

The moderating effect of religious values between ethics and perceptions of corruption in Peru

1. Introduction

Corruption is present in any sector, whether private or public, involving officials, politicians, private sector workers and the individual behaviour of members of a society (Transparency International, 2024; GRACE, 2024). The perception of corruption is a cultural phenomenon that erodes trust in institutions and can perpetuate a corrupt cultural tradition, which ultimately increases corruption (Melgar, 2010). As more citizens perceive government officials to be corrupt, they become more likely to normalise these practices (de Lancer & Villoria, 2014).

The perception of corruption has economic and social costs. High rates of perceived corruption are seen especially in developing and emerging economies (Transparency International, 2023). Ethics, reflected in political leadership and integrity, are essential in developing countries as a key component in the anti-corruption strategies that these countries are adopting (Zhang et al., 2023; Denisova-Schmidt, 2021). Nations' anti-corruption public policy efforts are intertwined with political and economic issues, considering the costs of oversight of corrupt behaviour and the losses caused by corruption itself (Zhang et al., 2023).

The literature has shown different relationships between religion, ethics and corruption. On the one hand, authors such as Marquette (2010) & Shadabi (2013) show an association between religion and corruption. Other studies show more detail on the relationship between religion and corruption, specifically studying religiosity and corruption (Niu et al., 2022; Gokcekus et al., 2020; Binti, 2019). Miranda dos Santos & Lemes (2022) conduct a cross-country analysis of religiosity and corruption, measured by accounting quality, where they find that the combined effect of religiosity and accounting quality in the fight against corruption is not effective. On the other hand, there are studies that relate religion to a moderating effect between ethics and corruption, with a higher incidence of ethical behaviour on the business and accounting ethics side (Koufie et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023; Agbentur et al., 2021; Agbetunde et al., 2021).

The purpose of this study is to examine the moderating effect of religious values, as manifested through spirituality and religiosity, on the relationship to ethical values and perceptions of corruption by means of the following research question

research: Do religious values moderate the effect of ethics on perceptions of corruption in Peru?

To address the research questions posed, this study uses the database of the seventh wave of the World Value Survey (WVS) and structural equation modelling (SEM), in order to determine the moderating role of religious values in the relationship between ethics and the perception of corruption, specifically in the Peruvian case. In addition, we seek to establish the moderating role of spirituality in the effect of ethics on attitudes towards corruption scenarios in these countries. Finally, the aim is to identify the moderating role of religiosity in the relationship between ethics and attitudes towards corruption in development contexts. In this way, this study seeks to provide an in-depth perspective on the role played by religiosity and spirituality as moderators in the configuration of ethical values in relation to Peruvians' perception of corruption. The findings of this research could provide valuable information for the design of policies and strategies to foster a culture of integrity and transparency in developing countries.

2. Theoretical Literature

Ethics and perceptions of corruption

Corruption can be conceptualised as a systemic characteristic of society or refer to individual acts (Kurer, 2005). Transparency International (2024) defines corruption as "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain" and notes that this phenomenon is adaptive to different contexts and changing circumstances, which evolve in response to changes in norms, legislation and technology.

The perception of corruption can be understood as the ability of citizens to identify and value the existence of corrupt practices (Canache et al., 2019), configured as a cultural phenomenon (Melgar, 2010). The perception of corruption thus depends on how society understands norms and what constitutes a deviation from them (Melgar, 2010). The perception of corruption does not reflect the objective or actual amount of corruption, but also reflects the 'biases', expectations, ethical attitudes and dispositions of the respondent (Pelizzo & Omarov, 2019). Thus, different levels of corruption perception are observed depending on the country where it is observed (Pelizzo & Omarov, 2019). Velasquez (2010) suggests that, although corruption and bribery in most developed and developing nations are not understood as ethical behaviours, there are specific and identifiable cultural contexts in which they may be morally indifferent acts.

Corruption perception is measured in the literature in two ways: expert scores and public opinion surveys (Mungiu-Pippidi & Fazekas, 2020). Perception indicators are divided into two groups, aggregated and disaggregated (Hart, 2019). Surveys such as LAPOP's Americas Barometer (Navia, 2015; Alhosaini, 2022) and World Value Survey (Yaw, 2024; Wysulek, 2019) collect public perceptions of corruption. On the other hand, aggregate indicators, such as Transparency International's and the World Bank's corruption perception indices, combine survey responses and expert assessments to measure corruption (Weber, 2008).

Ethics as a concept is multifaceted (Cliffe & Solvason, 2022). Transparency International (2024) defines ethics as the set of standards of conduct in government, business and society that guide decisions, choices and actions. It is also understood as compliance with laws and social norms - which seek the common good - established by society as a whole, influenced by culture and religion (Wilkinson & Tomalin, 2023; Rodriguez, 2005). However, it is not merely the following of social norms and obligations, but also involves culture and

informal norms, which influence individuals' ethical decision-making (Banks et al., 2022; Pelletier & Bligh, 2006). An individual effect is added to ethical behaviour that goes beyond following social norms and rules, linked to cognitive moral development and personal commitment to the common good (Pasztor, 2015). Understanding ethical behaviour as an active rather than reflexive process that requires recognition, monitoring and active re-evaluation of ethical issues (Banks et al, 2022; Reynolds, 2006).

Ethical and moral values are principles or beliefs that guide behaviour and decision-making and are therefore important for people to live in harmony with others and make ethical decisions (Elsayed et al., 2023). Cook (2022) defines ethical values as "beliefs that provide guidelines for acting correctly in specific roles or for living morally". However, he mentions that not all values are ethical. LeBar (2009) shows that the acceptance of ethical values may vary depending on the situation and personal perspective, especially in controversial contexts. People as individuals, collectives such as cultures, nations, churches, and service organisations possess ethical values (Cook, 2022). These values are reflected in various academic perspectives and articulated in codes of ethics of public servants, private workers and professionals in general (Secretaría General de la Contraloría General de la República, 2020; Blasco-León & Ortíz-Luis, 2014). For example, the core ethical values for social workers, according to Brent-Goodley (2017), include social justice, dignity and worth of the individual, as well as competence in professional performance. Ethical values are thus seen to be displayed in the ethical conduct of individuals, who attempt to make decisions for the well-being of society at large.

Ethics and its effect on perceptions of corruption

The perception of corruption is shown to be a cultural phenomenon, which depends not only on imposed social norms, but also on personal values and moral pathways (Melgar, 2010). Pelizzo & Omarov (2019) mention that the perception of corruption can be influenced by the ethical values and attitudes of public opinion survey respondents, which means that the perception of corruption can have variations between different ethical contexts.

Ethics has implications for individuals' behaviour, expectations and intentions. In this context, ethics can influence their perceptions, i.e. their view and evaluation of their context. Karande et al. (2000) reports that in ethical scenarios, managers in the United States perceive higher levels of intensity than managers in Malaysia to the extent that the decision has consequences for a victim. Tian (2007) finds that the perception of corrupt payments was not affected by either the

moral relativism and the moral idealism of Mainland China's managers, which means that gift-giving as a corrupt action is accepted as a legal business practice in China.

Religion and religious values from spirituality and religiosity

Stausberg & Engler (2016) consider religion as a social construct. Similarly, Greil (2009) refers to the treatment of religion as a cultural resource for which interest groups compete. Beckford (2003) mentions that what is most important in defining religion is not the conceptualisation of religion, but to move away from the concept of religion as a relatively defined object and focus instead on critically examining the social processes by which certain things are considered religious. Schilbrack (2024) compiles studies on the concept of religion and shows that religion should be treated as a multifaceted social reality that can have multiple effects on aspects of a culture. Mellor & Shilling (2016) refer that, from the view of Weber and Durkheim, religion is conceptualised as an extraordinary phenomenon that influences social action by changing the lived experience of individuals.

Religious values are ethical and moral principles derived from the teachings and doctrines of a religion (Carneiro, 2021; Acklin et al., 1983). In these values, people affiliated with a religion seek moral guidance, considering that religious practitioners would show a moral authoritarian view on religion (Fisher et al., n.d.). Religious values are related to concepts such as religiosity (Flavin & Ledet, 2013), with religiosity understood as the constant practice of religious values, religious commitment and the indicator of the level of practice in terms of rituals and values taught by the religion that are manifested in everyday life (Binti, 2019; Mishra et al., 2017), which influences ethical behaviour (Sulamin et al., 2021). Spirituality is defined as a concept distinct from religiosity, focusing on transcendence and the sacred. It represents an individual connection to the transcendental, without necessarily being linked to a religious institution or group (Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008). Religious identity has implications for religious values (Abu-Ras et al., 2022). Alwin et al. (2006) measure religious identity through subjective approaches, capturing religious identities by "non-denominational" and "denominational" reference categories. For their identification, they use the more aggregated question: "What is your religious preference?" from the General Social Survey.

Perceptions of corruption, ethical values and religious values

Religion, like ethics, does not accept corrupt behaviour. Religion in societies also functions as a moral guide, just as ethics does. There is almost no disagreement that all the world's religions encourage moral behaviour.

moral and ethical values of people (Gokcekus & Ekici, 2020). Thus, we would understand that religion and corruption have a negative relationship. Gokcekus & Ekici (2020) indicate that religiosity, rather than religious affiliation, influences corruption levels; thus, the more religious a society is, the higher the corruption, regardless of religious affiliation.

Other authors identify the role of religion as a moderating effect between ethics and corrupt behaviour. Salehzadeh (2024) finds a relationship between spirituality and religiosity moderating the relationship between subjective norms, perceived behavioural control and intention to engage in narcissistic behaviours in organisations. Koufie et al. (2024) & Agbetunde et al. (2021) find the moderating effect of religiosity on the ethical attitudes of professional accountants and on the relationship between contributory attitudes and tax compliance behaviour of entrepreneurial firms, respectively. Samad et al (2021) similarly conducts a study of Islamic religiosity and ethical intentions in bank managers, where they find that Islamic religiosity positively influences managers' ethical attitudes. These studies mostly use the Extended Theory of Planned Behaviour (ETPB) as a measure of ethical behaviour and its prediction.

3. Empirical development and hypotheses development

Marquette (2010) suggests that many people derive their ethical framework from their religion. This is especially true for those who identify as religious, but also applies to those who describe themselves as secular, humanist, agnostic or atheist, as these individuals may be influenced by the religions that are part of their cultural heritage, even if they do not always explicitly acknowledge this influence. On the other hand, one can see the direct effect of ethics on corruption, considering corruption as an ethical problem (Schwenke, 2000). Thus, we see that the variable religion, ethics and corruption can be correlated. This role is shown on a micro scale, such as in companies or organisations, where religious values can influence ethical decisions and ethical behaviour (Agbetur et al., 2021; Kashif et al., 2016; Agbetunde et al., 2022). In this regard, the literature embraces the role of religion as a moderating variable between prior attitudes or behaviour as understood by the theory of planned behaviour and consequent actions, as, for example, in the relationship between a tax payer's attitudes and tax compliance (Koufie et al., 2024; Salehzadeh, 2024; Liu et al., 2023; Mehta, 2021). These studies find that religiosity plays a significant moderating role in ethical intentions and behaviours (Samad et al., 2021; Kashif et al., 2021; Mehta et al., 2021).

In this sense, the following hypotheses are put forward in relation to the moderating role of religion in the relationship between ethics and corruption.

Hypothesis 1: There is a negative relationship between ethics and perceptions of corruption in developing countries in Latin America.

Hypothesis 2: Religious values intensify the negative relationship between ethics and perceptions of corruption in developing countries in Latin America.

Hypothesis 3: Spirituality intensifies the negative relationship between ethics and perceptions of corruption in developing countries in Latin America.

4. Methodology

The World Value Survey (Inglehart, 2022) includes data from 66 countries and territories. This survey implements random and probability samples representative of the adult population of the 66 countries. The Peru survey was developed in 2018 together with Latin American and Caribbean countries such as Colombia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru and Puerto Rico. The study uses wave 7 (2017 - 2022) of the survey as a source of information in order to obtain a measure of the moderating effect of religious values on the causal relationship between ethics and corruption in Peru.

The aforementioned survey includes questions on corruption, religious values and ethical values. The questions regarding religious values that will be considered for this study are as follows: (1) The question regarding religious values in relation to spirituality are "How important is God in your life?" measured on a Likert scale from 1 to 10, followed by the question "Which, if any, of the following do you believe in? God, Life after death, Hell, Heaven" and with which of the following statements do you most agree? The basic meaning of religion is: (1) To give meaning to life after death, (2) To give meaning to life in this world. The questions related to religious affiliation "Apart from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?" and "Apart from weddings and funerals, how often do you pray?". To find out the religious identity of individuals, the question "Do you belong to any religion or religious denomination? If yes, which one? Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, other" (Inglehart, 2022).

The questions related to the perception of corruption are as follows: "Now I would like you to tell me your opinion about corruption, that is, when people pay a bribe, give a gift or do a favour to other people to get things they need or services they need. How do you feel about corruption in your country? On a 10-point scale where "1" means "there is no corruption in my country" and "10" means "there is a lot of corruption in my country". If your opinion is ambiguous, choose the appropriate middle number" (Inglehart, 2022).

Finally, the questions related to ethical values "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement that nowadays one often has trouble deciding which moral standards to follow?" and "Please tell me for each of the following actions whether you think it can always be justified, never justified, or somewhere in between, using this card" (Inglehart, 2022).

An exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis of the study variables will be applied, followed by analysis through structural equation modelling (SEM) to evidence the moderating role of religious values in the causal relationship mentioned above. The magnitude of the practice of religious values will be measured through religious identity, religiosity and spirituality. Corruption through the perception of corruption, indicators set out in the questions corresponding to the World Value Survey.

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