

How Serious is Bribery? A Survey of Romanian 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 Romania 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. Terrorism was considered to be the most serious. Bribery ranked 6th, slightly less serious than suicide and stealing property, and somewhat more serious than political violence and parents beating children. 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

It is a basic principle of many legal systems that the punishment should fit the crime. In Victor Hugo's novel, *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean was given a long prison sentence for stealing a loaf of bread (Hugo, 2012). By today's standards, that punishment would be seen as too severe. There is widespread agreement that certain crimes deserve a certain punishment, within certain parameters, although legal scholars often disagree about some of the details (Dionne, 2008; Hirsch, 1990; Nash, 1991; Serajzadeh, 2008).

The present paper addresses the question, "How serious is bribery?" A logical response to the question might be, "Compared to what?" In order to get a better grasp of the issue, one might compare the severity of bribery to some other crimes. Luckily, some scholars have already plowed that field.

A study soliciting the views of German business students on six ethical issues (McGee, et al., 2009) concluded that accepting a bribe was the least acceptable act, followed by buying stolen goods and claiming government benefits to which you are not entitled. The two tax questions – cheating on taxes if you have a chance and paying cash for services to avoid taxes – ranked fourth and fifth, respectively. Avoiding a fare on public transport was deemed to be the least unethical act from the list.

Gupta and McGee (2010) solicited the views of 967 undergraduate and graduate accounting, business and economics, law and medical students and faculty in New Zealand. The five crimes included in the survey instrument were ranked as follows:

RANKING – Most to least serious

- 1 Accepting a bribe.
- 2 Claiming government benefits to which you're not entitled.
- 3 Avoiding a fare on public transport.
- 4 Tax cheating.
- 5 Prostitution.

Bribery was deemed to be the most serious of the five offenses. Perhaps prostitution was ranked last because prostitution is legal in New Zealand.

Ross and McGee (2011) published a survey of Malaysian opinion using World Values Survey data for 11 moral acts. The results are reported below:

RANKING – Most to least serious [Mean score rounded to one decimal place accounts for the ties.]

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

Accepting a bribe was ranked in the middle of the 11 acts, which makes it an average crime, somewhat less serious than wife beating and suicide and more serious than euthanasia and cheating on taxes.

The present study examines and ranks 19 acts, using the World Values Study data for Romania.

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 (Haerpfer et al., 2020). 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 results are presented in Table 1, listed numerically.

Q	Offense	Mean	Std. Dev.	n
177	Claiming government benefits to which you are not entitled	2.24	2.33	2792
178	Avoiding a fare on public transport	2.11	2.19	2827
179	Stealing property	1.51	1.54	1233
180	Cheating on taxes	2.49	2.64	2810
181	Accepting a bribe in the course of duties	1.64	1.68	2817
182	Homosexuality	2.25	2.32	2716
183	Prostitution	2.07	2.12	2772
184	Abortion	3.21	2.76	2745
185	Divorce	4.43	3.14	2762
186	Sex before marriage	4.72	3.29	1167
187	Suicide	1.63	1.69	2789
188	Euthanasia	2.65	2.83	2707
189	For a man to beat his wife	1.41	1.31	1235
190	Parents beating children	1.77	1.59	1236

191	Violence against other people	1.40	1.20	1234
192	Terrorism as a political, ideological or religious mean	1.31	1.17	1220
193	Having casual sex	2.79	2.76	2744
194	Political violence	1.70	1.84	2781
195	Death penalty	2.72	2.84	2760

Ranking

Table 2 ranks the relative seriousness of the moral acts that were included in the survey instrument. Terrorism was considered the most serious of the 19 acts. Sex before marriage was the least serious. Bribery ranked 6th, slightly less serious than suicide and stealing property, and slightly more serious than political violence and parents beating children.

Table 2				
Relative Seriousness of Offences				
(Most serious to least serious)				
(1 = Never justifiable; 10 = Always justifiable)				
Rank	Offense	Mean	Std. Dev.	n
1	Terrorism as a political, ideological or religious mean	1.31	1.17	1220
2	Violence against other people	1.40	1.2	1234
2	For a man to beat his wife	1.41	1.31	1235
4	Stealing property	1.51	1.54	1233
5	Suicide	1.63	1.69	2789
6	Accepting a bribe in the course of duties	1.64	1.68	2817
7	Political violence	1.70	1.84	2781
8	Parents beating children	1.77	1.59	1236
9	Prostitution	2.07	2.12	2772
10	Avoiding a fare on public transport	2.11	2.19	2827
11	Claiming government benefits to which you are not entitled	2.24	2.33	2792
12	Homosexuality	2.25	2.32	2716
13	Cheating on taxes	2.49	2.64	2810
14	Euthanasia	2.65	2.83	2707
15	Death penalty	2.72	2.84	2760
16	Having casual sex	2.79	2.76	2744
17	Abortion	3.21	2.76	2745
18	Divorce	4.43	3.14	2762
19	Sex before marriage	4.72	3.29	1167

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,¹ Argentina,² Armenia,³ Australia,⁴ Brazil,⁵ Bulgaria,⁶ China,⁷ Colombia,⁸ Estonia,⁹ Hong Kong,¹⁰ 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.

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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).

¹¹ McGee, Brown & McCrowre (2024).

¹² McGee & Wei (2024).

¹³ McGee & Brown (2024).

¹⁴ McGee & Yew (2024).

¹⁵ McGee & Pardisi (2024).

¹⁶ McGee, Pardisi & Petrides (2024).

¹⁷ McGee & Souissi (2024).

¹⁸ McGee & Benk (2024a).

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