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Ethical Framework for the IT and Business Professions

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ABSTRACT

Within an information technology (IT) environment, managerial and organizational influences may affect individual's ethical behavior. Understanding the individual difference in value systems, locus of control, Machiavellianism, and cognitive moral development, helps the IT managers to appreciate the reasons for individuals working within and outside the IT environment aware of the ethical behavior. This paper evaluates applicability of Kohlberg's framework on moral theory that focuses solely on justice-orientated moral approach in the IT profession. Results of semi-structured interviews with two IT managers suggest that the framework lacks flexibility, and needs to incorporate a caring perspective (referring to the content) and a cognitive-structural perspective (referring to the basic assumptions of the model). The caring, concerns, integrity and accountability concepts are important values of the cognitive aspect, the profession and individual professionals in the real world. The finding adds our understandings on the IT professions and societal norms.

INTRODUCTION

Information Technology (IT) personnel's differences in value, locus of control, Machiavellianism, and cognitive moral development, will critically influence the ethical behavior of individuals in the IT environment and business enterprise as a whole. Extent of influence varies from an individual to another and from a business enterprise to another. Solutions to this influence are an IT firm may need to employ individuals who share the firm's core values, to hire those with low-Machas, and to include those with higher stages of cognitive moral development in the firm's hierarchy. In a real world, this strategy may present practical and legal problems. Study shows that continuing staff trainings and developments help enhance cognitive moral of the individuals and a firm's culture (McGeorge, 1974). Gradually, through a firm's systems, and educational seminars on caring and accountability help the individuals to move to a next stage of moral development.

Despite the growing concern of the modern businesses focus and emphasize on care, accountability and ethical behavior, most theoretical frameworks lack these concepts. Theoretical moral frameworks tend to be principles orientated. For example, both Rest's Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1973, 1976) and Kohlberg's Moral Judgments Interview (Kohlberg, 1969; Parker, 1991) merely laid down the stages of individuals' moral developments without considering impact of

the external factors and expectations. More specifically, Kohlberg's moral theoretical framework merely focuses on studying the individuals' ethical reasoning has raised the question of the need to incorporate care and accountability to fit into modern business and societal needs, in particular the respective professional bodies and ethic rules.

This paper critically evaluates Kohlberg's model theory, and suggests the framework to include care and accountability to meet the modern business expectations and rules. We develop four hypothesis based on reviews of the literature and fill these by conducting two separate semi-structured interviews with two IT professionals. We have selected a man and a woman interviewee to test the hypothesis on whether gender plays a role in the caring element of moral development. The interviews help us to further understand the values and usefulness of Kohlberg's moral theory for the IT and business professionals' ethical behavior from a caring perspective (referring to the content) and from a cognitive-structural perspective (referring to the basic assumptions of the model). Apart from cares, the model needs to incorporate both the accountability and integrity elements. The model's moral reasoning and behavioral approach may differ due to the required accountability imposed by the respective professional bodies while different gender may result a different moral reasoning and behavior approach. Results of the semi-structured interviews have implications to the IT profession, business practices, firms' and individuals' moral development and strategies, regulators and the stakeholders.

We organize the remaining of the paper as follows. In the next section, we evaluate the various stages of Kohlberg's moral framework and develop hypothesis. In the third section, we test the hypothesis and analyze the findings. We conclude the paper with recommendations and ways forward.

KOHLBERG'S THEORY OF MORAL

The Kohlberg's moral framework (1969, 1976) maps an individual's ability to make reasoned judgments about moral matters. The judgments are divided according to the individuals' intends to pursue for the acts, in some cases, deem right by the individuals (see Figure 1). This suggests that the individuals continue to change their decisions priorities over time, through education, surrounding influences, confidence, willingness to take risks, experiences, changes in values and ethical behavior. The surrounding influences include those arise from within the firm where the individuals have constant engaged or due to the profession or business practice. In the modern business world, individuals need to observe their respective professional bodies' ethical rules and expectations. In a business context, a firm's culture, and ethics training and expectations shape individuals' and stakeholders' moral development (Mintz & Morris, 2008), moral reasoning and expectations.

Table 1: Kohlberg's moral framework.

Stages	Motives for Doing Right
Pre Conventional 1) Obedience 2) Egotism – instrumental and social exchange Consult others on completion of tax returns	1) Fear of punishment & authorities 2) Self- gratification, concern for oneself
Conventional 3) Interpersonal concordance 4) law & duty (social order) complete & file tax returns on time	3) Role expectation or approved form others 4) Adhere to moral codes, law & order
Post Conventional 5) Individual rights & standards agreed upon by society 6) Self-chosen principles	5) concern for others & broader social welfare 6) concern for moral or ethical principles

Kohlberg's moral framework focuses on the moral maturity evolves from the reasons individuals consider whether an issue is right or wrong (Kohlberg & Turiel, 1971). There are patterns of responses to the reasons a person gives for moral judgments or moral actions. These patterns indicate different orientations that in turn, become the basis for the individuals postulate the various stages of moral reasoning. These stages appear to be in an invariant sequence. In fact, time required to progress through each stage varies according to situations and issues. In theory, an individual follows the stage in a rigid sequence. An earlier stage prepares the individual for a subsequent stage (Kohlberg & Turiel, 1971). However, in a real world, where gaps exist within a firm's internal control system, the individuals may take the opportunities and a higher level of risk to breaking through rigidity of development pattern. This means, an individual may skip from stage two to stage four of moral development due to the individual is under pressure to commit fraud, rationalization (excuses for committing a crime) and egoism. Egoism arises because of the individuals want to prove that a firm's systems of internal control remain weak and breakable. In any case, Kohlberg identifies that there are three levels of moral development.

These are the pre-conventional, the conventional, and the post-conventional. Each level consists of two stages, totaling six moral stages for all the three levels. The distinction between these levels lies in the way the individuals organize and structure their social and moral thinking and associated experiences. The term conventional means conforming to and upholding the rules, norms and expectations of the society. At this level, a firm and its staff strictly obey the surrounding rules, norms and expectations. All the players remain obedient and yet to understand the conventional or societal rules and expectations. However, once the players have crossed over the conventional level and stepped on the post-conventional level, they deem to have a higher level of understanding and accepting the society's conventions, but their willingness to accept depends on the general moral principles that underlie these rules. At this level, the players' level of obedience becomes questionable. In cases where the principles are in conflict with the societal rules, the society will judge the post-conventional individuals by principle rather than by convention (Kohlberg, 1976). Principles normally have a better leeway than the rigidly designed rules. This allows the players to move in a wider space as long as the space is within the acceptable norm of a particular society or environment where the players operate.

Another way of understanding these three levels is to consider them as three different types of relationships between the self and society's rules, expectations and other conventions. Up through stage four, each stage represents a wider and more adequate perception of a society, of the players and of one's relationship to another and, of one's ability to think more abstractly (Duska & Whelan, 1975) and in considerations of the other. At the pre-conventional level, the players feel like 'outsiders against the society', which is perceived not as a unit but a gathering of distinct individuals and firms that comply with the rules. This means the players have a limited and narrow view on a society due to the players' limited exposures, knowledge, skills, experiences (Ferrell, Fraedrich, & Ferrell, 2005), willingness to take risk and lack of opportunity for the players to maneuver the societal rules. At this level, the players do not see any value in the rules; they are simply indicators of what behavior will bring pleasure and what behavior will bring pain. This leads to egoism, and self-identity, self-imposed isolating and selfish players. Their main concern is for oneself due to a lack of feeling of identity within a society or with a group. Once the players have enough of the pains, they will move on to the next level.

The conventional level necessitates the players to move from the concrete egoistic view of the pre-conventional level to a cognitive recognition of the values based on a group, group's practices and group's rules. It moves from an evaluation of actions in terms of consequences to an evaluation of actions in terms of how well they fulfill the expectations of a group in their own right, regardless of the consequences to oneself. The perspectives characteristic of the conventional level involves valuing the group and feeling of belonging to a group in a way that indicates real socialization. Cognitive determinants that move to the conventional level, also known as the ability to role take or to empathize, refer to as the ability to put oneself in the mind and place of another (Duska & Whelan, 1975; Kohlberg, 1976).

By recognizing the existence of others, this reflects the players' willingness to learn and adapt to the groups' culture, practices and believes, while preparedness to forgo one's self interests and needs. When the players move from stage four to stage five, or from the conventional level to the post-conventional level, this does not involve a more adequate perception of what the social system is, rather, it involves a postulation of principles in which a society and self expected to commit. Post-conventional, or principled thinking, involves moving to the most basic principles, laws and written rules. At this level, it is the society and its surroundings that determine whether the players is located in or has attained the post-conventional level. At this level, the players deem outside the society's perspective. Being freed from society's view, the players are autonomous, think for themselves and if there is a need to come to grip with a particular group, an individual must do so independent of the others in authority. This autonomy for Kohlberg is the most adequate ethical or moral posture. The common good of social utility (stage five), the universal ethical principles of justice, of reciprocity and quality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons (stage six), guide the rational considerations and critics in the post-conventional reasoning. Yet, according to Kohlberg, the most essential structure of morality is the principle of justice, focusing on the distribution of rights and duties regulated by concepts of equality and reciprocity (Duska & Whelan, 1975; Kohlberg, 1976).

MODEL AND HYPOTHESIS

Rigidity of the model

The model suffers from many shortcomings in particular, its ethical practice. The main criticism is Kohlberg postulates that all the six moral stages form a structured whole, and each reflects a specific thought organization (Kohlberg 1969). According to some critics (e.g. McGeorge, 1974; Bergling, 1981), this fundamental cognitive-structural characteristic of Kohlberg's stages are not supported by empirical evidence. Others (Rest, Turiel, & Kohlberg, 1969; Rest, 1973) reveal that, although there seems to be some overlap, Kohlberg's moral stages appear as a hierarchy of stages that moral reasoning and behavior based on a rigid pattern, sequence or event. They suggest that Kohlberg's stages lack flexibility in a continually changing process but blocks of sequences with clear distinct stages. In sum, a clear outline of the respective developmental stages helps depict moral development of the players. This line of thought has not applied in the business context, in particular in the IT profession. Based on Kohlberg's model and in an attempt to locate the players' level of moral development, we develop the following hypothesis:

H₁: IT and business environment do not follow rigid stages of moral reasoning.

Social implications

Kohlberg's moral theory posits cognitive development as the only major contributor to moral development (e.g. Gilligan 1982; Belinky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Huggings & Scalzi, 1988; Omery, 1989; Benner 1991). As such, Kohlberg's model (1969, 1976) has ignored both the social experience and emotional aspect of the individual's experiences, such as empathy, love and feelings of belonging. Some commentators (e.g. Haan, 1978; Gilligan, 1982) call upon practitioners to reformulate Kohlberg's stages, in particular the fifth and sixth stages of the moral development with more emphasis on personal context of reasoning before using the framework in the real world. Despite the call, the original Kohlberg's framework remains intact, but just requested for more emphasis on personal context of ethical reasoning in every stage of moral development (Shaub, 1994; Ponemon, 1992). The literature remains silent on whether in a real world scenario, in particular in the IT perspective the players need to follow the rigidity of all the stages of moral development. In view of this, we develop the following hypothesis:

H₂: IT and business environment do not follow rigid stages of moral development.

Justice-oriented morality

Kohlberg's moral framework uses a justice-orientated concept of morality. Kohlberg's highest levels adopt and implement impartial applications of abstracts, universal principles, and justice as the central core of morality (Penticuff 1991). Friedman (1987) criticizes excessive abstractness of Kohlberg's justice orientation because of its omission of morally relevant context details. Both Omery (1989) and Huggings and Scalzi (1988) claim that the impartial approach required by a justice orientation is antithetical to the caring perspective. More specifically, Kohlberg's moral concept does not portray the moral element of caring and connectedness. Caring and connectedness are essential elements for most, if not all, business transactions and

services. According to Gilligan (1982), care and responsibility within personal relationships are just as necessary as, and as good moral thinking as abstract reasoning, autonomy and concern for justice. Gilligan (1982) concludes that moral development and reasoning of women and men differ. Women's moral reasoning emphasize on caring for themselves and others, maintaining relationships, responsible, self-sacrificing, non-violence, and placing more weight on contextual details rather than on abstract rules and principles. In contrast, men's moral reasoning tend to focus on justice orientation, reflecting upon the themes inherent in Kohlberg's theory (Peter & Galop, 1994). However, a lack of the literature in the business context, in particular the IT profession, has led us to construct the following hypothesis based on whether Kohlberg's justice-oriented moral theory is applicable in the real world. We have also included the gender issue in the hypothesis.

H₃: IT and business environment do not rigidly follow the justice-oriented concept on moral development, and gender is not a key issue on the justice orientation.

Moral reasoning and moral behavior

Kohlberg's model assumes a strong relationship between moral reasoning (and judgment) and moral behavior (e.g. Callery, 1990; Penticuff, 1991). According to Kohlberg, the way the players reason and react in a hypothetical dilemma depends on their actual moral behavior. To act in a high moral standard requires a high level of moral reasoning. A player cannot follow the ethical principles (stage 5 and 6) unless the player understands, complies with or behaves morally. This means a close relationship exists between moral reasoning and moral behavior. Kohlberg admits that personal factors mediate the effects of moral reasoning and moral behavior, but considers moral reasoning as a good predictor of moral behavior (Kohlberg, 1976; Lickona, 1976). Both Rothman (1980) and Blasi (1980) analyze the hypothesized relationships and conclude that there is a relationship between moral reasoning and moral behavior, but the relationships are much more complex and less direct than Kohlberg assumes. In fact, moral reasoning influences moral behavior, but interacts with other situational and personal dimensions. In the business context, in particular the IT profession, the players are regularly involved in the moral reasoning and moral behavior situations. A lack of literature to support the notion of the existence of relationships between moral reasoning and moral behavior has led us to develop the following hypothesis:

H₄: IT and business environment do not rigidly follow moral reasoning and moral behavior.

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

The results of two separate semi-structured interviews with two IT professionals in Houston, Texas. We approached a networking group for candidates of our interviews. In that networking group, five of its members are working in the IT profession. We selected two of the candidates. We then approached them, separately, and requested their willingness for participating in the interviews. Once agreed, we asked for their availability, dates and venues for the interviews, and we insisted of conducting the interview in a place of their choice, including their own work environment, and conducive and relax, feel confident, trust and feel-free to express. We apply the grounded theory of maintaining a familiar environment to the interviewees to enable them

feel free to express their thoughts, views and comments. This process helps us to appreciate and understand what lies behind a specific phenomenon and areas that need further explorations (Glaser, 1992; Parker & Roffey, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.12) state that grounded theory is a process of systematical gathering and analyzing of data through research process, normally, data collection, analysis, and eventually assess the relationships between variables. In fact, Tomkins and Groves (1983) suggest that interviewers could gain more understandings on an issue by leaving the existing environment status quo that is, in its natural setting. Normally, a qualitative approach, including case studies and interviews help suffice this objective. Before we commence each interview, we assure the interviewees for confidentiality of information that they shared with us. We take notes during the interviews and transcribe them immediately after each interview. We discussed the interview notes with the interviewees to ensure accuracy and completeness. We then consolidate the notes from two interviews for all the similar issues, and investigate and follow up with the respective interviewees for any different in views and comments. On average, the interviewees have had nine years of service in the IT profession. Each interview takes an average of 48 minutes. Even though we have invited the interviewees for the meetings outside their work environments, both prefer the interviews conducted in their office premises. The interviewees spoke openly and in a friendly manner. In both cases, the interviewees were obliged to illustrate and substantiate the discussions with examples and evidence.

HYPOTHESIS TESTING

Rigidity of the model

The literature criticizes the model for being rigid in its ethical practice, in the sense that the players follow the six moral stages in a structured and orderly manner. In the real world, Interviewee A stipulates that 'as an IT professional, I need to change my approach in some situations to meet the societal norms, especially for existing and recurring clients. I need to modify the reasoning and behavioral processes to be in line with the industry's expectations and needs.' Interviewee B concurs on this notion and feels that 'I may sometimes skip from the pre conventional level and start from the conventional level. In some cases, I may review my client's situation and behavior and slip from post conventional level to the convention level'. In both cases, both interviewees consider economic downturns as another factor to consider when dealing with clients and situations. Poor economic situation leads to job insecurity, competitions and poor collectability when the payments are due. In those situations, 'I need flexibility in my business approaches when dealing with clients with poor credit history and records.' (Interviewee B). Based on the above interviews, we support **H₁**, that is IT and business environment do not follow rigid stages of moral reasoning. The six stages of moral reasoning are useful references for the business leaders but need modifications due to the surroundings and external factors that may have impact on the business strategies and performance.

Social Implications

Kohlberg's moral theory merely focuses on the cognitive development while ignoring both the social experience and emotional aspect of the individual's experiences, such as empathy, love and feelings of belonging. In the course of our interviews, both interviewees suggest 'the model

needs to incorporate the inter-personal relationships, past business dealings and internal and external situations, in particular, in the fifth and sixth stages of the moral development.' Flexibility needs to add to the model to secure for new contracts while sustaining for the existing contacts. This is due to 'IT involves lots of interactions with the business professions, society and stakeholders' (Interviewee A), and 'as long as I follow the ethical conduct of the IT profession and operate my business within the societal norms, I think I am okay' (Interviewee B). Despite the calls in the literature and those from the above interviews, the model remains rigid in its format of moral development. In view of this, we support **H2** that the IT professionals and business environment do not rigidly follow the stages of moral development. Also, there is a need to incorporate the interpersonal issues in the modal.

Justice-oriented morality

In our review of literature, Kohlberg's moral framework uses a justice-orientated concept of morality, and focusing on abstracts, universal principles, and justice as the central core of morality. Excessive abstractness makes the modal irrelevant and impractical in the real business world. Commentators have called upon to include the caring, connectedness, concerns and accountability perspectives in the modal. Also, the literature tends to cite a woman has more caring elements than man. While both interviewees agree that the need to incorporate the caring elements in the model, both agree (one of the interviewees is a man while another is a woman) that gender should not be a case for not instilling caring elements in the course of business transactions. In the case of IT profession, clients do not pay much attention on 'whether I am a man or woman, as long as I deliver the services and products' (Interviewee B, a woman). In view of this, we support **H3** that is, IT and business environment do not rigidly follow the justice-oriented concept on moral development, and gender does not play a key issue on the justice orientation process and moral reasoning. In the modern business context, stakeholders pay for the services and products they have expected for, rather than the gender who delivers the transactions. The gender issue may be relevant for certain profession like nursing (Gillian, 1982). Given that Gillian has conducted the research more than two decades ago, the society's expectations and norms have changed and moved on. Gender would be an interesting issue to look at in future research.

Moral reasoning and moral behavior

In the Kohlberg's model, it assumes a strong relationship between moral reasoning (and judgment) and moral behavior. This means, in a moral dilemma the players need to act in a high moral standard to meet a high level of moral reasoning and behavior. However, if the players consider personal factors in the scenario, this may mediate the effects of moral reasoning and moral behavior. In our interviews, we note that 'personal interactions place an important part in the IT profession, though we spend most of our times on the hardware and software' (Interviewee A). Interviewee B suggests a need to include the 'personal element in the model' to make it applicable in the real world. Based on the literature and interviewees' inputs, we support **H4** that is, IT and business environment do not rigidly follow moral reasoning and moral behavior in the course of business transactions, and a need for incorporating the human element in the model to meet the continuing modern IT situations and challenges. In this context, both interviewees agree that the model serves as a guideline on moral reasoning and behavior, but

emphasize the need for flexibility and human element especially in moral dilemmas. Business leaders need to use 'common sense' (Interviewee B) in many situations to avoid 'annoying clients and stakeholders. The bottom line is to stay within the professional ethical practices and societal norms' (Interviewee A).

Value of Kohlberg's model to business and IT

There is a considerable debate about applications of Kohlberg's moral theory in the real world. Doubts remain on the model on (1) Its moral reasoning gradually changes over time in the direction postulated by the theory, (2) its moral reasoning is primarily governed by cognitive processes and has specific cognitive prerequisites, (3) its development of moral reasoning does not progress only because people grow older, (4) its level of moral reasoning tends to increase when people engage in formal education or specific types of intervention programs, and (5) its moral reasoning influences moral behavior' (Duckett, Rowan-Bower, Ryden, Caisham, Savik, & Rest, 1992).

The lines of inquiries show the needs for assessing applicability of Kohlberg's moral theory in the IT ethical dilemmas and in the real world. In a real world, business contacts, in particular the IT professionals are in a constant contact with their existing and potential clients. The personal encounters expect the professionals to be responsible for and accountable toward the direct stakeholders. This requires duties of care, concerns and accountability. The personal care, professionalism and accountability will eventually help promote the stakeholders' confidence and trust. Kohlberg's theory of moral development serves as a useful guide on the IT professionals' ethical reasoning and behavior. The interactions between the individuals and environment, and the individual's behavior in terms of ethical principles, provide us the basis for assessing applicability of Kohlberg's model in the modern business communities. Though Kohlberg's model primarily focuses on the development of moral reasoning, moral behavior plays an equal part. Both reasoning and behavior affect the decision-making processes, and eventually the communications of decision and information to the perceived clients and third parties. The Kohlberg's framework maps the whole process of confident that the players have in complying with the societal and surrounding norms, but there is a lack of considering care, accountable and integrity.

In a business world, in particular for the case of IT professionals, care, accountability and concerns are essential for the players to remain in business and in contacts with the stakeholders. The abstract, rigid and justice-orientated concept of moral seems inadequate and irrelevant to the modern society. The model lacks principle-based ethics, social and interpersonal relationships, and individuals' care and responsibilities. All these elements are essential for the players to incorporate in their work ethics and reasoning, in order to work, survive and project positive images for the profession (Cooper, 1991) in the real world.

CONCLUSIONS

The above analysis of Kohlberg's framework moral development helps understand how the IT and business professional make rational moral reasoning and decisions based on circumstances and situations. However, the model needs adaptations, and incorporates the caring perspective

and personal and situational variables. Complexity of the IT and business situations and dilemma may force the professionals from arriving at different reasoning and conclusions. Undoubtedly, the model serves as a useful guide to the business world and IT profession. To meet the constant challenges and business situations, business leaders and IT professionals need to behave in a flexible manner with caring, accountability, integrity, and personal elements to maintain business transactions and client-professional relationships. It is essential that businesses should incorporate ethics in their visions and mission statements as a constant reminder to the internal and external stakeholders. Ethical reasoning and behavior should become a firm's culture and serve as the norm for projecting positive images while preserving the reputation of the profession, not necessarily confining to the IT profession.

Future research could expand and explore into how other professions, both in the services and manufacturing, react to moral reasoning and behavior. Another interesting area to explore is any differences between gender, race, culture, religion and political background of the individuals on the issues of moral development. Kohlberg's framework is a useful guide to the individuals, but may need further review and revise in light of the modern business and legal practices and societal expectations and norms.

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