Regional and Societal Influences in Ethical IT Decision Making: A Comparison of US and Australia

Overview. This research investigates how ethical IT decisions are made by IT and business students in US and Australia. Factors that influence such decisions may include personal characteristics, group norms, regional culture, societal expectations, and belief systems. It is postulated that these two countries, one capitalistic-oriented the other social welfare-oriented, are likely to show significant differences in ethics decision processes. A survey was administered to 137 Australian subjects in January 2011. Data were also collected from 320 US subjects. Analyses of the results indeed reveal a difference in the way ethical IT decisions are made. In general the Australian sample tends to base their decisions on social and environmental factors while the US sample tends to base their decisions on financial and personal factors. However some variations were observed among the Australian sample, e.g. response patterns of Australian subjects from larger cities tend to be more similar to those of the US. Findings are discussed in the context of Kohberg's Developmental Theory and Douglasian Cultural Theory. Based on these findings, curriculum guidelines in IT ethics education are proposed.

Methodology. The project started in summer 2010. Weekly meetings were held during the Fall semester of 2010 and are continuing into the Spring semester in 2011. Both students participated in the design and development of the survey questionnaire, using Qualtrics. They pilot tested it so that the survey was ready for deployment. Next, they extracted usable data from the responses of US students captured earlier. The two students then traveled with the faculty mentor to Australia in winterim of 2011 to visit three Australian universities (University of Wollongong, Southern Cross University, and Bond University) in three different cities. They assisted in the administration of the survey questionnaire to 137 Australian subjects and they also conducted a series of more in-depth "in-person" interviews with about 30 subjects. In addition, they interviewed the staff of Gnibi College of Indigenous People at Southern Cross University to gain some understanding on how Australian Indigenous people may approach ethics reasoning. To gain first-hand experience in research, the students also actively participated in the computational and analysis phase of the project. Many tables and diagrams in the research report were prepared by the students.

Significance. Given the pervasiveness of computers and Internet in everyday life and the large number of technology misuses and abuses in recent years, IT ethics has attracted a great deal of attention among IT professionals and the general public. Thus this research on IT ethics is very timely, since the study crosses the boundaries of several disciplines: technology, business, social sciences, ethics, and
philosophy. Its outcome will be of interest to a wide audience. Furthermore, due to the cross cultural nature of this study, it is expected that the findings will lead to a better understanding not only of ethical decision making in the IT context, but also of the impact of regional and cultural factors in ethical reasoning. Technology has a global influence, but in the interface between technology with human society, regional and cultural factors cannot be ignored. The research findings may also have pedagogic value in that they can help formulate guidelines for IT ethics education. A website, http://sites.google.com/site/itethcsaustralia/ was created to keep a record of the activities of the research team in Australia. In due course, we plan to publish our research findings on the site to share with other scholars and IT professionals.

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