

How Serious is Bribery? A Survey of Greek Opinion*

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Abstract

The present study addresses the question, “How serious is bribery?” In order to arrive at an answer, it was necessary to compare the seriousness of bribery to that of other selected acts. World Values Survey data for Greece were used to compare bribery to 18 other moral issues. Respondents were asked to select a number from 1 to 10, where 1 = never justifiable and 10 = always justifiable. Sex before marriage was deemed to be the least serious moral act. Wife beating was considered to be the most serious. Bribery ranked 6th, slightly less serious than parents beating children, and somewhat more serious than political violence. The present study is part of a much larger study that examines the ethics of tax evasion and bribery.

Keywords ethics, bribery, ranking

JEL Classification A13, A14, D23, D73, K14, K40, K42, K49, O17, O50, Z10

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Introduction

The present paper is part of a much larger study that examines the ethics of tax evasion and bribery (McGee & Shopovski, 2024a & b; McGee & Benk, 2023, 2024). This study reports the results of a survey of Greek opinion on the ethics of bribery. The question to be addressed is, “How serious is bribery?” In order to answer that question, we must ask a second question – “Compared to what?”

It is a basic tenet of many legal systems that the punishment must fit the crime. The penalty must not be too harsh, but it also must not be too lenient. Legal scholars have been discussing this issue for hundreds if not thousands of years. Modern scholars agree on many points, but sometimes differ about the details (Davis, 1983; Hirsch, 1976; Miethe, 1984; Piquero, Carmichael & Piquero, 2008).

Trautman and Kimbell (2018) view bribery and other corruption as a cancer that eats away at the ability of countries to provide for their citizens. They are seen as siphoning off money that might otherwise be used to feed the hungry, provide housing, education and medical care and fight poverty. However, there is another side to this story. Bribery that greases the wheels of commerce might have beneficial effects overall. Helping hand bribery needs to be distinguished from greedy hand bribery. The first kind may be ethical, depending on the facts and circumstances, whereas the second kind, greedy hand bribery, is generally unethical (McGee & Block, 2023).

A few studies have already attempted to answer this question, or at least to rank crimes in terms of seriousness. McGee, Petrides and Ross (2012) sampled 369 graduate and undergraduate mostly accounting and business students at a university in Mexico City, along with some faculty and nonstudents. Their survey instrument included six moral offenses. Accepting a bribe in the course of business was ranked 3rd, which was less serious than buying stolen goods and prostitution

and more serious than cheating on taxes, avoiding a fare on public transport and claiming government benefits to which you are not entitled. Women were significantly more opposed to prostitution than the men; the difference between male and female mean scores was not significant for the other five offenses. Overall, faculty were more opposed to the offenses than were the graduate and undergraduate students. The undergraduate students were least opposed, overall.

Aljaaidi, Manaf and Karlinsky (2011) sampled more than 300 business people, students, unemployed and self-employed people in Yemen. Their survey instrument included a list of 30 crimes. The bribery item was ranked 12th out of the 30 offenses, placing it slightly above the middle on the list, slightly less serious than arson and slightly more serious than homosexuality out of 30. Interestingly, the three tax items ranked 28, 29 and 30 on the list, which indicates that bribery is considered a much more serious offense than tax evasion in Yemen. The most serious offense was Islamic abuse, followed by murder and drug trafficking.

McGee, Gelman and Tarangelo (2014) solicited the opinions of nearly 600 students at a university in South Florida, USA that listed 75 offenses. They were asked to assign a number to each offense ranging from 1 (not serious) to 100 (extremely serious). The items were then ranked from 1 to 75 based on their mean scores. The bribery items were ranked as follows:

22 Paying a bribe when pressured to do so

23 Offering to pay a bribe

29 Soliciting a bribe

30 Accepting an unsolicited bribe.

The fact that all four bribe items ranked in the top 30 indicated that they were considered to be less serious than the average offense. The four kinds of bribes were clumped together in the 22-30 range. Paying a bribe when pressured to do so was considered to be the least serious offense

in the bribe category. Accepting an unsolicited bribe and soliciting a bribe were considered the most serious kinds of bribe, but still not very serious compared to the other offenses in the survey.

A study of 83 countries found that women were either significantly more opposed to bribery or somewhat more opposed in in 80% of all cases. Men were significantly more opposed in only five countries – Egypt, Ethiopia, Norway, Tajikistan and the United States (McGee & Benk, 2023a).

The present study used World Survey data for Greece, which included 19 moral issues.

Methodology

The World Values Survey (WVS) is an internationally organized research effort by many social scientists in many countries, the goal of which is to gather data on a wide range of economic, social, political, religious and cultural values. The first survey was conducted in 1981. New surveys are conducted about every five years. The current survey data [Wave 7] were collected between 2017-2022. The survey instrument included hundreds of questions on a wide range of issues. Data were collected in face-to-face interviews in respondents' homes, either by paper questionnaire or by CAPI (Computer Assisted personal Interview). Telephone interviews were conducted for remote areas. The sample size for each country was generally at least 1200. In Wave 7, more than 150,000 surveys were conducted in more than 90 countries. Data were collected in a way that made it impossible to identify individual respondents.

The present study used the World Values Survey data questions 177-195. Each question asked whether “X” could ever be justified. The scale was from:

1 = Never justifiable to

10 = Always justifiable

Findings

The findings are presented below. Table 1 lists the moral issues, along with their means, standard deviations and sample sizes.

Q	Offense	Mean	Std. Dev.	n
177	Claiming government benefits to which you are not entitled	1.62	1.33	1200
178	Avoiding a fare on public transport	2.44	2.15	1200
179	Stealing property	1.15	0.75	1200
180	Cheating on taxes	1.67	1.46	1200
181	Accepting a bribe in the course of duties	1.40	1.17	1200
182	Homosexuality	4.67	3.06	1200
183	Prostitution	3.95	2.71	1200
184	Abortion	4.52	2.88	1200
185	Divorce	6.87	2.60	1200
186	Sex before marriage	7.36	2.75	1200
187	Suicide	1.83	1.72	1200
188	Euthanasia	3.00	2.50	1200
189	For a man to beat his wife	1.13	0.65	1200
190	Parents beating children	1.22	0.79	1200
191	Violence against other people	1.19	0.74	1200
192	Terrorism as a political, ideological or religious mean	1.15	0.63	1200
193	Having casual sex	5.29	3.04	1200
194	Political violence	1.48	1.27	1200
195	Death penalty	2.43	2.10	1200

Ranking

Table 2 ranks the relative seriousness of the moral acts that were included in the survey instrument. Wife beating was deemed the most serious offense, followed by stealing property, with terrorism in third place. Sex before marriage was deemed the least serious moral offense, with divorce tanked in 18th place. Accepting a bribe in the course of duties ranked 6th, which was somewhat less serious than parents beating children and somewhat more serious than political violence.

Rank	Offense	Mean	Std. Dev.	n
1	For a man to beat his wife	1.13	0.65	1200
2	Stealing property	1.15	0.75	1200
2	Terrorism as a political, ideological or religious mean	1.15	0.63	1200
4	Violence against other people	1.19	0.74	1200
5	Parents beating children	1.22	0.79	1200
6	Accepting a bribe in the course of duties	1.40	1.17	1200
7	Political violence	1.48	1.27	1200
8	Claiming government benefits to which you are not entitled	1.62	1.33	1200
9	Cheating on taxes	1.67	1.46	1200
10	Suicide	1.83	1.72	1200
11	Death penalty	2.43	2.10	1200
12	Avoiding a fare on public transport	2.44	2.15	1200
13	Euthanasia	3.00	2.50	1200
14	Prostitution	3.95	2.71	1200
15	Abortion	4.52	2.88	1200
16	Homosexuality	4.67	3.06	1200
17	Having casual sex	5.29	3.04	1200
18	Divorce	6.87	2.60	1200
19	Sex before marriage	7.36	2.75	1200

Concluding Comments

Results differ for the various countries included in the World Values Survey database. Several studies like the present one will be published shortly (McGee & Benk, 2024). The present study is part of a much larger study that examines the ethics of tax evasion and bribery (McGee & Shopovski, 2024a & b; McGee & Benk, 2023, 2024). The seriousness of bribery in Albania,¹ Argentina,² Armenia,³ Australia,⁴ Brazil,⁵ Bulgaria,⁶ China,⁷ Colombia,⁸ Estonia,⁹ Hong Kong,¹⁰

¹ McGee & Salem (2024).

² McGee & Zhou (2024).

³ McGee & Lang (2024).

⁴ Pardisi & McGee (2024).

⁵ McGee & Petrides (2024a).

⁶ McGee & Jin (2024).

⁷ McGee & Petrides (2024b).

⁸ McGee & Proffitt (2024).

⁹ McGee & Chen (2024).

¹⁰ McGee & Petrides (2024c).

Iraq,¹¹ Japan,¹² Latvia,¹³ Macau,¹⁴ the Netherlands,¹⁵ New Zealand,¹⁶ Taiwan,¹⁷ Ukraine¹⁸ and several other countries will be included. Those interested in conducting research on the ethics of bribery can find summaries of 28 studies (McGee & Benk, 2023b) and 24 studies (McGee & Benk, 2023c) online.

Robert W. McGee is a professor at the Broadwell College of Business and Economics, Fayetteville State University, USA. He has earned 23 academic degrees, including 13 doctorates from universities in the USA and four European Countries, and has completed the certificate program in tai chi from the Harvard Medical School. He has published more than 60 books, including several novels, and more than 1000 articles, book chapters, conference papers and working papers. Various studies have ranked him #1 in the world for both accounting ethics and business ethics scholarship. He is an attorney and CPA (retired) and has worked or lectured in more than 30 countries. He drafted the accounting law for Armenia and Bosnia and reviewed the accounting law for Mozambique. He was in charge of assisting the Finance Ministries of Armenia and Bosnia convert their countries to International Financial Reporting Standards. He is also a world champion in taekwondo, karate, kung fu and tai chi (both Yang and Sun styles) and has won more than 900 gold medals.

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¹² McGee & Wei (2024).

¹³ McGee & Brown (2024).

¹⁴ McGee & Yew (2024).

¹⁵ McGee & Pardisi (2024).

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