

THE ETHICS OF ACCEPTING A BRIBE: AN EMPIRICAL CASE STUDY OF TURKEY

ABSTRACT

This study presents the results of an empirical study of attitudes toward bribe taking in Turkey. The authors constructed a survey instrument that asked whether accepting a bribe in the course of one's duties was justifiable. Respondents were asked to select a number from 1 (never justifiable) to 10 (always justifiable) to reflect their views on this issue. The sample consisted of 399 business and economics students at a university in Turkey. Results were analyzed overall as well as in terms of gender. The study found that accepting a bribe in the course of one's duties was almost never justifiable. The views of males and females were not significantly different.

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INTRODUCTION

One might assume, a priori, that bribery is always unethical. The perception is that the person accepting or soliciting a bribe is abusing power to obtain something for nothing, or that the person paying the bribe is being exploited. That is often the case. However, an examination of the literature finds that there are exceptions to this general perception.

While some scholars take the position that bribery is always unethical (James, 2001; Logue, 2005), Roy & Singer (2006) raise the issue of whether bribing a jailer so that a concentration camp prisoner can be released might be an ethical act in cases where the government is evil or corrupt. One may fine-tune this case by taking the position that the person paying the bribe is acting ethically, while the person accepting the bribe may be acting unethically, provided there is a duty not to release prisoners. However, the situation becomes more complicated if the prisoner should not be there in the first place. The point is that bribery may not always be considered an unethical practice. There may be instances where bribery can be considered an ethical act.

Another factor that must be considered is the issue of choice. In order to commit a moral (or immoral) act, there must be choice. One must be able to choose to act or not act, or to act in a certain way, before the decision can be labeled as moral or immoral. Where there is no possibility of choice, the act cannot be either moral or immoral. Thus, in cases where a bribe is no more than extortion, the person paying the bribe cannot be said

to be acting immorally because there is no choice in the matter.

One might usually assume that the person soliciting the bribe in such a case is automatically acting unethically, but such may not always be the case. If the individual soliciting the bribe is offering to circumvent the bureaucracy, which would make life easier for the individual paying the bribe, it could be argued that the recipient of the bribe is performing an ethical act, and is merely charging for the service. If the bribe taker is performing a valuable service, it could be argued that he or she is entitled to payment, and that refusal to pay for the valuable service after it is rendered could be considered unethical. Houston (2007) points out that offering to assist someone to circumvent a bad law, or helping to lubricate the flow of commerce (Kaufmann & Wei, 2000) in cases where there are few legal options, can have a positive effect on trade and the local economy, which would meet the utilitarian ethics test.

One strain of utilitarian ethical thought takes the position that what is efficient is ethical (Frey, 1984; Goodin, 1995; Posner, 1983, 1998). While this position can be challenged, it is a position that has been taken in the literature. Thus, in cases where bribery helps an economy to work more efficiently, the argument can be made that bribery is ethical. Bribery might even have an effect on the rate of economic growth (Mauro, 1995; Sanyal & Samanta, 2010) or on foreign direct investment (Egger and Winner, 2005), although too much of the wrong kind of bribery might have a negative effect. It might depend on whether the bribery is considered a helping hand or a greedy hand (Egger & Winner, 2005). Where the bribe taker does not provide a corresponding

benefit, the effect on FDI might be negative, whereas if the bribe taker provides a benefit, the effect might be positive. Assisting a buyer or seller to avoid red tape or bureaucratic hassles has value. Thus, paying for such assistance might not be considered an unethical act, either from the perspective of the payer or the receiver of the payment.

Johnson (2009) suggests that in cases where bribery reduces transaction costs, it might be a beneficial thing, and thus a benefit to consumers. Reducing transaction costs can be viewed as increasing economic efficiency. However, paying bribes may not always increase efficiency. Kaufmann & Wei (2000) found that companies that pay more in bribes spend more time negotiating with bureaucrats, and have a higher cost of capital.

Sometimes determining whether a particular act is ethical or unethical depends on which set of ethical principles one applies. Perhaps applying utilitarian ethical principles would lead one to conclude that an act is ethical, while applying rights theory or virtue ethics would lead to a different conclusion. Wong & Beckman (1992) developed a bribery model that applies both utilitarian and Kantian ethical principles to a wide range of ethical issues. Sometimes the conclusions differ, depending on which set of ethical principles one applies.

Utilitarian ethics has been criticized on several grounds (McGee, 1994, 1997; Rothbard, 1970). For one, it is not always possible to measure gains and losses. Thus, if one begins with the premise that an act is ethical if the gains exceed the losses, which is one of the premises of utilitarian ethics, it is not possible to determine whether an act is ethical if gains and losses cannot be measured.

Another criticism of utilitarian ethics is that it is not always possible to identify all the winners and losers (Bastiat, 1968; McGee, 1994, 1997). If an act is considered ethical if there are more winners than losers, one may not be able to determine if an act is ethical if some winners and losers cannot be identified. A third criticism of utilitarian ethics is that property and other rights are totally disregarded in the utilitarian calculus (Bentham, 1843; Rothbard, 1970; McGee, 1994, 1997).

There may also be a conflict between duty and utility. For example, if General Motors made an automobile that exploded on impact (Nader, 1965), applying utilitarian ethics might lead one to conclude that the company should continue to make the car if the losses from lawsuits were less than the profits to be made from selling the car. If one applied Kantian duty ethics (Kant, 1952, 1983), the conclusion would be that the car

should not be sold, if one begins with the premise that there is a duty not to sell cars that explode on impact. Thus, one may raise the question of whether it would be ethical to bribe a government inspector to ignore the design defect so that the car can continue to be sold. A utilitarian might conclude that the bribe would be ethical, whereas applying duty ethics would result in the opposite conclusion.

A study of managers' ethical behavior found that most managers tend to be utilitarians (Premeaux & Mondy, 1993). However, a later study by one of the same authors (Premeaux, 2004) found that, although managers still tended to be utilitarians, there has been a shift toward duty ethics, perhaps because of lawsuits, or perhaps because of the belief that one should do the right thing regardless of personal benefit. These two studies also examined a number of demographic variables. They found that, in general, views did not differ significantly by gender, marital status, race, region, income level, religion, political affiliation, education or size or type of company. However, those who were within five years of retirement tended to apply duty ethics or rights theory.

Another approach to determining whether an act is ethical is to apply virtue ethics (Aristotle, 2002; Baron, Pettit & Slote, 1997), which asks the question, "Does the act result in human flourishing?" This question is similar to asking whether the gains exceed the losses or whether the winners exceed the losers, but it is not quite the same question. One application of virtue ethics might be the effect that bribery has on foreign direct investment (Egger & Winner, 2005). In cases where bribery acts as a helping hand, the effect on foreign direct investment might be beneficial, whereas in cases where bribery is seen as a greedy hand, the conclusion might be that it hampers foreign direct investment (Egger & Winner, 2005). Some studies have found that bribery has an adverse effect on FDI (Cuervo-Cazurra, 2008; Mauro, 1995), but other studies have not found that to be the case (Colombatto, 2003). A study by Egger & Winner (2005) of 73 developed and less developed countries found that FDI increased with corruption, and that corruption stimulated FDI.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the present study was to determine attitudes toward bribery in Turkey. A survey was distributed to 399 students and faculty at Zonguldak Karaelmas University in Turkey. Respondents were asked whether they thought it was justifiable to accept a bribe in the

course of one's duties using a 10-point Likert Scale, where 1 = never justifiable and 10 = always justifiable.

FINDINGS

The overall mean score was 1.42, which indicates that accepting a bribe in the course of one's duties was viewed as almost never being justifiable.

Table 1 shows the demographics of the sample. Most students were young, unmarried, Muslim, undergraduate business and economics students.

Table 1

STUDENT STATUS	
Graduate student	20
Undergraduate student	364
Faculty member	13
Other/unknown	2
Total	399
MAJOR	
Accounting	-
Other business/economics	397
Philosophy	-
Law	-
Engineering	-
Other	2
Total	399
GENDER	
Male	132
Female	265
Unknown	2
Total	399
AGE	
15-29	389
30-49	8
50+	-
Unknown	2
Total	399
RELIGION	
Christian	-
Hindu	-
Muslim	397
Agnostic or atheist	-
Other/unknown	2
Total	399
MARITAL STATUS	
Married or in a committed relationship	11
Divorced or separated	-
Never married	386
Other/unknown	2
Total	399

Table 2 shows the data and analysis based on gender.

Table 2

Gender	Sample	Mean	Standard Deviation
Male	132	1.37	1.16
Female	265	1.45	1.61
	p value	Significant?	
Turkey – Male v. Female	0.6129	No	

As can be seen, the difference in mean scores was not significant ($p = 0.6129$). Thus, male and female views were not significantly different. Differences for the other demographic variables were not tested for significance, since the sample was overwhelmingly young, single, Muslim, undergraduate business and economics students.

A few other studies have examined demographic variables in connection with bribery. Swamy et al. (2001) looked at the relationship between gender and corruption and found that women were less involved in bribery and were also less likely to condone bribery. They also found that there tended to be less corruption in countries where women held a larger percentage of parliamentary seats and where women formed a larger percentage of the labor force. Hernandez & McGee (2013) examined ethical attitudes toward bribery in three Latin American countries and found that women were significantly more opposed to bribe taking, a finding that differs from that of the present study. The Hernandez & McGee (2013) study also found that older people are significantly more opposed to bribery than are younger people; that Caucasians are significantly more opposed to bribery than are blacks; that those for whom religion is an important part of their life are more opposed to bribery; that religious affiliation generally was not a significant variable; that widows and married people were significantly more opposed to bribery than were divorced and single people; that students were less opposed to bribery than were other groups; that degree of happiness was not a significant variable; that healthy people were less averse to taking a bribe than were unhealthy people; that those who placed less confidence in the police or the justice system were more strongly opposed to bribery than were those who had confidence in these institutions.



DISCUSSION

The main conclusion of the study is that there is strong opposition to bribe taking. This finding confirms the finding in the Hernandez and McGee (2013) study of three Latin American countries. It is probably safe to infer that there is strong opposition to bribe taking in other countries as well, although the people in some countries may be more averse to bribe taking than others. Thus, there is a need for further research. Comparative studies of several countries using a survey instrument similar to the one used in the present study would enable future researchers to find the answer to this question. Doing so would make it possible to rank countries in terms of mean score.

Further studies of demographic variables could also prove to be useful and informative. The Hernandez & McGee (2013) study examined several demographic variables. The present study examined gender and found that gender differences were insignificant, which differs from the result found in the Hernandez & McGee (2013) study, which found that women were significantly more opposed to bribery. The present study was not able to measure other demographic variables because of the homogeneity of the sample population. A study examining a more diverse Turkish population would

expand on the results of the present study.

Several studies have been done that examine gender as a demographic variable. The results have been mixed. In some cases, women were more opposed to certain practices (Beu, Buckley & Harvey, 2003; McGee, 2012; Ondrack, 1973; Ruegger & King, 1992), whereas in other cases, men were more opposed (Barnett & Karson, 1987; McGee, 2012; Weeks et al., 1999). In a third group of studies, both genders were equally opposed (Babakus et al., 2004; Callan, 1992; Harris, 1990; McCuddy & Peery, 1996; McGee, 2012; Roxas & Stoneback, 2004; Swaidan et al., 2006). More research needs to be done in this area to determine why results differ by gender.

Another area for future research is to examine opposition to bribery in different situations. One may conclude, a priori, that a bribe that results in helping a company to do business – a helping hand bribe – is not viewed as unethical, whereas a greedy hand bribe that has no corresponding benefit would be viewed as unethical. This assumption can be tested using a proper survey instrument.

Comparative studies of several countries can be made to determine whether certain views are widespread, or whether they vary by geographic location, culture, religion, etc.

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ქრთამის აღების ეთიკა: ემპირიული კვლევა თურქეთის მაგალითზე

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სტატია ეხება თურქეთის მაგალითზე ქრთამის აღების ემპირიული კვლევის შედეგებს, რომელიც ეყრდნობა ავტორთა მიერ თურქეთის უნივერსიტეტების ბიზნესის და ეკონომიკის ფაკულტეტის სტუდენტთა შორის ჩატარებულ გამოკითხვას. გამოკითხვა ეხებოდა ერთ კონკრეტულ თემას: არის თუ არა გამართლებული ქრთამის აღება მოვალეობების შესრულებისას.

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