EXCERPT

Does Power Corrupt?

How parking tickets, bankers, and bees explain selfish behavior.

By **Brian Klaas**, a professor of global politics at University College London.

NOVEMBER 21, 2021, 6:00 AM

When we say, "Nobody is above the law," that's not true. Some people are. In New York City, for example, official envoys to the United Nations and their families have diplomatic immunity. They can't be prosecuted for most crimes. Thankfully, that protection doesn't usually lead to ambassadors going on the prowl as serial killers. But the story is a bit different when it comes to serial parking violations.

For New Yorkers running late, illegal parking comes at a cost. Overstay your allotted time at a parking meter and you could be fined as much as $65. Park near a fire hydrant and cough up $115. But for diplomats, the cost-benefit analysis of blocking a fire hydrant used to come without any costs. The fines would still be issued, but nobody would have to pay them. Diplomatic plates were the ultimate get-out-of-jail-free card for illegal parking. It offered quite a temptation, too.

This article is adapted from ***Corruptible: Who Gets Power and How It Changes Us*** by Brian Klaas (Scribner, 320 pp., $28, November 2021).

In the five years from 1997 to 2002, United Nations diplomats were cited for 150,000 parking tickets that went unpaid—more than 80 per day. Cumulatively, they racked up an outstanding bill in excess of $18 million. (Thankfully, I'm sure nobody minded, because New Yorkers are internationally revered for their calm, empathic responses to people parking like assholes.)

In 2002, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg decided to put a stop to it. Bloomberg's administration began implementing a "three strikes, you're out" rule, in which any diplomatic vehicle with more than three unpaid parking tickets would lose its diplomatic license plates. The Manhattan Wild West of illegal diplomatic street parking ended. To make clear that a new sheriff was in town, the State Department stripped 30 foreign consulates of their special license plates in one day.

This is what social scientists call a "natural experiment." It's natural because it happened without the intervention of research teams. But while natural experiments don't take place in a laboratory, they follow the same logic. Just as medical experiments involve a treatment group and a control group, this natural experiment featured a control group (diplomats in the preenforcement period) and a treatment group (diplomats in the post-enforcement period). Everything else was mostly the same. The main difference that could explain any shifts in behavior was whether diplomats thought they could get away with parking violations.

Two economists, Raymond Fisman of Boston University and Edward Miguel of the University of California, Berkeley, analyzed the data to see what patterns they could find. If you're trying to guess what they found, you probably fall into one of two camps.

The first camp believes that those who park illegally are probably just inconsiderate rule-breakers. You're either an illegal parker, or you're not, in the same way that you're either a narcissist, or you're not. The second camp doesn't blame the individual but sees individual behavior as the product of culture or context. Perhaps the illegal parkers come from a society where officials are taught that the rules don't apply to them. Or perhaps people simply decide whether to break the law based on the odds that they'll face consequences.

So, what did Fisman and Miguel find?

Their evidence decisively backed up the culture-and-context explanation. There were stark differences in who parked illegally in the preenforcement period. Diplomats from places such as Sweden, Norway, and Japan had zero unpaid parking tickets during the five-year period. Even when they could've gotten away with it, they played by the rules. On the other end of the scale, diplomats from Kuwait averaged 249 parking violations per diplomat. The other nine countries rounding out the worst top 10 were all bastions of corruption: Egypt, Chad, Sudan, Bulgaria, Mozambique, Albania, Angola, Senegal, and Pakistan.

Clearly, cultures of corruption had a drastic effect on individual behavior. But enforcement—the system—mattered, too.

For the diplomats from corrupt countries who were parking illegally as if it were an Olympic sport, enforcement cleaned up their act overnight. Gold medalist Kuwait went from an average of nearly 250 unpaid parking violations per diplomat to an average of 0.15. Silver medalist Egypt went from 141 to 0.33. And bronze medalist Chad went from 126 to 0. Within days, diplomats from Chad were behaving the same way as diplomats from Norway, at least in how they parked their cars.

Those of you who initially had the hunch that personalities and character matter most—the first camp—are probably objecting right now. The individuals who represent corrupt regimes are more likely to be corrupt people! The pathway to representing, say, Venezuela at the United Nations is very different from the pathway to representing Norway! That's certainly true. Venezuelan diplomats can get promoted for behavior that would get Norwegian diplomats fired.

But Fisman and Miguel's analysis has an answer to that objection. In the preenforcement period, diplomats from squeaky-clean countries tended to park illegally more often the longer they were in New York. As they grew used to the absence of enforcement, they were increasingly tempted to mimic the behavior of diplomats from corrupt countries.

Culture matters, but so do consequences.

It's not just parking. A similar effect was found in Italy, where there's a stark regional corruption divide. Southern Italy—birthplace of the Mafia—has much more corruption than Northern Italy. The researchers Andrea Ichino and

Giovanni Maggi wondered how much that cultural imprint affects behavior, even when people move out of the area they grew up in.

To figure that out, they used another clever natural experiment. They studied the prevalence of what they call "shirking" behavior—such as absenteeism and other workplace misconduct—among employees at a national bank that has branches throughout Italy. They identified employees who transferred from one region to the other, the southern-born bankers who transferred to the north or vice versa. Their findings were similar to those of the parking study: Culture mattered, but the local systems they worked in mattered enormously, too. Most employees who moved north started behaving better, while most employees who moved south started behaving worse.

We even behave differently depending on how we believe a system operates, rather than how it actually operates. Chile, a robust democracy in South America, has similarly low levels of corruption to Taiwan, Spain, France, and the United States. Yet, as Andres Liberman of New York University notes, Chileans routinely find themselves amused as they read stories about foreigners—often Americans—who presume that everything south of the border is hopelessly corrupt.

When stopped by police, some American tourists try to bribe the Chilean cops, which is a crime. Back home in California or Connecticut, they'd never dream of bribing an officer. But in Chile, they're all too willing to give it a try. It backfires. Some end up in jail on charges of attempted bribery, all because of a false belief in how a system operates. Bad behavior clearly doesn't arise exclusively from bad character.

These insights matter enormously for understanding whether power makes people worse. If the system is to blame, then we should target our reforms at cleaning up the context. But if an individual who makes bad choices is to blame, we should target our reforms at putting better people in charge—or at least at trying to make bad people behave better.

One way to test whether systems matter more than individuals is to remove the variable of choice—at least as we understand it. That's pretty much impossible to do with humans, because we're constantly making intentional choices. Instead, we need to turn to the animal kingdom. What drives "corrupt,"

seemingly selfish behavior in species that aren't quite as self-reflective as we are?

Few people would say that bees and wasps make individual choices. Even the English language makes this pretty clear when we talk about "drones" in a colony or "hive minds." Yet systems and consequences also radically reshape behavior in the animal kingdom. Believe it or not, some wasp and bee species have corruption, more or less, and some even have dedicated workers who are supposed to act like insect cops.

But whether those swarms behave badly depends much less on the individual and much more on the rules and structures around them.

Bees and wasps, like Brits and Danes, are ruled by queens. Just as with humans, there can only be one monarch at a time. Being the queen is a sweet gig. You have an entire hive devoted to you, and you get to reproduce your genetic material with gleeful abandon. In the evolutionary sweepstakes, the queen bee has won the lottery. Her genes are passed along to every bee or wasp in the hive.

But worker bees and wasps have a hidden instinct: They want to pass their genes along, too. We won't go into the complicated math equations here, but dramatic evolutionary competitions are going on inside a hive. These competitions pit what is best for each individual against what is best for the hive.

All female larvae can become queens with the right diet. Give them the right baby food, and it's straight to the honeycomb version of Buckingham Palace. For each larva, then, becoming the queen bee is the ideal evolutionary outcome. But from the perspective of the hive, any excess queens are a waste. Queens can't carry out tasks that are normally assigned to workers.

It's sort of as if we endlessly cloned Queen Elizabeth II: It probably wouldn't be particularly helpful for, say, the productivity of the British steel industry. With bees, excess queens lower productivity, because each time a spare queen is made, it could've been a worker instead.

Bees and wasps are sophisticated social creatures, so they've evolved a policing mechanism to solve this problem. Workers become the hive's officers. They conduct search-and-seizure operations to find any rogue social climbers

aspiring to join the royal family. Then they dispense a disturbing bit of Marie Antoinette-style justice.

"These unfortunate creatures are beheaded or torn apart by the workers soon after they emerge from their cells in the brood comb," explain Francis Ratnieks and Tom Wenseleers, two experts in the behavior of social insects.

But, as is the case with humans, the wasps doing the policing sometimes abuse their authority for their own gain. As Ratnieks told me, some wasps act like corrupt cops: "Some of the workers who kill eggs are also laying their own eggs. It's not really for the good of the colony, but for the good of yourself."

So here's the interesting question: What causes some bee or wasp species to have more or less corrupt, opportunistic behavior compared to other species? In *Melipona* bees, for example, up to 20 percent of female larvae start developing into queens, entering a lottery that almost always ends with their heads being ripped off. In honeybees, only 0.01 percent of female larvae start developing into excess queens. That raises an intriguing question: Are *Melipona* bees just 2,000 times "greedier" than honeybees? Are they the selfish jerks of the social insect world?

The answer lies with the system, not the individual.

How social insect hives are built varies. Some seal eggs off, making them difficult to inspect. Others leave them open, allowing the police bees to enter (without a warrant, presumably) and make sure there's no evolutionary funny business going on. Some species have evolved to have special, larger queen cells that demarcate slots for larvae that could develop into future queens.

Other species have cells that blend right in, as a future queen looks just like the future workers. When the cells are easy to inspect and the queen cells are easily differentiated from the worker ones, the policing is far more effective. Off with their heads! When the cells are closed and would-be queen larvae blend in with the worker larvae, policing is ineffective.

Just as with humans, ineffective policing creates new temptations. You'll probably get away with it, so why not try? In bees and wasps, poor policing makes it more likely that some individuals will prioritize "selfish" behaviors over behaviors that benefit the hive. "When policing is more effective," Ratnieks said, "there are fewer workers who try to lay eggs." *Melipona* bees

aren't 2,000 times "worse" than honeybees. They just have a system that lets them get away with selfish behavior, so they're more evolutionarily selfish. Humans, in this respect, are much like bees.

From parking tickets to wasps, it's clear that systems guide behavior. That doesn't mean that all corruption or abuse of power is caused by the system. Some corrupt crooks or abusive leaders were rotten to begin with, and the system only amplified their depravity. But to fix it—to reduce corruption and prevent abuse—we need to accurately diagnose when it's the system that's to blame and when it's the individual. The correct answer, as bees and bankers make clear, isn't always obvious.

Brian Klaas is a professor of global politics at University College London and the author of *Corruptible: Who Gets Power and How It Changes Us.* Twitter: @brianklaas

TAGS: CORRUPTION, UNITED STATES