grow to like you? There's always that like-dislike factor. And yes, money does play a role in getting positions." (Sandro, commissioner, male, legal affairs unit).

The police also restrict public access to information and draw comparisons with other institutions to deflect moral responsibility. They often feign ignorance, distance themselves, or avoid discussion—framing corruption as real but beyond their control and thus not their responsibility.

"At my workplace, it's rare. No extra fees are collected. When people come to pay vehicle taxes, there are no additional charges. It's clean, zero. But as for other places, I couldn't say." (Helin, 1st Sub-Inspector, Female, District Police Unit).

Officers also claim that corruption is rampant in other institutions, suggesting it occurs more frequently or more severely elsewhere than in their own. By making such comparisons, they deflect attention from internal dysfunction, framing police corruption not as a systemic failure but as a typical anomaly that exists across all sectors.

“I don’t think it’s just the police. It happens everywhere. But when it involves the police, it draws more attention. Negative news about the police is always commented on and quickly goes viral.” (Rizal, Adjunct Commissioner, male, Human Resources Unit).

“It happens in both public and private sectors, especially in developing countries, where professionalism takes a back seat. As long as everyone benefits individually— “you’re happy, I’m happy”—it’s tolerated, even if it harms the greater good.” (Agam, 1st Sub-Inspector, male, Patrol Unit).

Systemic corruption endures as those in power refuse responsibility, shifting blame onto subordinate actors with limited capacity to resist or demand accountability. This reflects how denial of responsibility operates not merely as an individual technique, but as a structural effect of organisational power. As Sykes and Matza (1957, p. 667) argue, responsibility is a cultural construct shaped through social interaction and dominant normative logics. In a hierarchical social context, such constructions are no longer simply the product of shared consensus, but are actively defined by actors with greater power.

Within the INP, what counts as ‘responsible’ is organised through asymmetrical power relations that privilege senior actors. Transparency and accountability are selectively enforced downward, enabling superiors to scrutinise subordinates while limiting scrutiny of those at the top, thereby displacing responsibility: corruption is individualised at lower ranks while its structural conditions remain obscured. Denial of responsibility, in this sense, operates as an institutionalised mechanism that reproduces hierarchical power and shields superiors from scrutiny.

7.5. Condemnation of the Condemners

When denial and justification fail, the INP ignores criticism or criminalises and intimidates those who challenge police performance, corruption, and violence. Public criticism is often dismissed as hoaxes, hate speech, or sensationalism rather than acknowledged as evidence of structural failure.

“When a mistake happens, it quickly becomes a trending topic and draws heavy criticism. But how people see it really depends on their mindset. If people are objective, they see the positives too. If they’re biased, everything the police do looks negative.” (Ishan, 1st Inspector, Male, Traffic Unit).

“Social media now has a strong influence. Anything seen as negative is quickly made viral, and the public often sees only the bad side—especially when videos are edited or incomplete.” (Dimas, 2nd brigadier, male, human resources unit).

“The public tends to focus only on the moment money is handed over, assuming the officer asked for it, when in fact, they didn’t. Sometimes, officers become victims of hoaxes or unfair judgment. They accepted the money, yes, but they never requested it. So, how can they explain their side?” (Dira, Adjunct Commissioner, female, Intelligence and Security Unit).

Critics and public survey findings highlighting police corruption are routinely framed as biased and self-interested, suggesting the INP prioritises preserving its authority over uncovering the truth.

“Surveys aren’t 100% accurate. They reflect only the views of a small sample from millions. In my view, the reality may differ. Those surveyed likely had poor experiences with the police, so the findings need deeper scrutiny.” (Sinar, Adjunct Chief Commissioner, male, Narcotics Unit).

Institutional defenders often argue that the police are unfairly subjected to scrutiny, even though similar misconduct occurs in other institutions.

“It happens everywhere. It just isn’t exposed. That’s often because the work isn’t directly connected to the public interest. Take the customs office, for example. If there were clear harm to the public, such practices would quickly be exposed.” (Asya, Commissioner, female, Human Resources Unit)

Moreover, the police often depict the public as ambivalent—quick to criticise when harmed, yet permissive of corruption when it serves their own interests.

“Only the things that fall short of expectations get reported. Some complain, ‘Why is it so expensive just to sort the permit?’ Others just let it go, thinking, ‘As long as it’s resolved quickly, it’s fine,’ but some do speak up.” (Sisi, 1st Inspector, female, General Inspectorate Unit).

Police officers recast criticism as ingratitude or irresponsibility, equating challenges to police legitimacy with threats to justice. Criticism is thus treated not as democratic participation, but as improper and undeserving of support.

“If such conclusions are made, they can harm the public itself. The police, after all, are the ones people turn to when seeking justice for a crime. So, if the police are already accused of being corrupt, how can they be expected to protect or serve those who need help? I don’t quite agree with such statements.” (Rehan, Adjunct Commissioner, male, Special Crimes Unit).

Citizen feedback is often dismissed as emotional rather than legitimate, evidence-based input, positioning the police as the sole rational actor.

“It’s normal for the public to have mixed feelings about the police. They may love them, sometimes hate them, yet still miss and rely on them. The police are even missed, but also criticised or mocked. It’s part of the job’s risks.” (Ilmi, 1st inspector, female, security and internal affairs unit).

Public voices are seen as unfair for overlooking police needs and hardships, thereby shifting sympathy from victims to officers.

“The public should also reflect on why these things happen and look deeper into the reasons behind them. Not all police officers act that way. Many still serve with honesty and dedication.” (Pryan, 1st Inspector, Male, Security and Internal Affairs Unit).

The police discredit civilian opposition as outdated or irrelevant, implying a failure to grasp the current realities of policing.

“That’s really just an old joke. The police today have changed a lot, but the stigma still sticks. The challenge is breaking it, which isn’t easy—though public trust is thankfully improving.” (Aksa, Adjunct Chief Commissioner, male, Special Crimes Unit).

Such critics are often portrayed as having hidden agendas, radical or anti-government ties, or as threats to social harmony and national order, further undermining their legitimacy.

“Reports to internal affairs sometimes involve resolved cases, and the complainant isn’t always directly involved. It’s often someone who personally dislikes the investigator or disagrees with their approach. Sometimes jealousy, even from within our own circle, turns a resolved issue into a new problem and harms the institution’s image.” (Candra, 1st Inspector, male, General Planning and Budget Unit).

This strategy creates polarisation, splitting public opinion into pro-police and pro-victim camps.

“I believe more people appreciate having police present in their community. They feel safer and more comfortable, seeing the police as a positive presence. Some may even accept gift-giving, believing it’s for the common good. It’s really about how we connect with the community—how we build trust and ease tension, so we don’t seem distant.” (Bimo, Brigadier, male, human resources unit).

In doing so, it erodes empathy for victims and fuels moral panic, diverting attention from meaningful reform. This anti-criticism stance marginalises lower-income and vulnerable groups, silencing dissent and compelling them to pay the police to avoid injustice or gain equal footing. When positioned as dominant, the police deploy counter-narratives that not only dismiss criticism but also target grassroots actors, portraying themselves as guardians of public order and self-sacrificing servants to secure public trust and authority.

“Police have more duties than the military. They serve the public in many areas, from traffic to criminal investigations. Their work has been extensive, which is why nowadays the Indonesian police are well respected.” (Fara, Brigadier, female, General Crimes Unit).

By invoking past contributions, the police recast themselves as victims, using this narrative to justify criminalising those who challenge their or the regime’s reputation. As a result, the suffering of victims is overshadowed by narratives that glorify police hardship and sacrifice. Furthermore, the INP frames the public as the source of corruption, not victims deserving police sympathy.

“The public also plays a part in fuelling corruption. Some want things done quickly and choose to offer bribes — that’s where the problem starts. In truth, the public shares responsibility for the culture of corruption within the police.” (Alon, Commissioner, male, security and internal affairs unit)

“It’s often the public that triggers police corruption. If people followed the rules and accepted consequences when in the wrong, officers would be less likely to misbehave. The public shouldn’t become part of the problem.” (Zayan, 1st inspector, male, security and internal affairs unit).

The police are portrayed not as active perpetrators but as passive actors who merely respond to public requests rather than initiate transactions.

“When a private contractor financially supports a superior, it’s usually with something in return in mind. So, when a tender comes up, they expect to secure the winning bid.” (Pranav, 1st Sub Inspector, male, Logistics Unit).

“The public also plays a role in police corruption. A businessperson may build close ties with a senior officer, and when they break the law, it’s overlooked.” (Sinar, Adjunct Chief Commissioner, male, Narcotics Unit).

Blame is shifted onto ordinary people, who are accused of instigating bribery, trivialising regulations, and seeking shortcuts for personal convenience.

“People often try to avoid legal trouble. It’s human nature. They take the chance because the opportunity is there. It involves both sides: the public and the investigators.” (Darwin, Adjunct Commissioner, male, Public Relations Unit).

“People want things resolved quickly, even when they know they’re breaking the law—like riding without a helmet. When stopped, they say, ‘Sir, please help.’ These situations happen often, are seen by others, and over time shape public opinion.” (Purwanta, chief Commissioner, male, security and internal affairs unit).

Citizens often default to bypassing procedures when dealing with police permits, prioritising speed over compliance.

“Friends ask for help with a lost property report, then complain about the process. Though educated, they make it tiring to explain, so I just direct them to the station and guide them, as many others follow the same procedure.” (Della, Adjunct Commissioner, Female, Traffic Unit).

“People who don’t understand the process often complain, but that’s simply how the procedure works. It takes time. Vehicle permit transfers or regional changes take a while, but most people just aren’t aware of that.” (Sisi, 1st Inspector, female, General Inspectorate Unit).

Law-breaking citizens are cast as critical on the surface but, in reality, uncooperative, hypocritical, and opportunistic, reflecting a weak grasp of ethics and procedure.

“In my view, public legal awareness remains low. There’s no binding rule requiring the police to resolve legal cases quickly. That’s why many seek shortcuts through gratification.” (Sandro, Commissioner, male, legal affairs unit).

“The public also plays a part. Many, whether involved in a case or not, want quick resolutions. Suspects often think, ‘How can I avoid prosecution?’ leading to deals with officers. So, it’s both sides—not just the police, but the public too.” (Marzio, 1st Inspector, male, Operations Unit).

However, the police are not monolithic. Many lower-ranking officers quietly support public criticism, recognizing internal structural problems.

“In reality, that’s how it is. People often say that filing a police report feels like losing a chicken but ending up losing a cow. Take police recruitment, for example—it often involves money, and that’s just one of many situations where public dealings with the police include unofficial payments.” (Ina, 2nd Inspector, female, Special Crimes Unit).

“We try to change that mindset, but some units are so used to it. At public events, I often get questions like, ‘Ma’am, why does reporting something small to the police turn into a bigger loss. We can’t deny their experiences by saying, ‘There’s no extortion,’ when in fact, they were asked for one.” (Rinai, 1st Inspector, female, Community Development Unit).

Their voices often go unheard due to limited authority and the dominance of elite narratives. This reflects an internal power imbalance, where elites freely define and project institutional positions—claiming to represent all—while subordinates, despite being closer to social realities, have minimal space to speak or act meaningfully.

In Indonesia’s oligarchic political economy, *condemnation of the condemners* operates less as an individual defence mechanism than as a structural tool for reproducing hegemonic control. Critics—typically from less powerful groups—are dismissed as biased and incapable of understanding the needs and complexities of policing, while the police assert epistemic authority over national security, law enforcement, and social justice. This dynamic delegitimises critics’ moral capacity, framing their claims not as democratic participation but as threats to regime stability (Wilson, 2015).

In this way, dominant actors deflect attention from the harm they produce by discrediting the motives and social position of their critics (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 668), rendering critique illegitimate not on its accuracy but by constructing its source as unqualified to judge, thereby reproducing existing power hierarchies. More fundamentally, this exposes an asymmetrical power relation in which the police and allied dominant groups monopolise the authority to define “truth” and “rationality”, while subordinated groups are systematically constructed as morally inferior. In this sense, dominant groups exercise not only material power but also discursive power, producing frameworks of “truth” that naturalise their authority as necessary to “protect” or “civilise” those deemed less competent (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 80, 101).

7.6. Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the rationalisation of corruption in Indonesia is rooted in ideological constructions rather than individual decision-making. Within a hegemonic order, justificatory scripts are mobilised to neutralise moral condemnation from subordinated groups. In this context, the police draw on dominant Indonesian discourses—masculinist nationalism, majoritarian Islam, and Javanese collectivism—to legitimise corrupt arrangements.

Through these discourses, the INP secures moral legitimacy while deflecting attention from the structural nature of corruption. This is achieved by individualising responsibility, framing corruption as a matter of personal integrity rather than systemic conditions. Officers who are labelled or sanctioned are discursively constructed as deviant and disobedient—portrayed as violating orders, moral codes, cultural norms, and even patriotic duty—rather than as products of a wider socio-political order. This logic turns the punishment of “corrupt” individuals into a means of preserving the illusion of institutional purity, enabling the scapegoating of more vulnerable personnel—lower-ranking officers, women, and ethnic minorities—who are made to bear collective blame, thereby stabilising the underlying power structure.

Within a corrupt system, hegemonic discourses are internalised in ways that shape moral reasoning, enabling individuals to rationalise the exercise of power, neutralise guilt, and normalise indifference to harm. Within a hegemonic masculine order, unconditional loyalty to elites—across the police and the governing regime—is normalised rather than recognised as systemic corruption, reframed instead as essential to national stability, collective interests, and public prosperity.

As a result, lower-ranking personnel remain largely passive toward oppressive institutional policies yet react defensively when public criticism targets the elites they perceive as embodying the collective interest. In such moments, they not only deny or defend against allegations of corruption but may also willingly—or under pressure—sacrifice themselves rather than confront the underlying structure, driven by loyalty to superiors and the dominant power networks they represent.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined corruption in the Indonesian National Police (INP) as a systemic phenomenon rather than individual misconduct. As outlined in **Chapter One**, dominant narratives that have reduced corruption to the actions of a few ‘bad apples’ have obscured a complex structural reality. This approach has ideologically shifted attention away from the institutional nature of corruption, even as the institution itself has structured, institutionalised, and perpetuated corrupt practices through its internal power dynamics. Consequently, moralistic approaches to corruption have not only failed to address its root causes but have also served to legitimise and sustain the status quo, allowing corrupt practices to persist under the guise of isolated deviance.

In response to this critique, the study has deliberately shifted focus away from the question of “who commits corruption” and instead has examined how institutional structures and logics generate and reproduce conditions in which corruption becomes normalised. This perspective has enabled corruption to be understood not as an isolated anomaly, but as a systemic outcome of historically embedded power configurations within a broader hegemonic structure.

The study has explored three main themes. The first theme has examined how the INP, as part of a broader hegemonic social formation, has reproduced corruption narratives that serve dominant power structures. Through control over public and internal discourse, the institution has framed corruption as an individual moral failure rather than a systemic problem. In doing so, the INP has positioned itself not as a passive victim but as an active agent that has constructed and circulated narratives to preserve its ideological legitimacy and institutional authority.

The second theme has investigated how the internal structure of the INP has produced a hierarchy of interests that systematically privileged elite groups while marginalising the needs and aspirations of actors at lower levels. Within this configuration, the interests of dominant groups have been prioritised and embedded in the institution's formal and informal mechanisms. Consequently, lower-ranking personnel—who have possessed limited bargaining power—have often been coerced into accepting and enacting corrupt practices as part of the institution's normalised operational logic. This dynamic shifts the burden of suffering downward, making resistance highly risky—especially for those outside power.

The third theme has revealed how hegemonic power within the INP has constructed a system of moral neutralisation that has masked elite interests as embodiments of the institution's ideal values. Through the strategic deployment of discourse, structural policies that have systematically undermined the well-being of subordinate groups have been rearticulated as legitimate, necessary, and even morally justified. As a result, subordinates have internalised and reproduced the very system that sustains their subjugation, enabling elite domination to be stabilised through ideological consent rather than coercion alone.

Chapter Two has critiqued mainstream criminology—classical, positivist, and critical—and zemiology for failing to capture the systemic nature of corruption. It has argued that these approaches have overlooked how powerful institutions, such as the police, have produced, concealed, and normalised corrupt practices. The critique has been structured around four key points, beginning with the limitations in how these frameworks have defined and analysed corruption.

Firstly, classical criminology viewed corruption as a rational individual choice, ignoring the structural and institutional contexts that enabled it. It treated rationality as a neutral moral standard, legitimising the state and dominant social order while framing corrupt actors solely as deviant individuals who needed to be controlled. However, this claim of neutrality was ideological, as it concealed the fact that state power was often complicit in shaping and maintaining the very structures that facilitated corruption. Within this framework, corruption was defined in narrow legal terms, detached from its socio-political context, and reduced to a moral judgement shaped by those in power. As a result, corruption was isolated from power structures, allowing dominant actors to define it on their own terms and legitimise their own corrupt actions.

Secondly, positivist criminology retained the core limitations of classical criminology but shifted the focus from moral intent to determinism, explaining corruption as a consequence of moral defect, individual pathology, or social pressures. Classical criminology emphasised rational choice, whereas positivism portrayed individuals as products of internal or external forces. Despite their differences, both approaches failed to interrogate the power structures that enabled corruption. Positivism foreclosed inquiry into the institutional roots of corruption, treating the social order as ideal and neutral—something to be followed rather than questioned—thereby framing individuals who deviated from it as pathological. Its reductionist framework also portrayed individuals as passive outcomes of social pressure, disregarding both their agency and the influence of powerful actors in shaping systems that permit corruption. Ultimately, positivism deflected attention from systemic corruption, reducing it to isolated individual cases detached from structural and institutional arrangements.

Thirdly, critical criminology emerged in response to the shortcomings of both classical and positivist approaches in understanding corruption. This approach rejected the claims of legal neutrality and scientific objectivity, arguing that definitions of corruption were shaped by power structures serving elite interests. From this perspective, corruption began to be understood as a systemic phenomenon rooted in structural inequality and power relations. The state, political elites, and corporations exercised the power to define corruption, often criminalising minor or survival-based actions committed among marginalised groups through social labelling, while presenting elite abuses of power as legitimate policy. In this context, left idealism viewed systemic corruption as ideological domination, where power upheld hegemony by shaping belief systems and controlling dominant narratives. In contrast, left realism emphasised the symbolic and material harms suffered by subordinate groups due to institutional failures to address collective needs. Despite differing focuses, both strands saw corruption as a means for sustaining social inequality. Yet, while critical criminology challenges power structures, it still has notable limitations. Its approach remained bound to conventional definitions that focused on direct perpetrator–victim relationships, limiting its ability to address systemic corruption involving collective actors, implicit intent, institutional normalisation, and diffuse or unmeasurable harm.

Fourthly, although both emerged from critiques of conventional approaches that overlooked corruption as a structural issue, zemiology offered a more radical expansion than critical criminology. Unlike critical criminology, which remained tied to dominant systems, zemiology revealed how power shaped social structures and norms that normalised harmful practices without formally recognising them as corruption. Within this perspective, systemic corruption was seen as social harm—damage

concealed beneath dominant values that appeared legitimate but were substantively harmful and exclusionary to vulnerable social groups. Such harm often went unrecognised as corruption because it was embedded in everyday norms and institutional routines. However, this was also where zemiology's weakness emerged: despite its promise as an alternative, it often became trapped in moral relativism and failed to challenge how dominant power shaped moral definitions that appeared universal yet stemmed from ideological interests. Each moral approach posed challenges—human rights were criticised for their Western individualist bias; social recognition for subjectivity and contestation; basic needs appeared universal but were shaped by ideology, reflecting the dominant group's view of human need while excluding others; meanwhile, human flourishing risked reduction to hegemonic ideals of the “good life,” like dominant masculinity or global capitalism. Ultimately, zemiology's stance on power remained ambiguous, as it had not fully escaped the dominant moral frameworks defining corruption and harm within hegemonic limits.

It was this gap that the study set out to confront—challenging the very power to define corruption and exposing the interests embedded within those definitions. This study offered an alternative interpretation grounded in the lived experiences of vulnerable and subordinated groups, positioning them as victims of systemic corruption. In doing so, it shifted focus from blaming institutions to understanding structural victims, promoting a more contextual and reflective definition of corruption grounded in marginalised lived realities rather than from dominant moral narratives. As current definitions of corruption remain predominantly legal-formal, they fail to capture the relational or social dimensions underpinning corrupt practices.

In **Chapter Four**, the study has critically sought to minimise the dominance of the power/knowledge axis by foregrounding the lived testimonies of police officers of diverse ranks and genders as primary sources of understanding. Through a qualitative design employing semi-structured interviews, the research elicited concrete experiences of corruption within both administrative and operational units. The data were subsequently triangulated with insights from grassroots social groups and official documents from the INP and related state institutions, ensuring a balance between institutional and experiential knowledge. In doing so, this approach has exposed systemic corruption as a lived expression of power while foregrounding forms of knowledge silenced in official narratives, including within the police itself.

How do police define corruption?

This question has explored how power dynamics have fuelled systemic corruption in the INP. It has focused on the institution's dominant structures, which have exercised ideological power to shape and control the values and interpretations surrounding corruption. As a result, corruption within the INP has not only been legitimised but also normalised and perpetuated. This process has been examined through a combined analytical lens of hegemonic masculinity and differential association, as outlined in **Chapter Three**. These frameworks have been essential for understanding how dominant groups in the INP—such as high-ranking officials, senior officers, and influential informal actors who often represent dominant class, gender, and ethnic majorities—have been able to persuade or pressure subordinate members to accept institutional decisions, even when those decisions have undermined their own interests.

The first theory, hegemonic masculinity (Messerschmidt, 1997, 2018), explains how social hierarchies construct a dominant masculine ideal that sits atop the gender order. This ideal sets the standard of legitimacy, rendering other masculinities subordinate or deviant. Through an intersectional lens of class, race, and gender, it operates as a mechanism of domination that preserves the privilege of upper-class, heterosexual men—typically from majority groups—by marginalising those who do not conform. Such domination is sustained not only through material control but also through symbolic power—the capacity to define what is legitimate and valuable. It enables dominant groups to present their values as “common sense,” shaping accepted truths and marginalising alternatives. As a result, subordinate groups are silenced or delegitimised, their experiences dismissed in favour of dominant “truths.”

A key effect of symbolic domination is the creation of a truth hierarchy that determines who defines truth, whose experiences count, and who can speak about harm. In this system, truth is shaped not by objectivity or justice, but by social position and conformity to dominant norms—especially hegemonic masculinity. Those aligned with these norms are seen as rational and credible, while subordinate groups are denied recognition and the authority to express their lived realities. As a result, their claims are dismissed or questioned, further deepening their marginalisation.

Systemic corruption takes root when hegemonic masculinity defines ethical boundaries on its own terms, with elites imposing subjective standards of integrity and corruption as a regime of truth. The exercise of power that serves dominant interests is legitimised as institutional compliance, while similar acts by subordinate groups are labelled deviant or corrupt. It highlights that notions of right and wrong are not based on universal ethics but are shaped by one’s place within the power hierarchy.

As a result, elite-driven corruption often evades scrutiny, shielded by social legitimacy and entrenched power networks that normalise or justify it, while subordinated groups—shaped by ideological hegemony—are compelled to rationalise, conceal, or defend these abuses. In contrast, petty, survival-driven corruption among the marginalised is quickly criminalised and publicly condemned as moral failure. This double standard exposes corruption as a hegemonic, not neutral, construct, shaped by dominant groups to preserve their power and delegitimise resistance from below.

Understanding corruption as a hegemonic construct underpins **Chapter Five**, which moves beyond the reductionist view of corruption in the INP as mere individual deviance. Instead, corruption needs to be seen as structurally embedded in the INP's hierarchical organisation, functioning as a mechanism of control employed by the regime and its allies to dominate the public, particularly grassroots and minority communities. Within this framework, the INP avoids exercising authority neutrally or procedurally; instead, using its power strategically to consolidate dominance and legitimise its role as the state's leading security force.

The INP's enduring power has stemmed from colonial-era authoritarianism, sustained by ruling elites and extended beyond independence. Rather than dismantling this legacy, successive regimes—including those after the 1998 reforms—have preserved and repackaged it to serve dominant elites within shifting sociopolitical contexts. Within this continuity, systemic corruption operates not as a failure but as a mechanism that reinforces social hierarchies, disproportionately targeting marginalised groups under the banner of national security or public order. In doing so, the INP sustains a hegemonic mode of authority in which coercive control is prioritised over the protection and well-being of citizens.

As a result, the INP has routinely tolerated practices indicative of systemic corruption, including the commodification and exploitation of its authority. It has prioritised regime interests over the public good, deploying its powers to suppress dissent, enforce dominant norms, and extend preferential treatment to elites, often at the expense of the most vulnerable. Within this context, the INP's internal power structure has not merely overlooked abuses but actively normalised and legitimised them. Senior officials have institutionalised selective authority over subordinates, encouraging practices that reflect not accountability in a democratic sense, but alignment with hegemonic masculine ideals—where loyalty and conformity to institutional values take precedence over ethical conduct.

First, in the administrative domain, internal elites have commodified authority and framed it as a prerogative of superiors, justified as necessary for maintaining internal stability. Subordinates have complied not out of formal obligation, but to gain access to resources and symbolic recognition within the hierarchy.

Within the human resources unit, internal elites have justified their authority as a mechanism of political selection, granting them control over transfers, promotions, and personnel placements. In this system, compliant subordinates have been constructed as deserving of advancement—rather than complicit in corruption—while those who resist or question the process have faced stigmatisation, career stagnation, or punitive postings to undesirable or remote areas. As a result, subordinates have been compelled to comply with corrupt demands not out of ethical alignment, but as a strategic means of securing career progression and institutional recognition within a deeply hierarchical and politicised structure.

Within the planning and budgeting units, superiors have used their control over resources, programmes, and logistics to serve personal interests and power networks rather than subordinates' needs. Budgets have been manipulated, diverted to fictitious programmes, or aligned with regime priorities, while subordinates have been compelled to secure alternative resources. Those who have demonstrated loyalty have been rewarded with preferential access, whereas others have faced exclusion, delays, inferior allocations, or have been forced to 'pay' for entitlements.

In the inspectorate unit, elite authority has been used to enforce work ethics aligned with dominant interests rather than the public good. Monitoring and disciplinary systems have been loyalty-driven rather than neutral, with superiors concealing their own misconduct and that of loyal subordinates, while others have faced selective audits and sanctions. In this context, audits have functioned as instruments of coercion, using the threat of scrutiny to enforce corrupt compliance.

In the disciplinary and legal units, elite authority has been exercised to suppress dissent and reinforce structural dominance. Loyal subordinates have been shielded from complaints and sanctions, while others have faced excessive scrutiny, punitive measures, and public exposure—even for actions stemming from superiors' directives. Legal interpretation has served to protect rather than constrain power, with legal support reserved for those who comply with the unwritten rules of the hierarchy.

Secondly, in the operational domain, discretionary authority has been used to exploit lower-class communities, framed as a legitimate police prerogative rather than corruption. Like subordinates, citizens have been coerced into transactional compliance—not out of trust, but to access services and avoid sanctions.

In the law enforcement unit, police have operated as extensions of state law, serving ruling interests by targeting marginalised groups and political opposition while overlooking elite crime and structural corruption. Law has been commodified as a negotiable resource, enabling the exploitation of discretion for extracting resources from legally vulnerable citizens. Practices such as selective enforcement, protection of illicit businesses, charge manipulation, and informal settlements have been legitimised as investigative discretion rather than extortion. Those who have resisted unwritten norms have been labelled “non-law-abiding” and subjected to harsher sanctions, while those who have conformed—through wealth or connections—have been protected despite wrongdoing. This has reflected the production of a hierarchical truth, in which elite claims receive immediate attention while those of ordinary citizens are ignored, silenced, or punished, revealing who is authorised to speak and who is not.

In public service units, police have acted as gatekeepers of state resources rather than guarantors of equal access. Discretionary authority has been applied selectively to advance dominant interests, with high-quality or expedited services provided to those with economic or political capital and framed as social recognition rather than bias. Those without such access have been compelled to pay for equal treatment or navigate bureaucratic barriers, while such exchanges have been normalised as gestures of respect rather than bribery. Notably, petty extortion by lower-ranking officers has been more readily criminalised, whereas similar practices benefiting dominant actors have been legitimised as informal income, justified by excessive workloads and budget constraints. This dynamic has reflected a hierarchical structure of policing services, in which the needs of the powerful are prioritised while marginalised groups are routinely delayed, neglected, or deprioritised.

In public order and community policing units, the police have prioritised the protection of dominant interests over marginalised communities, framing the latter as security threats while treating elites as assets requiring enhanced protection. Priority policing—such as escorts, patrols, and security services—has been legitimised as necessary for stability rather than recognised as systemic corruption. At the same time, measures targeting lower-class groups—including protest suppression, moral regulation, and surveillance of dissenting or “deviant” groups—have been framed as legitimate institutional duties. As a result, safety has become a stratified service, accessible primarily to those with economic or political capital, while marginalised communities have remained exposed to insecurity, coercion, and targeted enforcement. This dynamic demonstrates that access to safety and justice has been politically mediated, determined by who is deemed worthy of protection and who can be sacrificed to sustain the prevailing social order.

In summary, across all INP units, abuses of power have not been recognised as corruption when committed by or benefiting those with symbolic and structural power. This construction of meaning has been examined through differential association theory (Sutherland, 1978), which posits that moral values are learned through the socialisation of dominant norms. Within a hierarchical order, subordinated groups have been more likely to internalise the values of dominant actors, who reproduce institutional norms, including routine corrupt practices. Consequently, the reproduction of corruption has reflected systemic social learning within a stratified power structure rather than individual morality.

In the INP, dominant masculine values have permeated both institutional and broader social structures, transmitted through training, hierarchical relations, and wider socialisation processes. Hegemonic masculinity has reinforced hierarchical order by instilling deference to dominant actors, justified through narratives of service and sacrifice. This normalised submission has enabled dominant groups to define morality and corruption in ways that serve their own interests. Consequently, corrupt consensus has not emerged from egalitarian deliberation or critical awareness, but from the internalisation of hegemonic ideology that sustains existing power coalitions.

What pressures push police into corruption?

The third theory, General Strain Theory (GST) (Agnew, 2005), posits that hierarchical social structures create unequal power relations, leading to systemic psychological and social strain. These power dynamics actively position one group as dominant and another as subordinate, creating strain not merely as an internal, individual experience, but as a direct result of structural imbalance. This inequality gives rise to emotional strain on both sides: the marginalised may feel frustration due to restricted access, perceived injustice, and symbolic domination, which can drive them to demand equality or attempt to overturn the existing order.

At the same time, those in dominant positions experience their own strain, stemming from the pressure to preserve their status and protect their resources against threats to their privileged social standing. Within this framework, individuals experience strain when they face barriers to achieving legitimate goals, suffer the loss of something they value, or are subjected to harmful treatment. However, this strain is not evenly distributed across society.

An individual's social position—especially in relation to class, gender, and race—plays a crucial role in shaping the intensity and impact of the strain they endure. Subordinate groups, including workers, women, and racial minorities, are more susceptible to strain due to their limited access to resources and social support. Conversely, dominant groups are typically better positioned to cope, benefiting from economic advantages and broader social networks that buffer the effects of strain. As a result, groups respond to social strain differently, depending on the extent to which they control the social structure. Dominant groups are typically able to diffuse strain through their influence over policymaking, which governs both material and symbolic resources. In contrast, marginalised groups often lack such power, forced to endure and adapt to adverse conditions.

This study further connects systemic strain to hegemonic masculinity, in which dominant groups hold the authority to define truth and embed masculine values within narratives presented to the public, as outlined in the first research question. Within this hierarchy of knowledge, the suffering of dominant groups is often framed as more legitimate, objective, and urgent than that of subordinate groups. Such framing enables the actions of dominant groups to be seen as reasonable and rational, frequently underpinned by socially accepted claims of victimhood. Through their control over symbolic authority, these groups elevate their interests to the highest levels of public recognition, while marginalised communities struggle to have their pain acknowledged or validated. Consequently, the claims of subordinate groups are often disregarded or labelled as disruptive, effectively forcing them to accept their marginalisation to preserve the prevailing social order.

In other words, occupying the apex of the social recognition hierarchy enables dominant groups to frame their needs as social needs and their private interests as public concerns, while presenting their achievements as collective accomplishments. Such narratives not only legitimise their power but also lead subordinate groups to accept—and often internalise—this authority as natural and legitimate. As a result, pressures experienced by dominant groups are systematically displaced onto the powerless through the dismissal of marginalised claims, restricted access to resources, and the criminalisation of dissent.

Through hegemonic mechanisms, dominant groups sustain their position and continually reshape power and truth to serve their interests. In contrast, subordinate groups, marginalised by social structures, face severely limited options. Yet tension does not inevitably result in deviance. Giddens' (1984) structuration theory highlights that individuals and groups retain agency within structural constraints—expressed through conformity, adaptation, or resistance. However, this agency is deeply shaped by social position and identity, all of which are governed by intersecting power dynamics of class, gender, and race.

Under subjugation, adaptation often emerges as the most rational survival strategy for lower groups with limited choices, typically involving compliance with corrupt systems and acceptance of the harm—even when it renders them objects of exploitation, commodification, and alienation. Participation in these systems does not indicate moral failure but rather reflects the structural pressure to choose between conformity and exclusion. Often, this conformity is accompanied by an uncritical acceptance of the system itself, illustrating how power operates not only through coercion but also through the subtle mechanisms of consent.

Within this context, lower-level corruption functions as an informal means of renegotiating power relations. While such practices risk reinforcing cycles of inequality and reproducing the very structures they confront, they also function as essential survival strategies amid entrenched systemic corruption.

The hegemonic definition of corruption within the INP, as discussed in **Chapter Six**, reflects structural pressures rooted in the dominance of social groups controlling state institutions. In Indonesia, the ruling regime instrumentalises the police to maintain political stability and societal control under an authoritarian-capitalist system. This hegemony stems from an alliance of the capitalist oligarchy, patriarchal Muslim culture, and the Javanese politico-ethnic elite—forming an exclusive politico-economic order that legitimises domination and exclusion under the guise of unity. Within this structure, police corruption consolidates power and aligns the force with elite agendas.

Regime loyalists shape the INP to mirror centralised rule, concentrating power and resources among a select elite. Loyalty is secured through material dependence and symbolic recognition, not equitable access—making subordinates more controllable and blurring the line between public duty and elite agenda. Hegemonic values are institutionalised to legitimise dominance, framing private interests as a public good. This hierarchical order reinforces systemic marginalisation, subordinating the interests of lower-ranking groups to elite priorities.

This dynamic sustains a recognition hierarchy in the INP, legitimising elite interests as public will while dismissing lower ranks' needs as lacking strategic or moral weight. Senior leaders, positioned as institutional figureheads, are thus empowered to centralise authority, monopolise resources, and distribute rewards in alignment with dominant interests. Without bottom-up accountability, authority becomes an instrument

of domination—protecting elite privilege while systematically marginalising those without power. Within this hegemonic order, dissent is reframed as disloyalty rather than critique, enabling dominant actors to control who is heard and who is silenced, thereby constraining space for non-elite narratives.

In the INP's economic structure, budget allocation is skewed towards elite interests, with lavish facilities and generous allowances justified through hierarchical achievement or the illusion of meritocracy. Access to resources for lower-ranking personnel depends not on performance, but on loyalty and affiliation, reinforcing patronage and excluding outsiders. This fiscal inequality is rarely challenged or labelled as corruption, as it is normalised through unquestioned seniority and rank. Consequently, lower-ranking personnel remain trapped in financial insecurity, with limited access to basic needs such as healthcare, housing, education, and transport, while avenues for grievance are restricted and often silenced through disciplinary measures that equate criticism with insubordination.

Field personnel often operate without adequate budget support, as superiors redirect operational funds according to their own priorities—leaving subordinates under-resourced and uncompensated for overtime. These top-down reallocations are normalised as legitimate discretion rather than corruption. Consequently, subordinates are forced to cover operational gaps personally or rely on informal sources, with no structural safeguards—turning institutional deficits into individual burdens. In contrast, elite privileges are framed as deserved rewards for perceived merit. This economic centralisation legitimises exploitation and pushes lower ranks toward informal extraction, rationalised as an operational necessity.

In the INP's political landscape, the heavy workloads of lower-ranking officers are obscured by institutional narratives of loyalty, service, and obedience. To appease the regime, senior officers impose unrealistic targets and redirect resources towards regime-linked agendas, leaving core public duties underfunded and burdening subordinates with additional tasks, unpaid labour, and political activities disguised as policing. This exploitation is rarely recognised as corruption, instead normalised as duty, masking power abuse as discipline. Consequently, lower-ranking personnel experience fatigue and stress, while their grievances are dismissed as weakness or disloyalty. The outcome is a clear concentration of privilege at the top, with burdens displaced onto those lacking bargaining power and fair compensation.

This inequality is reinforced through an exclusive, top-down reward system that lacks meaningful bottom-up recognition. Institutional rewards—such as promotions, strategic assignments, honours, and educational opportunities—are allocated based on proximity to power and reciprocal loyalty rather than equitable criteria, particularly disadvantaging those marginalised by race, gender, class, or ethnicity. The hegemonic system selectively legitimises compliant behaviours while marginalising those deemed critical or non-compliant. Political recognition, operating as a symbolic corruption, is normalised as competition for elite favour, further entrenching exclusion and alienation.

Within this structure, unequal interests impose disproportionate burdens on lower-ranking personnel. Subordinates face intense pressure without autonomy or safe avenues for resistance, while elites deflect responsibility downward and shield themselves through symbolic legitimacy. Inequality thus manifests not only in the distribution of resources and recognition, but also in determining who bears the psychosocial costs of the system and who remains insulated from them.

To sustain hegemony and satisfy regime demands, institutional elites are compelled to constantly assert power, coercing subordinates into compliance and normalising the systemic corruption they orchestrate. Subordinates must affirm them to access resources and recognition. Corruption within the INP is, therefore, better understood as a collective response to structural pressures that normalise loyalty and obedience, rather than the result of individual intent—as detailed in Chapter Five. In this exploitative dynamic, vertical obedience is not a moral choice but a survival strategy—used by lower ranks to offset low pay, secure protection, manage workloads, and gain recognition. Thus, corrupt behaviour among subordinates should not be viewed as personal initiative, but adaptation to a dysfunctional system driven by pressure and fear, not trust or participation.

How do police rationalise corruption?

The final theory, Sykes and Matza's (1957) theory of neutralisation techniques, offers a valuable framework for understanding how dominant groups maintain power not only through direct control but by embedding their ideology within society's moral fabric. These techniques shift from individual justifications to collective ideological tools, used to legitimise structural indifference toward subordinated groups. Rather than isolated acts, neutralisation operates as a systemic mechanism that protects dominant group interests by obscuring the harm they inflict, preserving a façade of moral legitimacy, and discrediting resistance through labels such as deviant or irrational that render dissent morally illegitimate. This process is reinforced through hegemonic morality, which normalises subordination by leading the oppressed to internalise and accept hierarchical norms as legitimate and inevitable.

Within this context, neutralisation functions not merely as a psychological response, but as an instrument of institutional power—operating not through overt repression, but by shaping public discourse around whose interests are ethically recognised and protected. As a result, hegemonic order endures not by eliminating conflict, but by morally reframing domination as natural, necessary, and virtuous—making obedience appear legitimate, normal, and self-reinforcing.

The way these moral neutralisation techniques operate systemically expose how, within a power-based social order, morality stems not from any objective, universal truth, but from hierarchies that naturalise domination and portray the dominated as inferior, corrupt, and in need of control—thereby legitimising their subordination. This moral hierarchy sustains an order shaped by dominant groups—not through ethical principles equally applied to all, but through ideological constructs that legitimise and perpetuate their supremacy.

Within this framework, dominant groups claim moral authority to judge and discipline subordinates, disregarding their suffering and extending forgiveness only when obedience is restored. Through hegemonic values disseminated by ideological institutions, they cultivate unquestioning obedience or compliance, reinforcing their power both symbolically and materially.

In contrast, subordinate groups are morally positioned to accept submission—even when directly harmed by hegemonic power. This moral hierarchy discourages systemic critique, leading many to internalise their oppression as natural, deserved, or inevitable. As a result, morality functions as a hegemonic device, naturalising corrupt power structures and concealing the harm inflicted upon subordinated communities beneath claims of universal virtue and the common good.

The moral hierarchy enables dominant groups to justify harm through socially sanctioned narratives, protected by perceived moral superiority. Subordinate groups, regarded as morally inferior, are denied this protection—their suffering is delegitimised, and their actions reframed as deviant rather than recognised as resistance. Those in power portray the harm they inflict as morally justified and necessary for social stability, while persuading the oppressed to view their suffering as a voluntary, virtuous sacrifice for the common good. In doing so, the exploitative and corrupt nature of their practices is effectively concealed. By controlling narrative and truth, dominant groups deploy strategies of factual denial to conceal harm and sustain moral legitimacy.

In contrast, subordinate groups are denied the symbolic and discursive space to challenge their oppression, as their voices are routinely silenced or dismissed. As a result, they are more likely to internalise their suffering as personal failure or moral deficiency, rather than recognise it as a consequence of the dominant elite's corrupt structural order.

Within this moral economy, dominant groups readily deflect blame and evade responsibility, shielded by a system that portrays them as inherently virtuous and blameless. Subordinate groups, by contrast, are denied this privilege. They are compelled to bear moral and social blame—even for harms they did not cause—as responsibility is systematically shifted downward to protect the legitimacy of those in power. To further avoid accountability, dominant groups obscure harm and deny the existence of victims, often inverting the moral order by portraying themselves as the ones wronged. Meanwhile, subordinate groups lack the symbolic authority and discursive power to articulate their suffering—whether to demonstrate harm, assert victimhood, or demand justice.

This asymmetry endures because dominant social values are structurally aligned with power, making it exceedingly difficult for subordinated groups to challenge authority or redefine moral legitimacy on their own terms. Dominant actors reinforce this imbalance by portraying critics as threats and undermining victims' moral standing, labelling them as deviant, destabilising, or irrational. As a result, subordinated groups lack the symbolic power to contest dominant narratives, while those who resist risk stigma, marginalisation, or silencing. Within this configuration, the powerful are constructed as guardians of social stability, rendering resistance illegitimate and threatening to the established order.

Ultimately, this study has shown that a hegemonic moral hierarchy legitimises power by recasting the harmful practices of dominant groups as both necessary and morally justified. Once normalised as lawful, this framing enables dominant power structures to embed their values within the core functions of social institutions. Institutional actors embedded within these structures no longer adhere to universal moral principles but instead confine their ethical responsibilities to the interests of their own networks.

As they become enclosed within this bounded moral universe, dominant actors grow increasingly detached from the lived realities of those harmed by the systemic corruption they sustain. This detachment generates a profound ethical distance, through which subordinate groups are constructed as less deserving of moral concern—diminished in value, dignity, and contribution. Consequently, indifference to their suffering is normalised, rationalised, and ultimately rendered unquestionable within the hegemonic moral order.

Nevertheless, neutralisation techniques are dynamic and situational, shaped by an actor's position within fluid and continually shifting power relations. In everyday life, individuals and groups do not occupy static positions of power; one may be dominant in a particular context and subordinated in another. Consequently, neutralisation techniques exhibit flexibility: when in dominant positions, actors employ hegemonic discourse to rationalise or justify their actions, whereas in subordinate positions, they may utilise the same techniques as tools of resistance or survival.

This understanding resonates with hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell, 1995; Messerschmidt, 1997), which conceptualises hegemony not as a fixed state but as a dynamic and negotiated relationship among masculinities and other intersecting social hierarchies. Within this framework, actors deploy diverse legitimisation strategies to either consolidate dominance or mitigate vulnerability when subordinated.

Chapter Seven applies the theory of neutralisation techniques to analyse how the INP rationalises systemic corruption. Its power structure produces ideological discourse that legitimises subservience to the regime while reinforcing control over lower social groups. The exercise of power that disadvantages lower groups has been normalised to serve hegemonic political and economic interests. Within Indonesia's hierarchical system, the INP not only reproduces power practices but also constructs a moral hierarchy that positions both itself and the regime as ethically superior. This hierarchy is fluid, shaped by the dominant group's interests. As a subordinate state apparatus, the INP lacks the space to negotiate moral frameworks and merely enacts the truth defined by those in power. Consequently, its institutional morality loses neutrality, aligning with dominant values to preserve loyalty and vertical control.

Within this framework, the INP's discretionary authority is neither autonomous nor grounded in justice but subordinated to prevailing power. Actions that benefit the ruling elite are routinely justified, even when they harm the public or perpetuate structural corruption. These practices are often framed as expressions of loyalty and service to the state, thereby masking ethically questionable conduct as acts of obedience.

In contrast, when subordinate groups engage in similar behaviours—such as refusing corrupt or harmful orders or challenging authority—the INP responds with stigmatisation or criminalisation. Such acts are labelled as deviant, disobedient, or threats to stability, legitimising repression in the name of law and order. In this way, identical behaviours are interpreted through radically different moral lenses, shaped by the actor's social position and their alignment with—or resistance to—dominant interests.

In the INP's moral hierarchy, superiors monopolise the definition of right and wrong to maintain institutional power and legitimacy. Morality is imposed from above rather than shaped collectively, reducing subordinates to passive recipients of moral labelling with no space to negotiate their actions. Within this structure, superiors unilaterally define loyalty or deviance, while subordinates are denied the right to moral defence. Deviations by high-ranking officers are often tolerated or concealed, whereas similar infractions by lower-ranking members are swiftly stigmatised, treated as reputational threats, and punished harshly. Moral authority thus becomes the exclusive domain of the dominant, while subordinates are rendered objects of judgment, stripped of any claim to moral justification.

Accordingly, in carrying out its core duties, the INP strategically frames its actions in alignment with institutional interests and the power structures that support them. Positioned under the control of the ruling regime, the INP hegemonically presents itself as a loyal, obedient, and fully compliant servant of the state's highest authority. This narrative functions not only as an institutional discipline but also as a justification for corrupt practices that extract resources from lower social groups, framed as necessary acts of obedience to maintain regime stability and continuity.

Within this framework, loyalty to the supreme leadership is presented not merely as a structural obligation, but as a legitimate moral sacrifice—so long as it serves and protects the interests of dominant social groups. Coercive actions against lower social groups—such as suppressing dissent, neglecting people experiencing poverty, or disciplining disruptive citizens—are reframed as acts of service rather than recognised as repression.

This narrative is further reinforced by religious discourse, which links obedience to authority with virtuous worship and divine reward. As a result, corrupt or repressive acts may be carried out sincerely, under the belief that obedience to rulers—viewed as divine representatives—will be blessed by God. Cultural discourse also ties loyalty to authority with integrity, justice, and commitment to the common good.

Within this logic, deference to power is seen as natural and part of an unquestionable social ethic believed to preserve harmony and prevent national disintegration. Thus, in this hegemonic framework, structural obedience is framed as a moral virtue—an ideological tool that suppresses criticism of inequality and state abuse.

In a superior position, the INP portrays itself as the public's moral guardian, standing above lower social groups and representing state ideology and interests. Its authority is placed above civil society, justified by a mandate to uphold stability, enforce the law, and protect dominant interests. Within this moral hierarchy, the INP is seen as the default source of truth, authorised to define right and wrong.

This perception renders its actions—including subjective discretion—widely accepted as correct, especially among lower social groups. Though framed as serving the common good, 'truth' often reflects institutional interests over justice for the marginalised. As a result, routine practices that undermine the public in favour of dominant elites are frequently shielded from condemnation, upheld by the INP's presumed moral legitimacy.

Meanwhile, lower social groups, though directly harmed by power abuse, are denied legitimate moral standing. Their narratives are distrusted, complaints dismissed as disruptive, and criticisms labelled deviant or anti-state. Excluded from public discourse, their voices are morally disqualified—treated as unworthy of being heard or believed. In such conditions, they often feel compelled to offer bribes to the police to avoid greater harm—intimidation, criminalisation, prolonged legal processes, or threats to their safety.

These corrupt payments are not made out of guilt, but from the recognition that the legal system offers no protection and that money has become the only effective language. Ultimately, lower social groups resort to bribery simply to protect themselves from further harm.

In the law enforcement sector, lower social groups often bribe police to avoid detention, intimidation, criminal labelling, and burdensome legal processes. These payments stem not from guilt but from the belief that the legal system works against them, and money is the only language power understands.

In matters of public order and security, such payments serve to avoid enforcement, fines, eviction, or displacement—not out of fear of the law, but a need for protection from officers, thugs, or a repressive system. The INP's absence when genuinely needed, and its bias toward elite interests, lead these groups to view bribery not as corruption, but as a practical investment in life stability.

Payments are also used to access public services—speeding up procedures, bypassing bureaucracy, and avoiding mistreatment or fabricated infractions. For the poor, time is income, and paying for shortcuts becomes a rational response to a discriminatory and hostile bureaucracy.

Within the INP, lower-ranking officers are often coerced into bribing superiors as a performative act of “moral loyalty”—a survival tactic amid heavy workloads, poor welfare, and arbitrary evaluations. It reveals a deeper moral distortion: superiors control not only resources but also the power to define truth and virtue. Subordinates, stripped of agency, must navigate an ethic where compliance is rewarded and integrity punished. This corruption has evolved beyond administrative failure into a symbolic tool for enforcing obedience, maintaining dominance, and preserving internal order under the guise of solidarity and *esprit de corps*.

Paradoxically, the INP, as the official source of truth, recasts bribes and informal payments from lower social groups as acts of loyalty, respect, or charity rather than corruption. Cultural and religious narratives legitimise these practices by framing submission as goodwill or communal support for maintaining social harmony.

Within this logic, corrupt acts are not viewed as moral failings but as acceptable, even virtuous, contributions to a morally sanctioned order. In contrast, those—especially from lower social groups—who resist or reject these informal norms are branded as threats, dissenters, or disruptors of moral order. Systemic criticism is reduced to personal deviance, deflecting responsibility onto individuals while protecting institutions and high-ranking officials from scrutiny.

It reflects a deeper moral decay, where institutions claim authority over truth and use morality as a tool of control. In such conditions, truth becomes flexible and politically contingent rather than principled. This manipulation transforms corruption from isolated misconduct into a systemic condition embedded in the institution's logic.

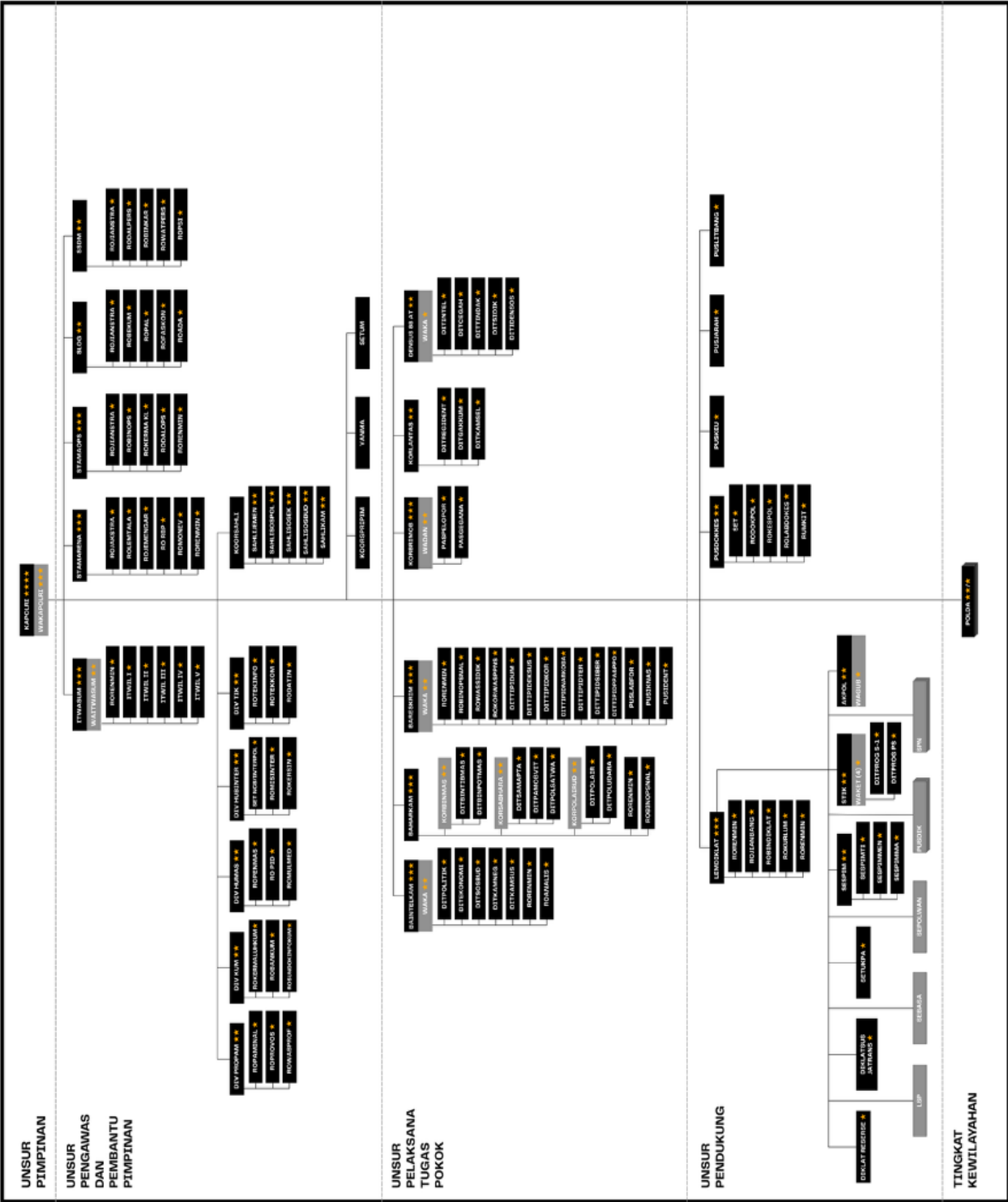
Taken together, at the literature level, this study advances a critical intervention into fragmented and insufficiently integrated social science accounts of corruption. It argues that corrupt practices often treated as discrete and isolated can only be understood within broader configurations of power, social structure, and legitimation. By rejecting individualistic frameworks, the study reconceptualises corruption as socially mediated harm, repositioning individuals not as autonomous actors but as constrained agents whose actions reproduce normalised corruption. In doing so, it exposes how reductionist approaches obscure the structural conditions through which corruption is produced and sustained.

At the policy level, this reconceptualisation challenges prevailing anti-corruption strategies by showing that individual punishment and stricter enforcement are insufficient and may reinforce the very system they seek to dismantle. The persistent failure of anti-corruption policies is therefore not simply a matter of weak implementation, but a consequence of a deeper misrecognition of corruption itself. Perception-based approaches are problematic (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 137), as they overlook how hegemonic norms shape what is recognised as corruption and what is instead regarded as acceptable, or even necessary, not only among the public but also among public servants.

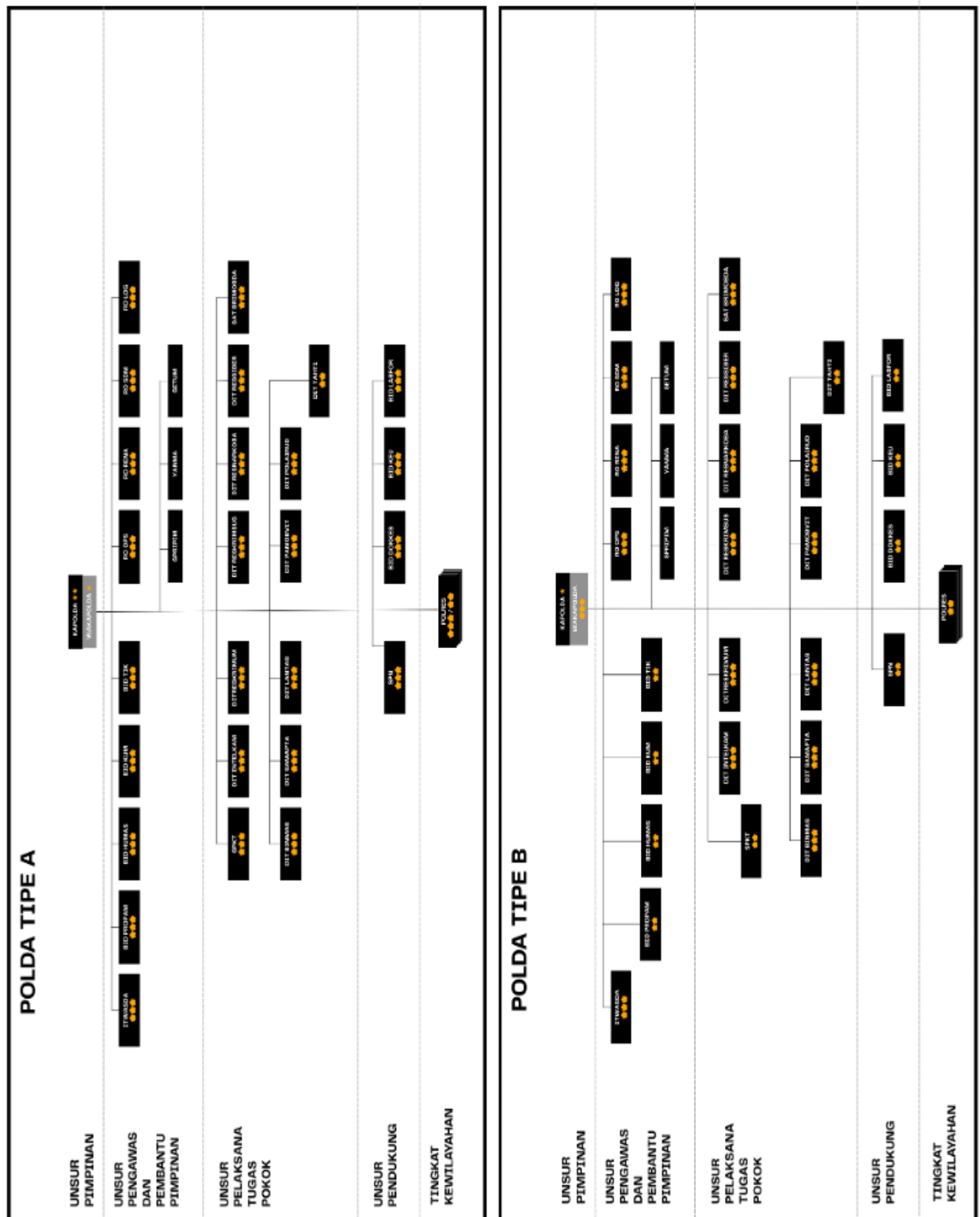
When power operates through dominant–subordinate interaction rather than top-down command, corruption is amplified through dominant narratives, rendering perception-based measures inherently unstable and politically contingent. The critical implication is that anti-corruption efforts must move beyond the narrow logic of individual punishment and confront the structural and ideological conditions that make corruption possible, sustainable, and, at times, rational for actors within the system.

From this standpoint, future research should focus less on defining corruption and more on examining how it operates, persists, and adapts as a system, including the conditions under which it is produced, maintained, and contested. It also requires a more critical analysis of why anti-corruption policies repeatedly fail, particularly when formal interventions are unable to disrupt entrenched power relations and the informal norms that sustain them. Without such a shift, both academic inquiry and policy interventions risk reproducing the very structures that enable corruption to endure.

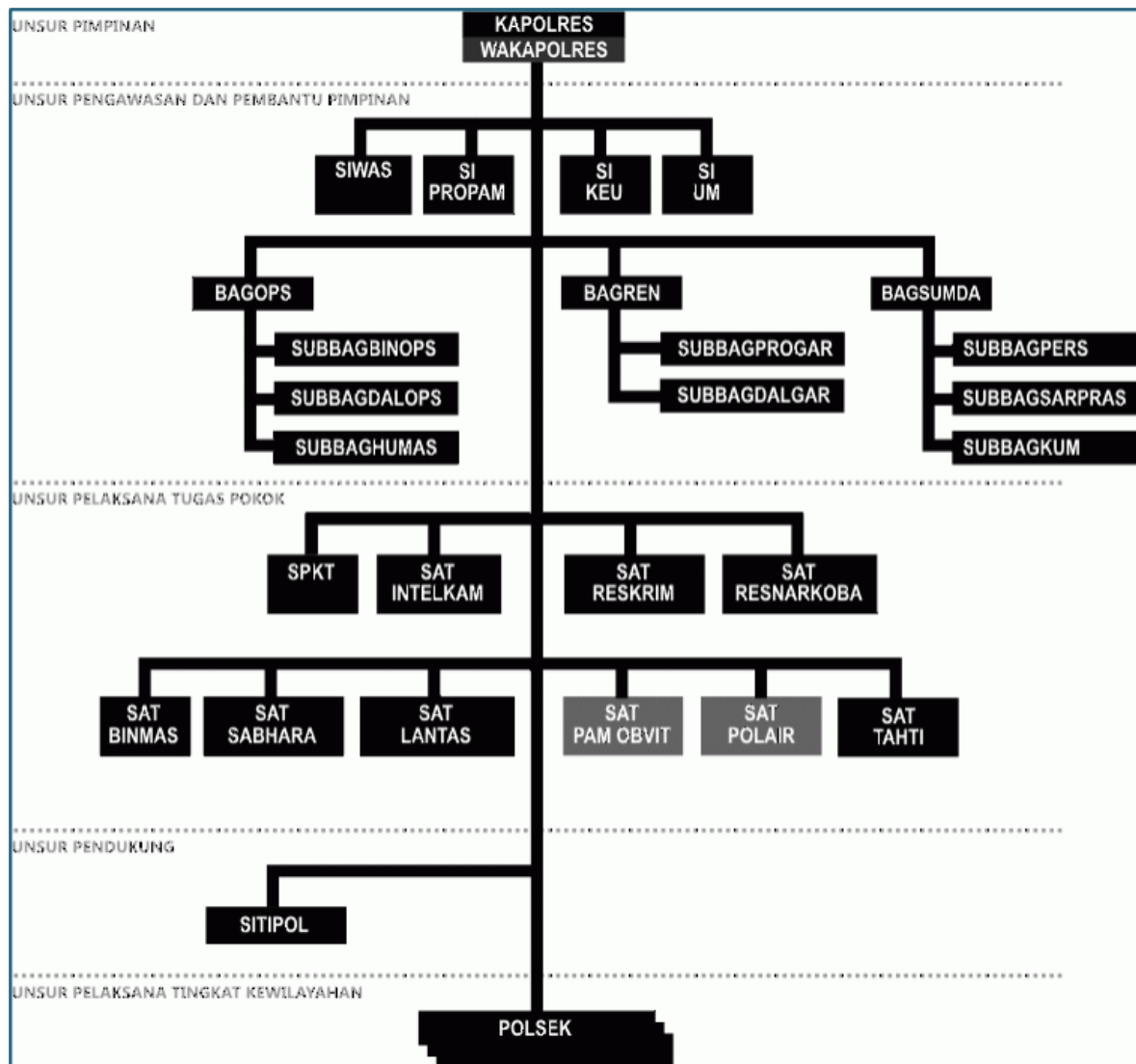
APPENDIX I: National Police Headquarters Organisational Structure



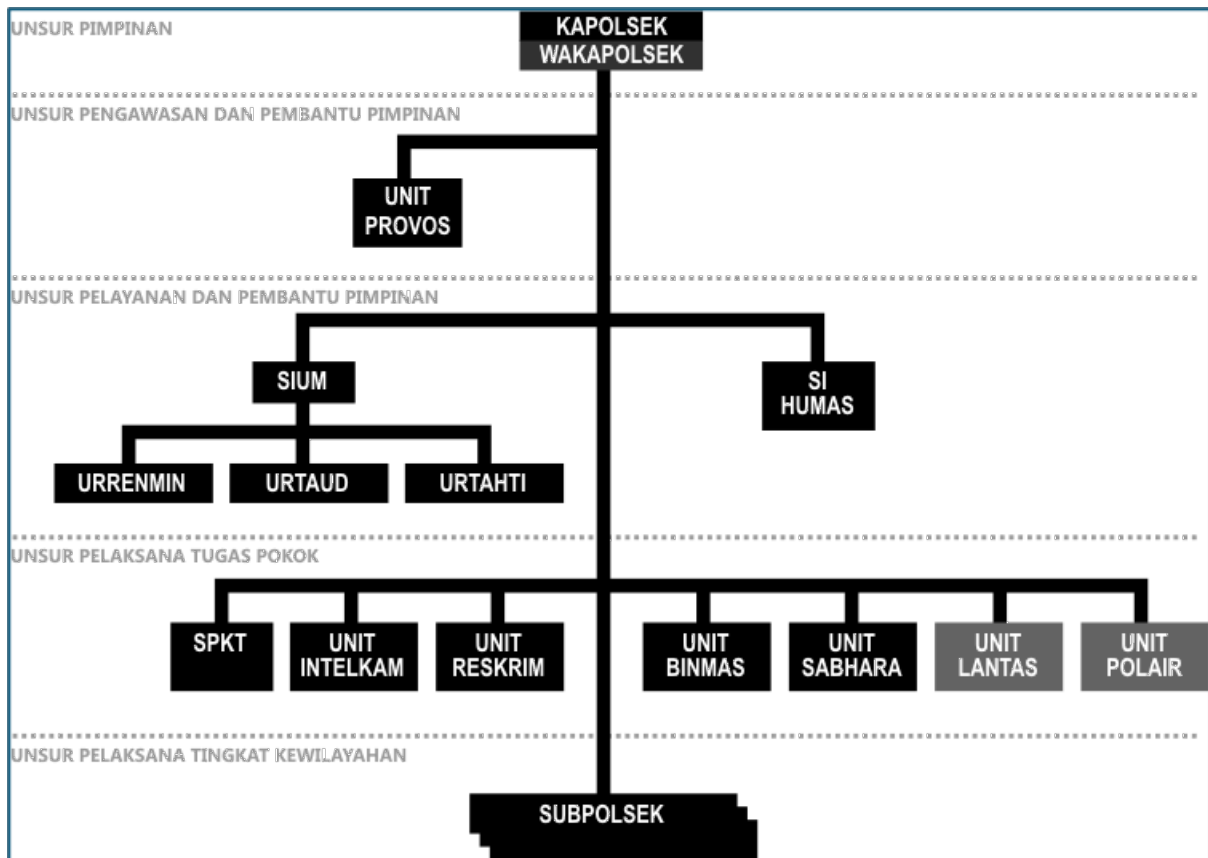
APPENDIX II: Provincial Police Organisational Structure



APPENDIX III: District Police Organisational Structure



APPENDIX IV: Sector Police Organisational Structure



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