

Discussion sheet

Was Samuel Pepys corrupt?

Introduction

This sheet offers a case study designed to generate debate and reflection amongst public officials, the private sector but also the general public about what constitutes corruption. It focuses on Samuel Pepys, the famous seventeenth-century diarist who recorded his views and behaviour in an unusually frank manner.



Image: John Hayls [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Let's start with some facts. Samuel Pepys was an administrator of the navy in the seventeenth century, during the reign of Charles II. His income increased six-fold during the diary years 1660-1669. Although his official income was £350 pa and in 1660 he had just £25 capital, by the end of 1667 he was worth £7000. Pepys accepted money, gifts and sexual favours from people with whom he did navy business.

Pepys as not corrupt

One perspective is that Pepys was a lovable rogue and brilliant administrator of the navy. In this version Pepys was only doing what everyone else around him did – his patron Lord Sandwich told him “that it was not the salary of any place that did make a man rich, but the opportunity of getting money while he is in the place”. It was not as though he did not have a sense of what was corrupt, since he roundly condemned corrupt behaviour in others. He thus recorded his shock when Richard Cooling, secretary to the important politician the earl of Arlington, boasted that “his horse was a bribe, and his boots a bribe and told us he was made up of bribes and that he makes every sort of tradesman to bribe him; and invited me home to his house to taste of his bribe-wine. I never heard so much vanity from a man in my life”. So what Pepys did was different. He did accept gifts and money but he noted that he had never asked for any of them; that they were done in thanks for “favours”; and that they were “presents”, “gratifications”, “rewards” and “acknowledgements”. He accepted gifts and presents from friends (he was very sociable) and for doing his job very well – he didn't accept bribes to do any injustice but “was not so squeamish as not take people's acknowledgement where I have the good fortune by my pains to do them good and just” service. He only ever took money for things that also benefited the king/state. Thus although Pepys accepted money from one contractor he noted that ‘there is not the least word or deed I have yet been guilty of in his behalf but what I am sure hath been to the King's advantage and profit of the service, nor ever will I’.

When he was offered a bribe to go against the public interest he contemplated returning it: “I... had a difference with Sir W. Batten about Mr. Bowyer’s tarr, which I am resolved to cross, though he sent me last night, as a bribe, a barrel of sturgeon, which, it may be, I shall send back, for I will not have the King abused so abominably in the price of what we buy, by Sir W. Batten’s corruption and underhand dealing”. So Pepys knew what corruption was and condemned it in other administrators throughout his life. But unless he accrued money when he was in office he was likely to have a miserable old age because there was no state pension or welfare system. He was actually quite self-restrained in the wealth he gained –he could, had he been really rapacious, have got a lot more, since there were so few checks on his actions. In any case, Pepys worked so hard for the state that he ruined his eyesight and had to leave off writing his diary.

Pepys as corrupt

A very different take on Pepys would see him as an avaricious man who forced himself on – some might say raped – at least one woman who sought his favour on behalf of her husband and extracted money from ordinary sailors as well as rich government contractors. What he called “acknowledgements” and “presents” were really bribes, and he deluded himself by trying to call them by less pejorative terms. He was evidently ashamed of his conduct: on one occasion he opened a packet containing money with his eyes shut “not looking into it till all the money was out, that I might say I saw no money in the paper if ever I should be Questioned about it”. Pepys lacked integrity in his personal and professional life, and was vain, showing off the silver flagons or the “very pretty Mare” that he had received as bribes. Others certainly saw his actions as corrupt, as a 1679 pamphlet indicates. This raised a printed “hue and cry” after him, the metaphorical communal chase after a common criminal, for having extorted an array of exotic gifts. Pepys and his crony Will Hewer were accused of taking lavish gifts and money that ought to be returned to the seamen from whom they had extorted them.

Pepys only evaded official enquiries into his conduct because he lied to them or hid the true picture: in 1668 Pepys decided to “prepare” those summoned to be interrogated by commissioners of account “about what presents I had from them, that they may not publish them”. Pepys and his colleagues were accused of having “corruptly preferred and postponed payments” and although he resolved “to declare plainly, and, once for all, the truth of the whole, and what my profit hath been”, in the end he found he could evade making the revelation. In the winter of 1669-70 Pepys was again called to account and responded by protesting that he never did “directly or indirectly ...demand or express any expectation of fee, gratuity or reward from any person for any service” but deliberately underestimated the amount he was now worth by £6000 in order to make him seem more innocent.

So was Pepys corrupt?

Pepys seems to have been caught between different conceptions of corruption and probity, with accusations of corruption becoming highly politicised and polemical in character, in large part because so many of the practices were deeply embedded in the wider social and cultural practices of the time, such as friendship, patronage, clientelism, and customs of respect and deference. Does this excuse his behaviour?

