

# How Serious is Bribery? A Survey of Polish Opinion\*

**Robert W. McGee**  
**Fayetteville State University**

**Monica Violeta Achim**  
**Babeş-Bolyai University**

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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 Poland were used to compare bribery to 12 other moral issues. Respondents were asked to select a number from 1 to 10, where 1 = never justifiable and 10 = always justifiable. Divorce was deemed to be the least serious moral act. Bribery was considered to be the most serious. Tax evasion ranked second, slightly less serious than bribery, 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

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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, 2023a, 2024). This study reports the results of a survey of Polish 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?”

The severity of something must necessarily be compared to the severity of something else, either implicitly or explicitly, in order to grasp where the act stands in relation to other acts. One purpose of the present study is to do that. The various acts of questionable morality that were included in the World Values Surveys are compared and ranked for comparison purposes.

One reason for doing so has to do with the application of a legal theory, which holds that the punishment should fit the crime (Durham, 1986; McPhail, 2018; Orey, 2015; Tongue, 2015). Punishments for any offense must not be more severe than what is called for based on the nature of the offense.

A few studies along the lines of the present study have been conducted in various places. A Polish study conducted by Ross & McGee (2012a) ranked the seriousness of 11 moral acts as follows:

**RANKED – Most serious to least serious**

- 1 Wife beating
- 2 Accepting a bribe in the course of duties
- 3 Claiming government benefits to which you are not entitled (tie)
- 3 Suicide (tie)
- 5 Cheating on taxes if you have a chance
- 6 Avoiding a fare on public transport (tie)
- 6 Prostitution
- 8 Abortion
- 9 Homosexuality
- 10 Euthanasia
- 11 Divorce

Bribery was ranked second, less serious than wife beating but more serious than all of the other moral acts.

A South African study conducted by Ross and McGee (2012b) ranked the moral acts as follows:

RANKING – Most to least serious

- 1 Accepting a bribe in the course of duties (tie)
- 1 Suicide (tie)
- 1 Wife beating (tie)
- 4 Cheating on taxes if you have a change (tie)
- 4 Prostitution (tie)
- 6 Claiming government benefits to which you are not entitled (tie)
- 6 Abortion (tie)
- 8 Avoiding a fare on public transport
- 9 Homosexuality
- 10 Euthanasia
- 11 Divorce

Accepting a bribe was seen to be more serious than any of the other acts.

A study by McGee, Gelman and Tarangelo (2014) of business school students at a university in Miami found that various forms of bribery were not considered to be very serious offenses. Of the 75 offenses that were included in their survey instrument, the various bribery offenses ranked as follows [1 = least serious, 75 = most serious]:

- 22 Paying a bribe when pressured to do so.
- 23 Offering to pay a bribe.
- 29 Soliciting a bribe.
- 30 Accepting an unsolicited bribe.

These results are interesting for several reasons. For one, all forms of bribery were clumped closely together. Although some acts of bribery were deemed to be more serious than others, none were considered very serious compared to the other offenses, judging from the relatively low ranking.

## **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 of the 13 moral questions that were included in the Polish survey. Each question asked whether "X" could ever be justified. The scale was from:

1 = Never justifiable to

10 = Always justifiable

## **Findings**

Table 1 lists the questions in numerical order, along with their means, standard deviations and sample sizes. The World Values Surveys distributed to some countries included 19 moral issues. The Polish version included just 13 of those 19 issues.

<b>Table 1</b>				
<b>Relative Seriousness of Offenses</b>				
<b>(1 = Never justifiable; 10 = Always justifiable)</b>				
Q	Offense	Mean	Std. Dev.	n
177	Claiming government benefits to which you are not entitled	2.04	1.92	1358
178	Avoiding a fare on public transport	2.47	2.32	1358
179	Stealing property	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
180	Cheating on taxes	1.56	1.43	1358
181	Accepting a bribe in the course of duties	1.28	1.02	1358
182	Homosexuality	3.98	3.43	1358
183	Prostitution	2.48	2.42	1358
184	Abortion	3.79	2.93	1358
185	Divorce	5.27	3.1	1358
186	Sex before marriage	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
187	Suicide	2.72	2.5	1358
188	Euthanasia	4.34	3.24	1358
189	For a man to beat his wife	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
190	Parents beating children	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
191	Violence against other people	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
192	Terrorism as a political, ideological or religious mean	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
193	Having casual sex	3.27	2.78	1358
194	Political violence	1.6	1.53	1358
195	Death penalty	4.16	3.24	1358

## Ranking

Table 2 ranks the relative seriousness of the moral acts that were included in the survey instrument. Interestingly, the Polish sample ranked accepting a bribe in the course of duties as the most serious offense, while cheating on taxes ranked second. It is a result that may be of interest only to a small group of economic philosophers, because not all bribery constitutes an unethical act if one applies the principles of either utilitarian ethics or deontology. Bribing a prison guard to allow a political prisoner who is wrongly accused to escape is an example of helping hand bribery (McGee & Block, 2023). Such acts of bribery allow good things to happen, and thus are not immoral. The Rothbard-Block Theory of Bribery (McGee, 2023) goes a bit farther. It would classify bribes that do not breach a fiduciary duty and that do not violate anyone's rights to be an ethical act.

Rank	Offense	Mean	Std. Dev.	n
1	Accepting a bribe in the course of duties	1.28	1.02	1358
2	Cheating on taxes	1.56	1.43	1358
3	Political violence	1.60	1.53	1358
4	Claiming government benefits to which you are not entitled	2.04	1.92	1358
5	Avoiding a fare on public transport	2.47	2.32	1358
6	Prostitution	2.48	2.42	1358
7	Suicide	2.72	2.5	1358
8	Having casual sex	3.27	2.78	1358
9	Abortion	3.79	2.93	1358
10	Homosexuality	3.98	3.43	1358
11	Death penalty	4.16	3.24	1358
12	Euthanasia	4.34	3.24	1358
13	Divorce	5.27	3.1	1358
14	Stealing property	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
15	For a man to beat his wife	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
16	Parents beating children	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
17	Violence against other people	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
18	Terrorism as a political, ideological or religious mean	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
19	Sex before marriage	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.

## 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, 2023a, 2024). The seriousness of bribery in Albania,<sup>1</sup> Argentina,<sup>2</sup> Armenia,<sup>3</sup> Australia,<sup>4</sup> Brazil,<sup>5</sup> Bulgaria,<sup>6</sup> China,<sup>7</sup> Colombia,<sup>8</sup> Estonia,<sup>9</sup> Hong Kong,<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> McGee & Salem (2024).

<sup>2</sup> McGee & Zhou (2024).

<sup>3</sup> McGee & Lang (2024).

<sup>4</sup> Pardisi & McGee (2024).

<sup>5</sup> McGee & Petrides (2024a).

<sup>6</sup> McGee & Jin (2024).

<sup>7</sup> McGee & Petrides (2024b).

<sup>8</sup> McGee & Proffitt (2024).

<sup>9</sup> McGee & Chen (2024).

<sup>10</sup> McGee & Petrides (2024c).

Iraq,<sup>11</sup> Japan,<sup>12</sup> Latvia,<sup>13</sup> Macau,<sup>14</sup> the Netherlands,<sup>15</sup> New Zealand,<sup>16</sup> Taiwan,<sup>17</sup> Ukraine<sup>18</sup> 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.

**Monica Violeta ACHIM** is full professor and doctoral supervisor in the field of Finance at the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Administration. Babeş-Bolyai University. Cluj-Napoca. Romania. With over 24 years of experience in academia, she has published as author and co-author. over 150 scientific articles and 25 books. Her most recent reference work is the book Economic and Financial Crime. Corruption. Shadow Economy and Money Laundering. published by Springer. In 2020 she earned an Award for Excellence in Scientific Research at Babeş-Bolyai University. Faculty of Economics and Business Administration. Cluj-Napoca. Romania. in recognition of the results obtained in her research activity. She heads a big grant titled “Intelligent analysis and prediction of economic and financial crime in a cyber-dominated and interconnected business world.” conducted over the period 2021-2023. financed from the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research. CNCS - UEFISCDI. project number PN-III-P4-ID-PCE-2020-2174 ([www.fincrimenet.net](http://www.fincrimenet.net)).

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<sup>15</sup> McGee & Pardisi (2024).  
<sup>16</sup> McGee, Pardisi & Petrides (2024).  
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