USA and Mexico: Cultural and Ethical Belief

The survey we are using asks an interesting question: Please tell me for each of the following actions whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between? This question is asked for fifteen different possible actions.

Let’s begin by looking at four actions which can be roughly grouped under the title “white collar crime.” The four actions are:

- Claiming government benefits to which you are not entitled
- Avoiding a fare on public transport
- Cheating on taxes if you have a chance
- Someone accepting a bribe in the course of their duties

We can summarize the salient results as shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 | Accepting false benefits / avoiding fares is almost never justifiable

Country	Age	All (%)		Protestant (%)		Catholic (%)		None (%)	
		False benefit	Avoid fare	False benefit	Avoid fare	False benefit	Avoid fare	False benefit	Avoid fare
Mexico	All	40	44	40	46	40	43	40	45
	Under 30	35	38	43	48	32	37	38	38
	Over 44	47	49	44	48	46	48	54	56

United States	All	74	64	81	71	71	62	68	57
	Under 30	60	45	68	54	62	41	54	41
	Over 44	81	74	85	77	77	73	79	70

Those who selected 1 or 2 against a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 was “never justifiable” and 10 was “always justifiable”

Table 2 | Cheating on taxes / accepting a bribe is almost never justifiable

Country	Age	All (%)		Protestant (%)		Catholic (%)		None (%)	
		Tax cheat	Accept bribe	Tax cheat	Accept bribe	Tax cheat	Accept bribe	Tax cheat	Accept bribe
Mexico	All	78	79	85	83	76	78	79	79
	Under 30	75	76	85	82	72	76	77	75
	Over 44	82	82	81	86	81	81	85	87
United States	All	80	83	88	90	80	84	74	75
	Under 30	69	66	76	76	77	70	63	60
	Over 44	86	90	91	94	83	88	81	85

Those who selected 1 or 2 against a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 was ‘never justifiable’ and 10 was ‘always justifiable’

First of all, one would like to see numbers in every space exceeding 90% of the population who declared that white collar crime is almost never justifiable. But the truth is, you see very few results reported in the 90’s and some of them are less than half (50%) of the population.

Notice that the biggest variations are on the first two questions: claiming Tax cheats and avoiding fares. In Mexico, less than 50% of the population in most of the categories

believe these two behaviors are almost never justifiable. For Mexicans under the age of 30, those who believe these behaviors are almost never justified drops to about 35% of the population, or over 10% less than those 45 and older.

Those in the United States are almost twice as likely to believe these behaviors are almost never justified. Similar to Mexico, those who are under 30 are 15-20% less likely to agree that these behaviors are almost never justified. Interestingly, the percentage of Protestants who agree is over 10% higher than Catholics and Nones.

As shown in Table 2, the answers for tax cheating and accepting bribes are more oriented toward the belief they are almost never justified. The responses from Mexico are consistent in that about three quarters of the population believes they are almost never justified. In the United States, we see some variation. First, those under thirty are from 15 to 25% less likely to state they are almost never justified. We also see that Protestants are 15% more likely than are Nones (those with no religious affiliation) to say that these actions are almost never justified. But even with these differences all categories are 60% and above.

Why do we see that those under thirty are less likely to say these forms of white collar crime are almost never justified? In fact, we also see that in the case of claiming Tax cheats over 50% of young, Mexican adults selected a number between 5 and 10, meaning they thought that the action was almost always or at least more often than not justifiable. We can’t tell from the data the reason for this difference based on age. In this case it could be the well known “It can’t happen to me” attitude held by many young adults; i.e., “I will never be caught.” Or it could be that benefiting from the public dime may seem more attractive to young adults than to older adults who are more likely to be contributing most of that “public dime” through their taxes.

Perhaps the most interesting result is the difference between the answers from Mexico on claiming Tax cheats vs. cheating on taxes. As shown, only 40% of Mexican respondents said that claiming Tax cheats was almost never justified, while 78% said that cheating on taxes was almost never justified. This result is very odd because both situations have the same root effect: taking money from the government. I suspect the huge difference is a result of how the government deals with these two transgressions. Perhaps those who claim Tax cheats are almost never caught or receive a light punishment, while those who cheat on their taxes are often prosecuted and punished.

In summary, a significant number of people in both countries believe that these illegal behaviors may be justifiable in many situations AND those under the age of 30 are more likely than their elders to hold a situational ethics view toward these illegal behaviors. It would be interesting to know how many of these respondents have actually done these illegal actions, but they were not asked the question.