Chapter II

Moral Psychology and Information Ethics:

Psychological Distance and the Components of Moral Behavior in a Digital World

Charles R. Crowell

University of Notre Dame, USA

Darcia Narvaez

University of Notre Dame, USA

Anna Gomberg

University of Notre Dame, USA

Abstract

This chapter discusses the ways in which moral psychology can inform information ethics. A "Four Component Model" of moral behavior is described involving the synergistic influences of key factors including sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and action. Two technology-mediated domains, electronic communications and digital property, are then explored to illustrate how technology can impact each of the four components believed to underlie moral behavior. It is argued that technology can

create a kind of "psychological distance" between those who use technology for communication or those who acquire and use digital property (e.g., software or music) and those who may be affected by such uses (e.g., e-mail recipients or digital property owners). This "distance" potentially impacts all four components of moral behavior in such a way that the usual social or moral constraints operative under normal (non-technology-mediated) circumstances (e.g., face-to-face communication) may be reduced, thereby facilitating the occurrence of unethical activities like piracy, hacking, or flaming. Recognition of the potential deleterious impact of technology on each of the four components leads to a better understanding of how specific educational interventions can be devised to strengthen moral sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and action within the context of our increasingly digital world.

Introduction

We ignore ethics and computing at our peril!

Rogerson & Bynum, 1995

Unethical behavior is pervasive and timeless, as is the question of why people do bad things. What makes some people behave morally or ethically and others not? Psychologists interested in moral development have attempted to answer such questions by examining the psychological components of morality, the elements that work in concert to bring about moral behavior (Rest, 1983). Emerging from this work is a model of moral behavior that identifies the joint action of four psychological processes: sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and action (Narvaez & Rest, 1995).

Certainly, the "information age" has been accompanied by its share of technology-related ethical issues and challenges. Interestingly, many (if not most) of these challenges are not fundamentally new (Barger, 2001). Although there may well be exceptions, information technology appears to have created new and different ways to engage in the same kinds of unethical behaviors seen throughout history, from stealing property to invading personal privacy (Johnson, 2001). Because these issues have been studied and analyzed for years in other contexts, it is all the more important for Information Science (IS) researchers and practitioners to be well acquainted with general principles of moral and

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