



## Acceptable IS Use: Conceptualization and measurement



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### ABSTRACT

We investigate the use of systems in situations that are subjective. In these situations, usage behaviors are often guided by applied ethical perceptions, rather than absolutes of what can or should be done. Using a scenario-based randomized survey, we developed and tested the concept of “Acceptable IS Use” to measure individual perceptions of use in such situations. Our contributions are a) the conceptualization of Acceptable IS Use grounded in applied ethics theories; b) measurement of the construct through a scale with demonstrated validity and reliability, and c) showing that perceptions of Acceptable IS Use can be influenced.

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### 1. Introduction

Defining the use of Information Systems (IS) has been an important topic of discussion in the field. Various types of use, such as faithful use (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994), exploitative and explorative use (Subramani, 2004), applied and adapted use (Barki, Titah, & Boffo, 2007), effective use (Pavlou & El-Sawy, 2006), quality use (Boudreau & Seligman, 2005), deep use (Burton-Jones & Straub, 2006), and accepted use (Allen, Burk, & Davis, 2006) have been identified in IS research.

In recent years, research focus has moved from the study of “use” to the study of “effective use” (Burton-Jones & Grange, 2008). It is indeed important, at least from an organizational perspective, to look at improving how systems are used and how to get people to use information effectively (Jaspersen, Carter, & Zmud, 2005). However, research on effective use is guided by the assumption that the information system use is objective and stable (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991); while the intentionality to use varies in degrees

that are ascribed to individual human traits and states. What if use itself is subjective? We know there are gray areas in certain kinds of systems use. In these situations, actions are often guided by applied ethical perceptions, rather than absolutes of what can or should be done (Cohen, 2005; Frey, 2004; LaFollette, 2002; Singer, 1986). We define the construct “Acceptable IS Use” as an individual perception of usage behaviors that are appropriate from an applied ethical standpoint.

Applied ethics is a branch of ethics, which examines specific controversial issues within certain domains, such as euthanasia or abortion in medical ethics, or social responsibility in business ethics (Cohen, 2005; Frey, 2004). With such issues, there are groups of people both for and against the issue at hand, and there is a distinctly moral component associated with the issue. Normative principles can be applied to argue for and against the issue. The field of *business ethics* examines moral controversies relating to the social responsibilities of capitalist business practices, the moral status of corporate entities, deceptive advertising, insider trading, basic employee rights, job discrimination, affirmative action, drug testing, and whistle blowing. While business ethics are not frequently applied to the study of IS use, we believe that such application may become increasingly important as organizations have to frequently rely on voluntary ethical behavior of employees

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in lieu of monitoring or imposing legal actions. Seemingly innocuous IS use behaviors, such as frequenting social media sites, browsing for leisure, downloading music or using one's own hardware devices are becoming increasingly common in the workplace. In the absence of clear legal guidelines, or entrenched organizational practices, it is frequently up to the best judgment of the employee to engage in, or refrain from, behaviors that may lie on ethical or moral boundaries.

The problem of what is Acceptable IS Use is further exacerbated due to the growing rate of data breaches in organizations that are largely attributed to negligent behaviors of employees (CERT, 2013). Accidental disclosure of sensitive information on social media sites, use of personal devices such as smartphones and USB drives within enterprise networks, and use of cloud-based personal applications such as Gmail and Dropbox, while considered Acceptable IS Use, have been identified as the largest threat to organizational security (Ponemon, 2012). While policies, and even laws, may exist against unauthorized use, many view such behaviors as acceptable.

One such behavior is the use of unsecured wireless networks that are not public. An article in the New York Times illustrated a scenario of unsecured wireless internet use wherein the author admitted to joyriding of her neighbors' unprotected wireless networks over an extended 5-year period (Rubinstein, 2011). In her personal account of internet infringement, the author stated her belief that she was not stealing and that she considered her neighbors' unprotected networks to be "essentially a gift" by virtue of the fact that they were not password protected.

Based on these ideas, our objective is two-fold. First, we wish to define and develop the concept of "Acceptable IS Use" rooted in applied ethical theory. Next, we examine whether an individual's concept of Acceptable IS Use can be influenced. Results of this study will enable practitioners to better understand IS use decisions that are beyond the realm of mandated use. This study is also intended as a starting point for discourse in IS Use within the domain of ethics.

## 2. Theoretical underpinnings

Contractarian ethical theories such as social contract theory and, by extension, integrated social contract theory, provide a normative basis for the development of what is morally acceptable; an ethical code, if you will. However, ethical behavior is a circular, evolutionary process, formed by both what we believe and how we behave. In the study of ethical behavior, normative ethics is concerned with the ways in which moral conclusions should be reached while applied ethics is concerned with applications in particular contexts (Mingers and Welsham, 2010).

Within this circular evolution, what we believe to be ethical influences our behavior and, over time, the behaviors that we observe influence what we believe to be ethical. We examine the evolutionary nature of ethical behavior by drawing on both normative and applied ethical theories to help us illuminate how individuals conceive of and interpret Acceptable IS Use.

### 2.1. Contractarian ethical theories

We start our enquiry of what individuals consider acceptable by using the broad lens of normative ethics. Centuries-old Social Contract Theory (SCT) is rooted in a Rawlsian view of contractarian ethics whereby social norms are constructed through a hypothetical, universally adopted agreement of what is just and acceptable to all. Rawlsian contract theory seeks a set of principles in terms of which free and equal citizens can justify their institutions on grounds that everyone can affirm (Hill, 1995). Rawls' universal agreement is accomplished by introducing a theoretical "veil of

ignorance" behind which players must construct ethical principles which will determine the relational state of society. Using what Rawls describes as an "original position", participants must make decisions, with no specific information about how they would be affected by the outcome, so as to form objective and impartial moral rules which can be universally accepted. Those in an original position essentially construct what Donaldson and Dunfee (1994) refer to as a "macro social contract" of unbiased ethical norms consisting of general terms that would be universally agreed upon by any rational citizen. Fairness is presumably achieved through the requirement of a consensus, by all persons affected, as to the terms of the social contract.

SCT is typically applied at a macro-level to articulate societal moral authority. Historically, this approach has been convenient for evoking broad moral theory; however, in so doing, it has ignored the role of both institutional and individual decision makers in forging workable agreements that govern society (Thompson & Hart, 2006). The weakness in Social Contract Theory is that it lacks the ability to resolve conflicts which would necessarily arise among communities of varying interests and moral priorities. Consequently, a less abstract framework which provides practical normative guidance with respect to specific ethical dilemmas among economic communities is a logical progression. Integrative Social Contract Theory provides such a framework.

Integrative Social Contract Theory (ISCT) prescribes a more defined level of micro-social agreement between members of informal specific communities. Proposed by Thomas Donaldson and Thomas Dunfee (1994), ISCT provides a finer-grained level of analysis to arrive at a framework to allow decision makers to act in accordance with acceptable values, practices and norms within their society. ISCT has been applied at the industry (Maignan & Ferreli, 2004), firm, and social community (Cava & Mayer, 2007) level of analysis. It is based on the foundational premise of bounded moral rationality which recognizes that rational economic actors are incapable of knowing every possible consequence of a particular decision or the moral preferences of all other affected agents. ISCT also recognizes that it is nearly impossible to model our myriad moral convictions and preferences, even when these are well accepted, by way of systematic moral theory (Donaldson and Dunfee, 1994). Given this bounded moral rationality, ISCT provides a communitarian, rather than a universal, approach to ethical interaction wherein similar economic groups are given limited moral latitude which is driven by their individual desires and ethical choices.

### 2.2. Psychological contract theory

A critique of contractarian ethical theory is that it "presumes some set of understood societal obligations by institutions and the people who inhabit them, but does so without examining how people actually construct and make sense of their relationships with one another, with organizations, and with society." (Dunfee, 2006; Thompson & Hart, 2006). While the contractarian theories previously described propose a framework for the construction of moral authority which serves to guide ethical behavior within societies at divergent levels of analysis (e.g. macro vs. micro), neither addresses the inherent idiosyncrasy of individual behavior. In the day-to-day reality of human interactions, decisions must be made by real agents whose individual interpretations of moral authority and personal obligations are unique.

To address the inherent inability of prior contractarian ethical theories to resolve practical moral dilemmas for individual decision makers, Thompson and Hart (2006) propose a "nano-level of analysis" by considering individual 'psychological contracts'. Unlike SCT and ISCT, which are normative ethical theories, psychological

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