



Survival Ethics and Lack of Institutional Oversight: How Economic and Familial Pressures Drive Power Abuse in the Indonesian Police

Rissan Simaremare ^{1,*}, Meiske Claudia ²

¹ Doctoral Program in Management Science, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Lambung Mangkurat, Indonesia

² Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Lambung Mangkurat, Indonesia

*Email (corresponding author): riccan1975@gmail.com

Abstract. *Power abuse within the Indonesian National Police (Polri) remains a chronic concern, often attributed to systemic corruption. However, less attention has been paid to the everyday socioeconomic realities that shape officers' moral decisions. This study investigates how economic hardship and familial obligations influence unethical conduct among police officers, including bribery, extortion, and misuse of authority. Adopting a critical qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis involving 18 informants, including officers, family members, and legal practitioners. Findings reveal that officers frequently operate under what may be termed "survival ethics," where moral compromise is justified as a response to unmet financial and familial demands. A lack of effective institutional oversight and weak internal control mechanisms further normalize misconduct, blurring the line between necessity and deviance. Officers expressed guilt, resignation, and moral fatigue, often perceiving corruption as a rational, if reluctant, coping mechanism. These insights suggest that addressing police misconduct requires more than punitive reform; it demands structural improvements in welfare systems, ethical leadership, and community oversight. By situating misconduct at the intersection of economic vulnerability and institutional weaknesses, this study adds a critical perspective to global discourses on police ethics in developing contexts.*

Keywords: *Police misconduct, survival ethics, institutional oversight, economic hardship, familial obligation*

1. Introduction

Police corruption continues to constitute a critical challenge in Indonesia, profoundly undermining state legitimacy and eroding public confidence in law enforcement institutions. Despite numerous reform initiatives over the past decades, the Indonesian National Police (Polri) persistently grapples with allegations of bribery, extortion, and abuse of authority. While conventional analyses tend to foreground macro-level explanations—emphasizing structural, legal, or political dimensions of corruption (Hidayat, Yunus, & Helmi, 2023a; Wahyuningsih, 2023)—this study contends that such frameworks inadequately account for the everyday pressures that influence officers' ethical reasoning. Specifically, micro-level stressors such as economic precarity and intense familial obligations are identified as critical drivers in the rationalization and normalization of unethical conduct.

Officers at lower hierarchical tiers within Polri frequently operate under conditions of chronic financial insecurity. As stipulated in Presidential Regulation No. 103/2018, the

remuneration for entry-level officers remains considerably below urban subsistence thresholds, with base salaries and allowances amounting to approximately IDR 3.73 million per month. These financial constraints are further compounded by culturally embedded expectations of *tanggung jawab sosial* – an expansive set of obligations toward extended family, religious ceremonies, and communal functions. Failure to fulfill these duties is not merely a personal shortcoming but a source of social shame, reputational loss, and even institutional marginalization. Within this context, the role of provider becomes a moral imperative, thereby legitimizing morally ambiguous actions undertaken in the name of familial survival (Azzara, Simanjuntak, & Puspitawati, 2022; Elshaer, Ghanem, & Azazz, 2022a).

Several participants in this study disclosed that they supplemented their inadequate incomes through informal practices – such as accepting facilitation payments or selectively enforcing regulations. These actions were not framed as acts of opportunism, but as necessary responses to pressing needs like education fees, medical costs, or ceremonial expenditures. Such accounts point to the emergence of a normative framework best described as *survival ethics* – a morally adaptive logic that enables officers to reconcile legal transgressions with obligations to kin and community. This framework invites a reconceptualization of police misconduct as an ethically complex coping strategy rather than mere deviance borne of individual vice.

Although individual motivations are pivotal, they are deeply embedded within – and exacerbated by – a broader institutional ecology marked by weak internal monitoring. Polri's rigid hierarchy privileges obedience and group cohesion over ethical reflexivity, thereby discouraging dissent. Officers reported that voicing concern over misconduct frequently results in punitive transfers or professional stagnation. The institutional culture is further shaped by what many described as a “code of silence,” underpinned by senior officers who tacitly tolerate or benefit from corrupt practices. These dynamics systematically erode mechanisms of internal accountability, thereby constraining officers' moral agency (Carr & Forde, 2024; Ivković, Maskály, Kule, & Haberfeld, 2022).

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) offers a pertinent explanatory lens in this regard. It posits that individuals weigh perceived benefits against potential risks in their ethical decision-making. When applied to Polri, the confluence of low risk of sanction and high material pressure constructs a rational incentive structure for unethical conduct (Abdullah, 2022; Leeson, 2020). In such settings, officers may conclude – however reluctantly – that corruption is a less dangerous path than financial destitution. RCT thus aligns with the empirical realities of officer behavior under systemic strain.

Familial dynamics – particularly within collectivist cultures such as Indonesia – serve as both moral anchors and sources of pressure. The imperative to sustain not just nuclear but also extended family members, and to maintain communal standing through material symbols, transforms economic failure into a moral failing. Consequently, officers encounter heightened internal conflict, vacillating between institutional codes of conduct and deeply internalized familial expectations (Gottschalk, Domschke, & Schiele, 2020; Tran, 2022).

Existing anti-corruption efforts, including those led by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) and Polri's internal disciplinary mechanisms, are often reactive, punitive, and structurally underdeveloped. Training programs in ethics and integrity remain superficial, and institutional provisions for psychological support or stress management are virtually nonexistent. As noted in prior studies, ethics education alone is insufficient in the absence of enabling institutional structures that support ethical behavior (Steenbergen, Jansen,

& Ellemers, 2023; Sulaiman, 2024). Reform, therefore, must target the structural conditions that produce and sustain ethical compromise.

Cross-national research echoes these findings. In under-resourced policing environments such as Nigeria, Kenya, and India, officers frequently rationalize misconduct as a necessity arising from low wages and institutional neglect (Aborisade, 2023; Govender & Pillay, 2021). These parallels underscore the need to incorporate socio-economic and organizational realities into reform strategies rather than treating them as peripheral concerns.

Against this backdrop, the present study poses a central research question: How do economic hardship and familial obligations contribute to moral rationalization and unethical conduct among Indonesian police officers? By foregrounding officers' lived experiences and integrating insights from economic sociology, criminology, and organizational theory, this study advances the concept of *survival ethics* as a critical interpretive framework. In doing so, it seeks not merely to catalog instances of corruption, but to illuminate the systemic vulnerabilities that entrench it. Ultimately, the study argues that ethical compromise within the Indonesian police force must be understood through the lens of structural strain, institutional fragility, and moral negotiation under duress—not merely as isolated moral failure.

2. Methods

This study adopts a critical qualitative research design to interrogate how economic hardship and familial obligations contribute to ethical erosion and misconduct among Indonesian police officers. Grounded in an interpretive-critical paradigm, the research foregrounds officers' lived experiences while simultaneously challenging institutional arrangements that obscure or normalize deviant behavior. This approach is especially well-suited to ethically sensitive and socially embedded phenomena, wherein dominant institutional narratives frequently silence subaltern perspectives or frame misconduct in overly reductionist terms (Bhavnani, Chua, & Collins, 2020).

2.1 Philosophical Orientation

The philosophical underpinning of this inquiry is anchored in critical qualitative methodology, which posits that knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by entrenched power asymmetries. The researcher is not positioned as a detached observer but as an active interlocutor, committed to unveiling how power relations, normative expectations, and organizational structures co-construct the conditions under which misconduct occurs (Bhavnani et al., 2020). The objective, therefore, extends beyond narrative documentation to a critical exposition of the institutional logics and oversight failures that perpetuate unethical conduct.

A central tenet of this orientation is radical reflexivity, wherein the researcher continuously interrogates their own positionality, interpretive lens, and institutional embeddedness throughout the research process. Reflexive techniques employed included analytic memo-writing, reflexive journaling, and iterative member-checking against participants' narratives (Barrett, Kajamaa, & Johnston, 2020a; Peddle, 2021a). Reflexivity was relational and processual, foregrounding how the researcher's access, identity, and assumptions shaped both data generation and interpretation (Smith & Luke, 2021).

2.2 Participant Selection and Sampling Strategy

A purposive and snowball sampling approach was utilized to recruit individuals with direct experiential knowledge of institutional and ethical dilemmas in policing. The final sample comprised 18 participants: ten active-duty officers from patrol, traffic, and criminal investigation units; two former officers; three family members; and three civil society representatives. Inclusion criteria were threefold: (1) demonstrable experience of financial or organizational pressures; (2) willingness to engage with ethically sensitive content; and (3) demographic and institutional variation in rank, gender, geography, and unit assignment.

To enhance representational depth, maximum variation sampling was applied to ensure heterogeneity across personal and institutional contexts. Following Dwivedi and Kaur (2025), snowball sampling was employed to access participants reluctant to engage through formal channels, especially those apprehensive about institutional reprisal.

2.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through a triangulated approach combining semi-structured interviews, naturalistic observations, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted either in person or via encrypted digital platforms, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. Each session spanned 60 to 90 minutes and explored thematic domains such as economic distress, familial burden, ethical reasoning, and institutional perceptions.

Observations were carried out in informal and formal settings—ranging from community-police interactions to in-station dynamics and officer-family engagements. These were used to capture nonverbal cues, spatial interactions, and contextual nuances often overlooked in interview data. Document analysis encompassed internal police regulations, codes of ethics, and disciplinary records (Azhari, Novatiana, Sinaga, & Adriansyah, 2025), offering a textual anchor for assessing institutional expectations versus operational realities.

Post-interview reflexive notes were written to capture contextual impressions and initial interpretive leads, aligning with qualitative best practices for immersive inquiry (Barrett, Kajamaa, & Johnston, 2020b). These notes were then cross-analyzed with interview and documentary data to support thematic triangulation and interpretive validity.

3.4 Data Analysis Technique

The study employed reflexive thematic analysis (TA) as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2020), which emphasizes analytical rigor, iterative engagement, and interpretive reflexivity. The six-phase analytical process entailed:

1. Immersive familiarization with transcripts and field notes
2. Generation of initial codes using both inductive and deductive logic
3. Thematic construction through code clustering
4. Iterative review of themes for internal coherence and conceptual clarity
5. Theme naming to reflect underlying constructs
6. Final synthesis integrating narrative analysis and direct quotations

Coding was conducted manually using a structured template and memoing system, ensuring analytical traceability. Peer debriefing sessions provided external validation, and triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents bolstered the credibility of emergent patterns (Estoque & Padagas, 2021). The analysis yielded four primary themes: (1) economic stress as moral burden, (2) familial obligation and ethical compromise, (3)

organizational complicity and institutional silence, and (4) rationalization of deviance in the context of oversight failure.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Ethical Rigor

To ensure methodological integrity, the research adhered to the Lincoln and Guba framework, emphasizing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Trustworthiness was reinforced through the following techniques:

- Member checking, wherein thematic summaries were shared with select participants for validation (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Skåre, Midtbust, Lund, Kaasa, & Dreyer, 2022)
- Data triangulation across interviews, field observations, and institutional documents.
- Peer debriefing to interrogate researcher bias and validate interpretations (Barrett et al., 2020)
- Reflexive journaling to document evolving assumptions, emotional responses, and interpretive shifts (Peddle, 2021; Smith & Luke, 2021)

These strategies ensured that the findings were grounded not in anecdotal narratives but in a methodologically and ethically sound framework of inquiry.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional review board of the researcher's affiliated university. Participants were thoroughly informed of the study's objectives, their right to withdraw, and the measures taken to ensure anonymity and data protection. All identities were pseudonymized, and sensitive data were securely stored in encrypted formats.

Given the high vulnerability of the respondent group—particularly those disclosing ethically compromising behavior—multiple safeguards were instituted to minimize psychological distress. These included verbal and written informed consent, access to support resources, and structured debriefings after emotionally intense interviews. The research strictly adhered to the principle of non-maleficence, ensuring that no harm befell participants as a result of their engagement (Ginju & Iurchevici, 2024a).

3.7 Integration with Prior Research Design

This methodological framework marks a refinement of the study's original conceptual design, advancing it through enhanced reflexivity, broader sample variation, and systematized analytical protocols. While earlier iterations emphasized narrative synthesis, the current approach incorporates validated coding procedures, theoretically anchored themes, and ethically rigorous field engagement. The integration of recent critical literature further deepens the epistemological validity and practical applicability of the study's findings (Bhavnani et al., 2020; Wahab, 2024).

3. Results and Discussion

The thematic structure of this study is organized into five core clusters, each derived through reflexive thematic analysis as articulated by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2020). These themes illuminate the intersectionality of economic precarity, familial obligation, and organizational structure in shaping officers' ethical orientations and decision-making processes. While existing scholarship often treats these factors as discrete, this study offers an integrative perspective, highlighting their dynamic entanglement within the lived realities of Indonesian police personnel.

To enhance analytical clarity and reader orientation, Table 1 below presents a summary of the emergent themes, their subcomponents, concise descriptions, and selected verbatim quotations that encapsulate the emotional and moral complexity expressed by participants.

Table 1. Summary of Emergent Themes, Subthemes, and Illustrative Quotations

Theme	Subthemes	Brief Description	Illustrative Quotation
Financial Stress as Moral Burden	Income inadequacy, social expectation	Financial strain compels ethical compromise	"If you don't do it, you cannot feed your children."
Familial Obligation and Ethical Compromise	Work-family conflict, symbolic burden	Family pressures amplify ethical vulnerability	"It is not greed; it is guilt."
Organizational Culture of Complicity and Silence	Hierarchical endorsement of misconduct	Corruption normalized through internal dynamics	"You keep quiet or face a transfer."
Moral Rationalization and Survival Ethics	Moral disengagement, survival justification	Deviance rationalized as pragmatic moral adaptation	"I know it's wrong, but what choice do I have?"
Institutional Inaction and Reform Aspirations	Cynicism vs. cautious optimism	Mixed perceptions of reform efficacy and sincerity	"The ethics posters are just for show."

3.1 Result

3.1.1 Financial Stress as a Moral Burden

The most consistent and emotionally resonant theme emerging from the data pertains to economic hardship as a primary driver of ethical compromise. Across diverse ranks and regions, participants emphasized the persistent disparity between institutional compensation structures and the socio-economic demands of everyday life. Officers described being burdened not only by subsistence needs – such as rent, education, and medical expenses – but also by culturally prescribed obligations, including religious ceremonies and extended family responsibilities.

Participants frequently presented their involvement in unofficial income-generating practices, such as accepting "facilitation fees" or exercising selective enforcement, as acts of reluctant necessity rather than moral failure. As one officer poignantly remarked: *"If you don't do it, you cannot feed your children."* This narrative affirms the framework advanced by Bishopp et al. (2020), who characterize such conduct as a strain-induced moral compromise, wherein chronic occupational stress catalyzes ethical erosion. Similarly, Aborisade (Aborisade, 2021) has demonstrated that in resource-constrained law enforcement environments, financial duress often precipitates misconduct that is perceived as essential for survival.

This theme also finds resonance with Socoliuc et al. (2022), who introduce the concept of a “moral economy of deviance” – a socio-ethical framework wherein deviant behavior is redefined as a legitimate means of fulfilling familial and communal obligations. Participants described how the absence of institutional mechanisms – such as regular salary adjustments, inflation-linked benefits, or access to welfare programs – deepened their dependence on informal practices to bridge the economic gap. The structural inertia of the institution was cited as a form of passive neglect that exacerbated officers’ vulnerability to moral compromise.

Moreover, the fear of economic retribution – such as losing informal income streams – emerged as a powerful deterrent to reporting misconduct. Officers expressed hesitancy to expose peers, citing both the risk of professional retaliation and the destabilization of informal support systems. This observation is consistent with Cubitt’s (2021) assertion that economic precarity undermines the moral infrastructure of organizations, disincentivizing ethical resistance and reinforcing complicity. Ivković et al. (2022) further argue that such conditions erode institutional accountability mechanisms, contributing to a self-reinforcing culture of silence in which corruption is both normalized and pragmatically justified.

3.1.2 Familial Obligation and Ethical Compromise

Interwoven with economic distress is the deeply entrenched theme of familial responsibility, which emerged as a potent moral driver in participants’ ethical reasoning. Officers repeatedly described their professional conduct as shaped by internalized provider roles – roles reinforced by societal norms, patriarchal expectations, and cultural imperatives. Within Indonesia’s collectivist sociocultural context, notions of success and social legitimacy are often measured through visible symbols of familial provision, including home improvements, educational attainment of children, and ceremonial sponsorships.

This emotional and symbolic burden was vividly captured in statements such as: *“It’s not greed – it’s guilt. You see your wife cry, your children ask for books, and you feel like a failure.”* Such expressions align with Liu et al. (2020), who argue that guilt and shame tied to unmet familial expectations serve as emotional catalysts for moral disengagement. Under these pressures, officers become increasingly susceptible to justifying unethical behavior not as opportunistic but as acts of filial duty and emotional preservation.

Tran (2022) highlights that unresolved work–family conflict significantly weakens organizational commitment and erodes adherence to institutional ethics. This tension is particularly acute within policing, where officers wield discretionary power and are routinely exposed to informal revenue opportunities. The symbolic weight of “looking successful” – especially in a public-facing and honor-laden profession – amplifies the moral dilemma, prompting many to engage in ethically ambiguous conduct to preserve familial and social status.

Gottschalk et al. (Gottschalk et al., 2020) emphasize the existence of a reciprocal feedback loop between occupational and familial stressors, where psychological strain in one domain intensifies vulnerability in the other. In this study, officers who were unable to meet familial expectations through legitimate income channels reported elevated levels of emotional exhaustion, role conflict, and a greater propensity to rationalize misconduct as a regrettable yet necessary choice.

3.1.3 Organizational Culture of Complicity and Silence

A third critical theme emerging from the data concerns the institutional culture of the Indonesian National Police—a culture perceived by participants as complicit, hierarchical, and weakly regulated in its response to misconduct. While some officers disclosed direct involvement in unethical acts, others described a form of institutional passivity, wherein observed violations went unchallenged due to fear of retaliation or professional stagnation.

Several respondents described scenarios where senior officials failed to adequately monitor or intervene in petty corruption, a practice that is common and continues as an informal response to personnel welfare gaps. This normalization of deviance echoes Zakaria et al.'s (2023) concept of “ethical erosion from above,” whereby leadership inaction or tacit endorsement cascades through institutional ranks, legitimizing unethical behavior. Carr and Forde (2024) provide a parallel in the Trinidadian police, showing how leadership silence fosters a deviance-permissive culture.

The prevalence of a “code of silence” was repeatedly invoked as a collective adaptation strategy. Officers described this unwritten norm as essential for professional survival: challenging misconduct often led to ostracism, transfer, or reputational damage. Ivančík (2021) underscores that in hierarchically rigid organizations, loyalty to superiors and peers frequently overrides moral integrity, making complicity a form of institutional conformity.

Participants also critiqued internal ethics initiatives as symbolic rather than substantive. Ethics trainings were characterized as performative checklists with little relevance to real-world dilemmas. Demoulin and Stinglhamber (2024) link such superficial engagement to occupational disillusionment, wherein well-intentioned officers become cynical in the absence of enforceable standards and ethical leadership.

These findings affirm the assertion by Hidayat et al. (2023) that institutional integrity cannot flourish in the absence of structural reinforcement—including consistent disciplinary action, transparent oversight, and meaningful role modeling. In such environments, officers increasingly resort to “situational ethics”—moral decisions contingent not on institutional codes but on immediate contextual pressures and organizational inertia.

3.1.4 Moral Rationalization and Survival Ethics

A fourth emergent theme pertains to the moral rationalization of misconduct, wherein officers do not perceive their actions as inherently corrupt but as morally defensible responses to systemic neglect. Many respondents described a process of cognitive adaptation, in which they had to “make peace” with their choices, particularly when those choices secured their families' well-being. This pattern aligns with Liu et al. (2020), who conceptualize moral disengagement as a strategy for preserving self-integrity amid ethically compromised behavior.

The notion of “survival ethics”, as articulated by Gottschalk et al. (2020), offers a critical interpretive frame. Participants repeatedly framed informal income—through bribes, administrative “fees,” or case manipulation—not as acts of greed but as compensatory mechanisms within an inadequate institutional structure. Their narratives were not marked by defiance, but by resignation, ambivalence, and emotional fatigue. One officer remarked: *“I know it's wrong. But what choice do I have?”*—an utterance encapsulating the convergence of structural constraint and moral ambivalence.

This ethical recalibration was further embedded in peer norms and institutional narratives. Officers described a workplace ethos in which resisting misconduct was interpreted as naive, disloyal, or even professionally risky. This reflects what Demoulin and

Stinglhamber (2024) describe as group-level moral disengagement, wherein ethical responsibility is diffused across collective justifications and informal codes.

Notably, some participants interpreted their unethical conduct as passive resistance – a coping mechanism in response to perceived abandonment by the state. This framing resonates with Peddle (2021) and Smith & Luke (2021), who argue that in ethically precarious professions, moral ambivalence does not denote moral collapse, but adaptive negotiation within constrained ethical terrains. However, the cumulative effect of this ambivalence often culminates in ethical fatigue—a progressive dulling of moral sensibilities that facilitates sustained deviance over time (Zakaria et al., 2023).

3.1.5 Institutional Inaction and Aspirations for Reform

The final thematic domain centers on officers' perceptions of institutional inaction and their ambivalent outlook toward reform. Participants articulated a prevailing sense of disillusionment with internal oversight mechanisms, which were often perceived as performative rather than substantive. Ethics campaigns—comprising posters, slogans, training modules, and ceremonial affirmations—were routinely dismissed as "window dressing" divorced from operational realities.

As one participant succinctly stated: *"The ethics slogans are just for show. If your superior tells you to do something wrong, you obey – or face the consequences."* This sentiment reflects a deep-seated skepticism toward institutional reform, rooted in the disconnect between normative ideals and behavioral enforcement. Wahab (2024) cautions that ethical mandates without structural reinforcement produce cynicism, eroding both the credibility of leadership and the effectiveness of ethics programming.

Yet, this skepticism was not uniformly distributed. A subset of younger officers and civil society actors expressed measured optimism, identifying ethical leadership, transparent career advancement, and participatory community oversight as viable pathways for transformation. These perspectives resonate with Adams et al. (Adams, McCrain, Schiff, Schiff, & Mourtgos, 2022), who emphasize the necessity of multi-directional reform pressures—combining institutional will from above with grassroots accountability from below.

In addition to governance reforms, participants underscored the need for structural interventions targeting officer well-being, including mental health support, workload rationalization, and family-responsive policies. Elshaer et al. (2022) and Ginju and Iurchevici (2024) corroborate the value of such interventions, arguing that sustained ethical behavior is untenable when psychosocial stressors remain unaddressed.

Nevertheless, a consistent refrain echoed throughout the interviews: without enforceable accountability and genuine leadership commitment, even the most well-designed reforms would remain aspirational. This insight reinforces Hidayat et al.'s (2023) contention that ethical transformation in policing requires not only normative change but also institutional protection for officers who uphold ethical standards—a condition currently perceived as absent in much of the Indonesian policing landscape.

3.1.6 Reflexivity and Thematic Integration

In accordance with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020), the researcher engaged in continuous and deliberate reflexive practice throughout the research process. This entailed documenting emotional responses to data, maintaining a reflective journal to capture potential interpretive biases, and conducting peer debriefings to

triangulate emerging insights. The theme of *survival ethics*, for instance, elicited particular resonance due to the researcher's prior exposure to policy debates on police welfare – necessitating intentional bracketing of assumptions to preserve interpretive integrity.

Such reflexive engagement enhanced the transparency and trustworthiness of the analytical process, in line with established qualitative criteria for credibility and confirmability (Skåre et al., 2022). By continuously interrogating how power, position, and perspective shaped the interpretive lens, the analysis remained anchored in participants' narratives, rather than imposed theoretical schemas.

Thematically, the five principal clusters—economic pressure, familial obligation, organizational complicity, moral rationalization, and reform ambivalence—map coherently onto the conceptual triad articulated in the literature review. Specifically:

- Rational Choice Theory elucidates how officers weigh the risks and rewards of misconduct in conditions of oversight failure and material necessity (Leeson, 2020; Abdullah, 2022).
- Strain Theory contextualizes deviant behavior as a logical response to structural blockages and chronic institutional pressure (Bishopp et al., 2020).
- Organizational Deviance Theory explicates the cultural mechanisms—such as peer norms, leadership inaction, and ethical ambiguity—that reproduce deviance over time (Ivančík, 2021; Zakaria et al., 2023).

In synthesis, this study affirms that police misconduct in Indonesia cannot be reduced to individual pathology. Rather, it emerges from an ecology of vulnerability, wherein economic instability, symbolic familial obligations, and institutional neglect intersect to erode moral clarity and facilitate the normalization of deviance. Understanding these interdependencies is critical for designing reform strategies that are not only ethically robust but also contextually grounded.

To visually consolidate these insights, Figure 1 presents a conceptual map of the thematic architecture. The diagram illustrates how systemic pressures—economic strain, familial duty, and organizational culture—converge through processes of moral rationalization to produce the adaptive framework of survival ethics. This visualization captures both the complexity and coherence of officers' ethical landscapes under institutional strain.

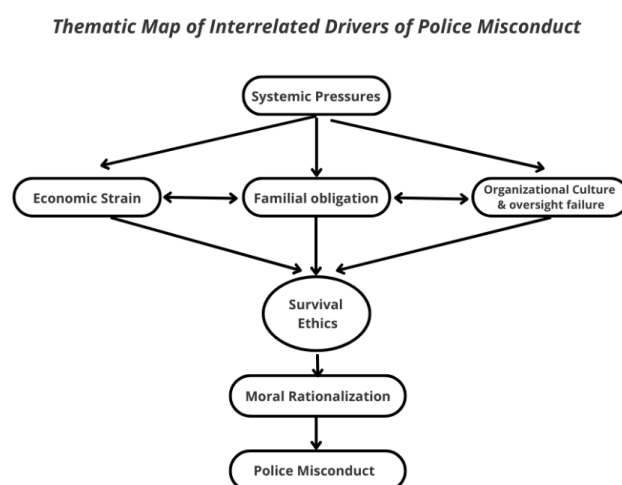


Figure 1. Thematic Map of Interrelated Drivers of Police Misconduct

This conceptual map illustrates the interlocking systemic pressures that shape ethical decision-making among Indonesian police officers. Economic strain, familial obligation, and organizational culture – exacerbated by weak internal oversight – converge to create a context in which officers adopt survival ethics as a rationalization strategy. This moral framework, in turn, facilitates moral disengagement and normalizes deviant behavior as a perceived necessity. Arrows represent dynamic feedback loops among conditions and adaptive responses, highlighting the complexity of institutional strain in shaping misconduct.

3.2 Discussion

This study offers a multidimensional understanding of ethical erosion within the Indonesian National Police, uncovering a complex interplay between economic precarity, familial obligation, organizational oversight failure, and moral rationalization. By centering the lived experiences of frontline officers, the research advances a critical perspective that transcends legalistic and structuralist explanations (Kawedar, Handayani, & Milawati, 2025; Hidayat, Yunus, & Helmi, 2023). Rather than depicting misconduct as individual moral failure, this study situates deviance within a systemic ecology of vulnerability and institutional fragmentation.

3.2.1 Interpreting Economic and Familial Pressures Through Theoretical Lenses

Findings from this study affirm the utility of Strain Theory in conceptualizing misconduct as a response to structural constraints. Officers consistently described their ethical decisions as shaped by persistent financial insecurity and culturally loaded familial obligations. These accounts mirror Bishopp et al.'s (2020) insight that deviant behavior in policing often arises when individuals are structurally blocked from achieving culturally endorsed goals through legitimate means.

The presence of moral disengagement (Liu et al., 2020) and the articulation of survival ethics (Gottschalk et al., 2020) further demonstrate that officers do not abandon moral reasoning; rather, they reconfigure moral boundaries to cope with pressures that are both institutional and emotional. As Zakaria et al. (2023) contend, when organizational structures fail to support ethical conduct, moral recalibration becomes a necessary adaptation.

While Rational Choice Theory (RCT) remains conceptually relevant, this study challenges its traditional formulation by demonstrating that officers' decisions are not purely utilitarian or selfish. Instead, they often represent emotionally complex trade-offs, where misconduct is viewed as the lesser of evils in the face of institutional neglect, familial demands, and moral fatigue (Leeson, 2020; Abdullah, 2022).

3.2.2 Organizational Culture as an Ethical Ecosystem

Ethical decision-making in policing is not merely individual, but profoundly institutionalized through cultural norms and oversight failures. Participant narratives revealed a deeply embedded organizational climate where silence, conformity, and implicit tolerance of deviance were normalized. These findings echo Ivančík (2021) and Carr and Forde (2024), who argue that in hierarchically rigid institutions, informal norms often eclipse formal codes of conduct.

Such conditions reflect what Cubitt (2021) characterizes as “ethical decay” – a gradual erosion of normative standards under conditions of permissive leadership and weak accountability. Officers in this study described symbolic ethics programs, unreliable internal

sanctions, and a pervasive “code of silence” (Ivković et al., 2022) that discouraged moral dissent.

3.2.3 Reform Aspirations and Structural Implications

Despite prevailing cynicism, this study captured pockets of cautious optimism among younger officers and civil society stakeholders. Participants advocated for reforms that went beyond punitive measures, emphasizing the need for transparent promotion systems, external community oversight, and structural support mechanisms, including mental health and family-inclusive policies. These findings align with Adams et al. (2022), who highlight the importance of reform convergence from both top-down institutional leadership and bottom-up civic engagement.

Respondents frequently linked ethical compromise to unmet welfare needs and unresolved emotional burdens. As Elshaer et al. (2022) and Ginju and Iurchevici (2024) assert, sustainable ethical behavior cannot emerge in contexts of material deprivation and psychological strain. These insights reinforce the argument that anti-corruption frameworks must integrate organizational justice, emotional well-being, and context-responsive support systems into their design.

Significantly, several participants framed their engagement in deviance as a form of passive resistance to institutional abandonment. Rather than interpreting misconduct as defiance, it was narrated as an informal mechanism for negotiating dignity and survival under systemic neglect. This challenges dominant discourses on corruption and invites critical reflection on the political economy of policing in low-trust institutions.

3.2.4 Contributions to Knowledge and Theoretical Advancement

This research contributes to the literature by offering an integrated empirical model that weaves together economic, familial, and organizational drivers of misconduct. Unlike studies that address these elements in isolation (Sulaiman et al., 2023; Zakaria, Osman, & Noranee, 2023), this work demonstrates how their convergence generates moral tension, adaptive rationalization, and institutional degradation.

Theoretically, the study advances applications of Strain Theory and Rational Choice Theory within a critical qualitative framework that privileges subjectivity and context. More notably, it introduces “survival ethics” as a central lens through which officers rationalize deviance not in opposition to morality, but as a contingent moral adaptation. This conceptual framing contributes to a more humanized and structurally aware understanding of police ethics in precarious institutional settings.

Below, Table 2 provides a comparative synthesis of this study’s findings alongside existing scholarship, underscoring its contribution to theoretical and empirical debates on police misconduct.

Table 2. Comparison of Key Findings with Supporting Literature		
Theme	Key Finding in This Study	Supporting Literature
Financial Stress as Moral Burden	Economic hardship leads to justification of misconduct as survival strategy	Bishopp et al. (2020); Liu et al. (2020); Aborisade (2021)
Familial Obligation and Ethical Compromise	Family expectations heighten emotional stress and ethical compromise	Gottschalk et al. (2020); Tran (2022); Liu et al. (2020)
Organizational Culture and Oversight Failure	Deviance normalized through silence and hierarchical complicity	Ivančik (2021); Carr & Forde (2024); Ivković et al. (2022)
Moral Rationalization and Survival Ethics	Officers rationalize unethical acts under institutional and emotional strain	Liu et al. (2020); Demoulin & Stinglhamber (2024); Gottschalk et al. (2020)
Institutional Inaction and Reform Aspirations	Cynicism toward reform, with modest hope for ethical leadership and support	Hidayat et al. (2023); Wahab (2024); Adams et al. (2022)

3.2.5 Limitations and Areas for Further Research

While this study provides rich insight into the moral reasoning of Indonesian police officers, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size – though diverse – was limited to 18 participants, which may constrain generalizability. Second, the sensitive nature of the topic may have influenced the depth or candor of disclosure, despite trust-building and reflexive strategies.

Future research could benefit from larger and more geographically varied samples, including higher-ranking officials and female officers, to capture broader organizational dynamics. Longitudinal and comparative studies would also enhance understanding of how institutional reforms evolve over time and how ethical coping mechanisms differ across policing cultures..

Conclusion

This study concludes that unethical conduct within the Indonesian police force is not the product of isolated moral failure, but rather the cumulative effect of intersecting systemic forces: economic precarity, familial obligation, and institutional oversight failure. Through a critical qualitative lens, the findings demonstrate that police officers navigate an ethically volatile environment in which survival, cultural responsibility, and institutional neglect converge to shape moral reasoning and professional behavior.

Officers described their engagement in deviant practices not as deliberate corruption, but as ethically burdened adaptations to a system that offers limited support and ambiguous accountability. Financial insecurity and symbolic family pressures emerged not only as material challenges but also as significant psychological stressors that erode ethical resilience (Bishopp et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Gottschalk et al., 2020). These pressures are compounded by an organizational culture marked by hierarchical complicity, peer normalization of

deviance, and the symbolic enactment of ethics policies (Carr & Forde, 2024; Ivančík, 2021; Hidayat et al., 2023).

By integrating Rational Choice Theory, Strain Theory, and frameworks on organizational deviance, this study provides a multidimensional analysis of how misconduct becomes internalized, rationalized, and reproduced. Such insights are critical in understanding deviance in low-resource, high-pressure institutions where formal rules are weak and informal obligations dominate.

This research offers several important contributions to the study of police ethics and institutional corruption:

1. Conceptual Reframing

It reconceptualizes deviance as a form of moral negotiation under structural constraint, challenging dichotomous views that classify officers as either ethical or unethical. Instead, it proposes a continuum of moral compromise, mediated by institutional strain and emotional burden.

2. Contextual Insight from Indonesia

The study provides empirically grounded insight from an underrepresented context in global discussions on police misconduct, enriching cross-cultural understanding of how socio-cultural, economic, and institutional dynamics interact (Zakaria et al., 2023; Wahab, 2024).

3. Policy Relevance

On a practical level, the findings highlight the limitations of punitive anti-corruption models. Effective reform must address the material vulnerabilities faced by officers, including inadequate compensation, lack of welfare access, and unresolved psychosocial pressures.

Ethics training alone is insufficient; it must be accompanied by:

- Emotional and psychological support systems
- Transparent and meritocratic promotion structures
- Ethical leadership across ranks (Elshaer et al., 2022; Ginju & Iurchevici, 2024)

Additionally, institutional culture must be reengineered toward transparency and accountability. This includes dismantling the “blue wall of silence” through:

- Enforceable whistleblower protections
- External oversight mechanisms
- Structured community engagement platforms (Adams et al., 2022; Ivković et al., 2022)

Reform efforts must be adaptive, incremental, and locally grounded, avoiding one-size-fits-all solutions imported from foreign models that overlook the socio-political complexity of Indonesian policing (Scoggins, 2021).

6.2 Recommendations for Future Research

To build upon the insights of this study and further enhance theoretical and policy discourse, future research should consider:

- Comparative studies across provinces and policing units to explore regional and structural variation within Polri.
- Longitudinal research examining the impact of reform interventions on officers’ ethical reasoning and institutional trust over time.
- Focused exploration of gendered experiences, particularly the ethical and institutional challenges faced by female officers, who remain underrepresented in both national and global policing literature.

- Integration of quantitative dimensions—such as financial strain indices, emotional fatigue scales, or institutional trust metrics—to support triangulation and broader generalizability.

Funding

This study did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. All research activities were self-funded by the author and carried out independently under general academic supervision.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express sincere appreciation to the academic advisors for their valuable guidance and critical insights throughout the research process. Gratitude is also extended to the Indonesian police officers, former personnel, family members, and civil society representatives who participated in the study. Their willingness to share personal and sensitive experiences was essential to the depth and credibility of this research.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest. The research was conducted independently, and no external party had any influence on the study design, data collection, analysis, manuscript preparation, or the decision to publish the findings.

References

- Abdullah, S. (2022). Understanding Corruption in Iraq: A Theoretical Perspective. *Journal of Kurdistan for Strategic Studies*, (5). doi:10.54809/jkss.vi5.166
- Aborisade, R. A. (2021). Accounts of Unlawful Use of Force and Misconduct of the Nigerian Police in the Enforcement of COVID-19 Measures. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 36(3), 450–462. doi:10.1007/s11896-021-09431-4
- Aborisade, R. A. (2023). Policing the COVID-19 Outbreak, Accounts of Misconduct, and the Imperatives of Procedural Justice Training for Nigerian Police Officers. *International Annals of Criminology*, 61(3–4), 292–313. doi:10.1017/cri.2023.23
- Adams, I. T., McCrain, J., Schiff, D., Schiff, K. J., & Mourtgos, S. M. (2022). Public Pressure or Peer Influence: What Shapes Police Executives' Views on Civilian Oversight? doi:10.31235/osf.io/mdu96
- Azhari, A., Novatiana, F., Sinaga, I. K., & Adriansyah, M. (2025). Integrity in Law Enforcement Police Ethics and Responsibilities. *Micjo*, 2(2), 1149–1157. doi:10.62567/micjo.v2i2.569
- Azzara, R., Simanjuntak, M., & Puspitawati, H. (2022). The influence of religiosity, economic pressure, financial management, and stress levels towards family quality of life during COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. *Jurnal Ilmu Keluarga Dan Konsumen*, 15(1), 27–38. doi:10.24156/jikk.2022.15.1.27
- Barrett, A., Kajamaa, A., & Johnston, J. (2020a). How to ... Be Reflexive When Conducting Qualitative Research. *The Clinical Teacher*, 17(1), 9–12. doi:10.1111/tct.13133
- Barrett, A., Kajamaa, A., & Johnston, J. (2020b). How to ... Be Reflexive When Conducting Qualitative Research. *The Clinical Teacher*, 17(1), 9–12. doi:10.1111/tct.13133
- Bhavnani, K., Chua, P., & Collins, D. (2020). Critical Approaches to Qualitative Research, 243–262. doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190847388.013.17

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2020). Can I Use TA? Should I Use TA? Should I *not* use TA? Comparing Reflexive Thematic Analysis and Other Pattern-based Qualitative Analytic Approaches. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 21(1), 37–47. doi:10.1002/capr.12360
- Carr, D. N., & Forde, T. (2024). Explaining Corruption in the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service: A Case Study of Organizational Culture and Police Corruption, 351–368. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-52378-6_19
- Cubitt, T. (2021). Using Network Analytics to Improve Targeted Disruption of Police Misconduct. *Police Quarterly*, 26(1), 24–53. doi:10.1177/10986111211057212
- Demoulin, S., & Stinglhamber, F. (2024). Turnover Intentions of Police Officers When Facing Discretionary Ethical Dilemmas: The Explanatory Roles of Professional Disillusionment and Job Stress. *Police Quarterly*, 28(2), 159–181. doi:10.1177/10986111241263118
- Dwivedi, A., & Kaur, Prof. K. (2025). Evaluating India's Police Accountability Framework: Internal and External Mechanisms. *Nurs*, 9(4). doi:10.69953/nurs.v9i4.211
- Elshaer, I. A., Ghanem, M., & Azazz, A. M. S. (2022a). An Unethical Organizational Behavior for the Sake of the Family: Perceived Risk of Job Insecurity, Family Motivation and Financial Pressures. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(11), 6541. doi:10.3390/ijerph19116541
- Elshaer, I. A., Ghanem, M., & Azazz, A. M. S. (2022b). An Unethical Organizational Behavior for the Sake of the Family: Perceived Risk of Job Insecurity, Family Motivation and Financial Pressures. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(11), 6541. doi:10.3390/ijerph19116541
- Estoque, H., & Padagas, R. (2021). From Nursing to Courtroom: A Qualitative Descriptive Study of the Preparations, Motivations, and Barriers of Nurses Becoming Lawyers. *Nurse Media Journal of Nursing*, 11(1), 10–23. doi:10.14710/nmjn.v11i1.33886
- Ginju, G., & Iurchevici, I. (2024a). The Relationship Between Occupational Stress and Quality of Family Life, 230–238. doi:10.54481/pcss2023.24
- Ginju, G., & Iurchevici, I. (2024b). The Relationship Between Occupational Stress and Quality of Family Life, 230–238. doi:10.54481/pcss2023.24
- Gottschalk, M. G., Domschke, K., & Schiele, M. A. (2020). Epigenetics Underlying Susceptibility and Resilience Relating to Daily Life Stress, Work Stress, and Socioeconomic Status. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 11. doi:10.3389/fpsyt.2020.00163
- Govender, D., & Pillay, K. (2021). Policing in South Africa: A Critical Evaluation. *Insight on Africa*, 14(1), 40–56. doi:10.1177/09750878211048169
- Hidayat, A. S., Yunus, N. R., & Helmi, M. I. (2023a). Law Enforcement Ethics and Morality Contribution in Reducing the Culture of Corruption. *International Journal of Social Science and Education Research Studies*, 03(04). doi:10.55677/ijssers/v03i4y2023-11
- Hidayat, A. S., Yunus, N. R., & Helmi, M. I. (2023b). Law Enforcement Ethics and Morality Contribution in Reducing the Culture of Corruption. *International Journal of Social Science and Education Research Studies*, 03(04). doi:10.55677/ijssers/v03i4y2023-11
- Ivković, S. K., Maskály, J., Kule, A., & Haberfeld, M. M. (2022). The Code of Silence and the Theory of Police Integrity, 17–35. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-96844-1_2
- Leeson, P. T. (2020). One Rationality to Rule Them All. *Social Science Information*, 59(4), 563–568. doi:10.1177/0539018420963351
- Liu, Z., Liao, H., & Liu, Y. (2020). For the Sake of My Family: Understanding Unethical Pro-family Behavior in the Workplace. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 41(7), 638–662. doi:10.1002/job.2463

- Peddle, M. (2021a). Maintaining Reflexivity in Qualitative Nursing Research. *Nursing Open*, 9(6), 2908–2914. doi:10.1002/nop2.999
- Peddle, M. (2021b). Maintaining Reflexivity in Qualitative Nursing Research. *Nursing Open*, 9(6), 2908–2914. doi:10.1002/nop2.999
- Skåre, T. S., Midtbust, M. H., Lund, J., Kaasa, S., & Dreyer, A. (2022). Barriers and Facilitators When Implementing Electronic Patient-Reported Outcome Measures at a Municipal Cancer Care Unit. *Cancer Nursing*, 46(4), E268–E275. doi:10.1097/ncc.0000000000001120
- Smith, E. B., & Luke, M. (2021). A Call for Radical Reflexivity in Counseling Qualitative Research. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 60(2), 164–172. doi:10.1002/ceas.12201
- Socoliuc, O.-R., Sirghi, N., Jemna, D.-V., & David, M. (2022). Corruption and Population Health in the European Union Countries – An Institutional Perspective. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(9), 5110. doi:10.3390/ijerph19095110
- Steenbergen, E. F. v., Jansen, W. S., & Ellemers, N. (2023). How Executive Boards Set the Stage for Unethical Behavior in the Financial Sector. *Business Ethics and Leadership*, 7(4), 108–127. doi:10.61093/bel.7(4).108-127.2023
- Subagio, S., Sjamsudin, S., Hidayati, F., & Wike, W. (2023). The Role of CEC in the Implementation of Anti-Corruption Policy in Public Finance, 369–377. doi:10.2991/978-2-38476-082-4_33
- Sulaiman, E. (2024). Empowering local communities engagement: Rural tourism and business innovation for SDGs Desa. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism and Entrepreneurship*, 4(3), 331–344. doi:https://doi.org/10.35912/joste.v4i3.1968
- Tran, Q. H. N. (2022). Exploring Relationships Among Work–family Interfaces, Organizational Commitment, Organizational Justice and Occupational Stress in Vietnamese State Organizations. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 55(2), 157–171. doi:10.1108/ict-01-2022-0006
- Wahab, I. P. S.-Md. I. (2024). Leveraging Databases for Effective Policing: A Strategic Approach to Modern Law Enforcement. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 6(6). doi:10.36948/ijfmr.2024.v06i06.31880
- Wahyuningsih, S. E. (2023). Law Enforcement of Corruption in the Business Framework of State-Owned Enterprises in Indonesia. *International Journal of Management Studies and Social Science Research*, 05(02), 41–51. doi:10.56293/ijmsssr.2022.4573
- Zakaria, N. Z., Osman, I., & Noranee, S. (2023). The Influence of Personality Traits on Ethical Behavior of Police: The Mediating Effect of Ethical Leadership. *Information Management and Business Review*, 15(4(SI)I), 138–145. doi:10.22610/imbr.v15i4(si)i.3585

CC BY-SA 4.0 (Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International).

This license allows users to share and adapt an article, even commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the distribution of derivative works is under the same license as the original. That is, this license lets others copy, distribute, modify and reproduce the Article, provided the original source and Authors are credited under the same license as the original.

