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Cultures' Constraints on Ethical Decision-making: A Call for an AIS Code of Conduct

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What is Ethical Decision-making?

Decisions that are made ethically are, by definition, made in accordance with principles. Examples of such principles are the Categorical Imperative and the Utilitarian formula of maximization. The ethical principles most commonly studied in business were derived from within the Western culture.

What is Culture?

Culture refers to the hidden, often unconscious, learned assumptions, norms, attitudes, and values that distinguishes one group of people from another (Hofstede, 1984, 1994). As artifacts of these values and assumptions, researchers can experience the culture's rituals, heroes, and symbols. For example, one culture's hero is the one who endures ordeal without complaint. A child in this culture learns to value these attributes.

When an individual is encompassed by his or her native culture, its common assumptions and values are considered certainties and so are transparent for the purposes of normal discourse. For example, someone who has been taught throughout life to stand up for one's rights assumes without thinking that individuals have rights. In this way, ethicists and others are unaware of their own cultural bias.

The recognition of culture's relationship to technology is relatively new (for example, Kumar and Bjorn-Andersen, 1990; Kedia, and Bhagat, 1988; Fernandes, 1995). Nelson and Clark (1994) point out that cultural issues are central to IS research. Koopman (1994) compares the relationship between technology and culture to an iceberg. Most of an iceberg is hidden from view, and it is this hidden portion that causes the most difficulty. Technology, the "visible" portion, is built upon a much larger set of commonly-held knowledge, the culture.

What is the relationship between Ethics and Culture?

While both ethics and culture have been studied in conjunction (Izraeli, 1988), their relationship has been elusive. Both ethics and culture deal with the values of right and wrong, good and bad. An ethical analysis discerns what is right by applying logic to relate the situation under question to one or more principles. In contrast, a cultural analysis discerns what is right by appealing to the underlying values, as manifest through the culture's heroes and symbols.

Classic ethicists believe that what is right and wrong is static, that is, it does not change, throughout time or place. For example, if slavery is wrong, it was always wrong and it is wrong everywhere. This is because the principle on which this determination is made does not depend on time or place. (However, ethicists do believe that our collective human capacity to understand right and wrong develops over time and study.)

In contrast, a culture's determination of its values, including right and wrong, is dynamic. For example, the role of women in society has developed in the West as has its view of slavery.

There can be and are conflicts between these two approaches to morality. In particular, some of the dimensions on which cultures differ are those very dimensions on which ethicists from the Western tradition based their ethical principles. This conflict can be named cultural imperialism on one hand or ethical relativism on the other.

The Traditional (Western) approach to IS Ethics

A number of writers have noted that the globalization of information technology (IT) significantly impacts both culture and ethical decision-making (Cohen, 1992; Kraut, Dumais, Koch, 1989; Vogel, 1991, Wilcox and Mason, 1988; Wriston, 1988/9). To understand the nature of the underlying conflict between culture and Western ethical analysis, consider the cultural underpinnings of some basic ethical issues.

Richard Mason (1986) provided the field of Information Systems with an oft-quoted framework for understanding the ethical issues of information. This framework classifies IS ethical issues as involving Intellectual Property, Access to Information, Privacy, and Information Accuracy. Let us consider here the issues of property and privacy rights.

Cultural Bias in Intellectual Property Rights

Ownership of any property, including intellectual property, has a cultural basis. That is, not all cultures hold the Western view that property, including intellectual property, belongs to the individual (Samuelson, 1996).

Cultures differ on a variety of dimensions. Hofstede (1984, 1994) uncovered several dimension by which workers from different national cultures differ. These dimensions include perceptions of the power distance between worker and boss, feminine (person-oriented) versus masculine (thing-oriented), tolerance of uncertainty, and degree of Individualism versus Collectivism. Let us consider this last dimension.

Consistent with Hostede, Koopman (1994) organizes cultural norms along several dimensions. One of these dimensions he calls the *Individualist/Competitive Ethos* versus the *Group Cooperative/Communal Ethos*. Table 1, adapted from Koopman, provides examples of this dichotomy. The Western concept of property rights are based on the Individual/Competitive cultural assumption. In Group/Communal cultures, the concepts of property rights do not exist in the same way as for the Individual/Competitive since the

purpose of an individual's work is to benefit the community. That is, the assertion of intellectual property rights requires an individual competitive cultural assumption.

Cultural Bias in Privacy Issues

Likewise, the culture's concept of the individual as separate from the community affects its view of privacy. For example, in Fiji the high school graduation marks are published in the news paper, while in other cultures such information is considered private. Tradition ethical analysis methods cannot deal with the issue of cultural variation.

Implications Table 1. Adapted from Koopman (1994).

I demand productivity from people.	I prefer to create a climate in which people will be willingly more productive.
I look you in the eye and challenge you.	I bow my head and show you respect.
My concern is for production.	My concern is for people.
Profit for me is derived from self-interest.	Profit to me is a vote of confidence my society gives me for service rendered to that society.

From the above, it is clear that the most commonly used principles for ethical analysis are insufficient to help decision-makers deal with the cultural diversity. What is needed is a better ethical analysis that teases out the cultural from the absolute. For example, in the U.S. driving on the left side of the road is dangerous and so it is considered unethical. However, such behavior is proper in the South Pacific.

Who is to work toward creating such an analysis? It cannot be just those who have been enculturated in the West as their unconscious assumptions prevent them from understanding what those assumptions are. Rather it should be created by a variety of people from a variety of cultures.

Other IS-oriented professional organizations have promulgated codes of ethics (ACM, 1992; ACM, undated; DPMA, 1986, 1988). AIS is a new organization and, unlike others, has an international focus. Therefore, AIS would be in the proper position to establish a cross-cultural code of *behavior* for IS that considers the issues of cultural variation. Only after we can agree upon what constitutes professional behavior can we give more than lip service to the more important issues of IS ethics in our global society.

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