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Ethical Codes, Methodological Precepts and Authenticity in Information Systems Development

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Abstract
This paper describes research in progress on the philosophical concept of authenticity – used as a framing device for providing an interpretation of aspects of both ethical and practical action on the part of information systems (IS) professionals. Both ethical codes and prescriptive IS development methods for IS professionals can be found in most developed countries in the world. Here it is argued that ethical codes and IS methods may be of limited value in IS work. Both ethical codes and IS methods are complicated by the need to adopt positions on, and give recommendations about, IS practice. One key problem here is that IS analysts and designers have to intervene in organisations (and thereby intervene in the lives of the members of those organisations). It is argued that an important issue for IS research is whether they choose to do so in (what will be characterised as) an authentic manner, rather than doing so in sincere adherence with either a code of professional ethics or with a series of methodological precepts.

Personal Authenticity and Ethical Codes
Firstly, to characterise the concept of authenticity, a brief explanation will be given. Given that there is a lack of absolute guidance as to how one is to act in any given situation, the question of “what should one do...?” raises severe difficulties. Some sorts of authenticity questions may be familiar to the readers of this paper. As a consultant, the author experienced several authenticity problems; a few are given as example questions here:
1. Should I use a methodology which has embedded values that I do not agree with?
2. Should I use a methodology, which, in my judgement, is wholly inappropriate to the circumstances pertaining in the organisation?
3. Should I attempt to improve organisational performance by introducing greater accountability in a low-wage organisation?

These are difficult ethical questions, and whilst some of these may be covered by the codes of conduct and practice of professional IS bodies, others may not be (see Walsham, 1996). Also, such decisions require degrees of interpretation, and therefore judgements about such matters are likely to vary from person to person. In any case, not all IS professionals are members of professional societies, and not all those members may be aware of the codes of conduct and practice, and no doubt some will choose to ignore such things. More importantly, adherence to any such code is unlikely to be practically enforceable; adherence will therefore have to be "granted" voluntarily by the IS professionals concerned:

In the scientific community the medical specialist has better defined ethical codes than most other groups... They are also enforced by powerful sanctions such as expulsion from the medical profession if serious infringements occur. Many other professionals, including the British Computer Society, have also drawn up ethical codes but these are often vague and difficult to apply and enforce... Ethical responsibilities will also vary both with the nature of work that is being carried out and the nature of the social environment where the work is conducted. (Mumford, 1995, p. 6)

Because the value of ethical codes are limited, the sorts of questions characterised above (which all IS professionals must probably face from time to time) may best be understood as questions of personal authenticity, rather than being understood as strictly ethical questions. Indeed, it has been suggested that, “[T]he concept of authenticity is a protest against the blind, mechanical acceptance of an externally imposed code of values.” (Golomb, 1995, p. 11).

The concept of authenticity is often primarily connected to considerations put forward by Nietzsche (1844-1900):

There is a term Nietzsche himself rarely employs, but which is the most suitable label for a constant object of his philosophical concern - ‘authenticity’... Nietzsche’s question could now be posed as follows: ‘How to live authentically?’ ... comfortable acceptance of inherited values, or comfortable evasions of questions of value, will both do the trick. But these are not authentic alternatives... (Cooper, 1983, p. 2-3)

Nietzsche’s statements and concerns about such issues are a constant theme in his texts (especially 1956 and 1974). Cooper elaborates the concept of authenticity via some examples from teaching. He explicates the problems thus:

A familiar disturbance felt by the teacher arises when some of these [educational] policies, values, or whatever, are not ones to which he can subscribe... The disturbance produces a problem of authenticity, for unless the teacher resigns or is willing to invite considerable friction at work, he must simulate agreement to views that are not his. [Alternatively] ... The thought which may strike the teacher is not that he cannot subscribe to, or
authoritatively transmit, various beliefs and values, but that he has slipped into, fallen into, unreflective acceptance of them. They have become part of the school's furniture; they go with the job like the free stationery. (Cooper, 1983, p. 4)

Such questions are intensely personal, and researching how IS professionals deal (or should deal) with such questions as arise in IS practice will be necessary if real progress is to be made towards the aim of improving IS practice, because slavish adherence to externally imposed codes of conduct is not necessarily a guarantor of ethically proper behaviour (it has been argued).

**Authenticity and Methodological Precepts**

An example of a tension between methodological adherence and authentic systems development practice can be found within the ubiquitous concept of the *systems development life cycle*. This was originally derived from an empirical study by Barry Boehm (Boehm, 1976). The consequent life cycle model has been absorbed into nearly every structured IS method propounded ever since; if it is criticised, it is criticised as being a prescription that does not “work” in practice (whatever the precise form of the criticism takes). The usual criticism runs along the lines that the longer one takes to "get the requirements right" the longer it takes to develop a system at all - and the greater the likelihood becomes that the requirements are "out of date":

> "[T]he development life cycle concept … relies heavily on the initial definition of the problem being complete and correct and that the users' requirements will not change in the time taken to progress to final implementation. In the case of modern complex information-systems neither of these assumptions can safely be made ..." (Lewis, 1994, p. 75)

Nevertheless the widespread use of life cycle methods for IS developments continues relentlessly (although numerous alternative approaches are often propounded). A recent UK survey was conducted to investigate the use of systems development methods (amongst other things). This survey indicated, "Within systems development, 57% [of systems development staff] claim to be using a systems development methodology." (Fitzgerald, *et al*, 1998). The effect of the widespread adoption of structured methods is to remove personal authenticity from the systems development personnel. Lewis argues:

> The legacies of hard systems thinking, such as the idea of the development life cycle, have become so deeply ingrained in IS thinking that only rarely is note taken of the constraints that they impose upon the way we view the development of information-systems. (Lewis, 1994, p. 75)

Now, as received wisdom becomes a guiding force for decision making, so the possibilities for making any genuine decisions tend to evaporate. As Golomb argues:

> In the context of our everyday humdrum lives, it is hard to know what we genuinely feel and what we really are, since most of our acts are expressions and consequences of conditioning, imitation and convenient conformity. (Golomb, 1995, pp. 24-25)

Adherence to methodological prescriptions may provide systems development staff with a convenient set of reasons for not doing what they (truly) feel that they ought to do. The point to stress here is that these motivations (to do what one ought to do on authentic versus methodological grounds) are not identical – they are very different. Indeed, Wastell has pointed out the degree to which the adherence to methodological prescriptions has a value as a defence mechanism for systems development staff (Wastell, 1996). Although the main focus of Wastell’s paper is to demonstrate how it comes about that methodology gets used as a social defence mechanism he also argues that what is actually needed in systems development situations is quite different:

> Many analysts apparently developed a fetishistic dependence on methodology … They appeared to withdraw from the real job of analysis, of engaging with users in an open and frank debate about system requirements. Instead they withdrew into the womb of security provided by the method. They worried about details of notation, of whether the method 1 being correctly implemented and of the need to press on and fulfil deadlines rather than ensure that they had really understood what the users wanted. (Wastell, 1996, pp. 35-36)

This can be interpreted as a failure of authenticity on the part of the systems development staff encountered by Wastell.

**Authentic Intervention**

Many models of authenticity have been propounded, but in this short paper we may consider the Nietzschean approach in isolation. Structured / life cycle methodological precepts make little allowance for the influence of choice on the part of the IS professionals - who will be (methodologically) guided to investigate practically everything relevant in a particular study. Of course, such detailed and thorough investigations are not only difficult to achieve practically, but run counter to the actual social-psychological conditions in which analysts operate. Firstly, on organisational (social) grounds:

The modern organisational environment is a far cry from the well-ordered world of the classical bureaucracy, with its elaborate hierarchical division of labour and highly routinized procedures. The modern organisation, in contrast, is characterised by constant innovation, by flux and fluidity [which] presents a potent challenge

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1In the case study reported in Wastell (1996), the method used was the UK’s SSADM.
to the social defences that characterise the traditional organisation, such as the bureaucratic ritual, which contain anxiety by narrowing attention and by defining rigid roles. The new demands require a broadening of rules, wider boundaries, increased integration and interdependence. (Wastell. 1996, pp. 34-35)

Can the concept of Nietzschean authenticity help us to understand the psychological demands placed on contemporary IS professionals? Nietzsche’s arguments on such issues can be found in Book Five of The Gay Science (Nietzsche, 1974). However, his style of writing does not lend itself easily to the discourse of IS development! Golomb makes the following points – concerning how Nietzsche conceptualised the relationship between authenticity and epistemology - in a clear manner:

An individual’s life comprises a boundless number of experiences and notions, including a tremendous amount of superfluous information. Through awareness of one’s authentic needs one may organise and refine this chaos into a harmonious sublimated whole. Initially the self is a bundle of conflicting desires and an array of contradictory possibilities. The self’s unity is a function of its own decisions and creations… The search for authenticity is seen as the wish to reflect one’s own indeterminacy by spontaneous choice of one of the many possible ways of life. The individual is a kind of artist who freely shapes his self as a work of art. (Golomb, 1995, p. 69)

Prima facie, a great deal of systems development work in a turbulent organisational environment can – indeed must – depend on the authenticity of the development staff if good systems are to be developed. Slavish adherence to methodological prescriptions can only serve to deny the insights and wisdom attained by systems development staff (about the actual needs of the organisation) over many years of experience. Moreover, it can be conjectured that the widespread use of contract IS/IT staff – often with disastrous consequences (Currie, 1995) – is indicative that insufficient attention has been paid, by IS managers, to the role that authenticity plays in good systems development.

Conclusion

This paper has reported work in progress on the philosophical concept of authenticity as providing both a better way of understanding the role played by ethical codes and IS methods, and as way of characterising actual IS practice, in modern organisations. Clearly work needs to be done in organisations to investigate how authenticity is actually mobilised (or not as the case may be) in organisations. Furthermore, the beneficial and/or detrimental affects that authentic activities have on the systems development process should also be investigated.

Although Nietzsche’s version of authenticity has been characterised (very basically, given space constraints), other philosophers and authors of literature have made important contributions to the debate – including Heidegger. Further research would need to investigate these views also. Finally, it should be noted that Adorno (1973) provides a powerful critique of the whole notion of authenticity. This critique is mainly directed against the Heidegerrian version of authenticity. Suffice it to say here that such a critique needs to be taken seriously and warrants further research.

References

References available upon request from the author (s.k.probert@rmcs.cranfield.ac.uk).