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The social dynamics of ethical decision-making in a corporate entity: espoused versus enacted practices

Dorotea Baljević, Julia Prior and Ken Dovey
University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia

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Abstract

Purpose – The research explores the impact of socio-political dynamics upon espoused ethical decision-making within a defined corporate context.

Design/methodology/approach – Adopting an ethnographic research methodology, with data gained from participant observation and interviews by the principal author (as an "insider researcher") over an 18-month period, the research explores the relationship between espoused and enacted corporate policy regarding ethical decision-making.

Findings – The study shows that ethical decision-making in an organisation requires an environment beyond enterprise structures, practices and procedures. In addition to being embedded in a supportive cultural context, ethical decision-making needs to be viewed as an indispensable value proposition.

Research limitations/implications – The capacity to generalise from this research is limited by its defined context: that is, a single global corporation. However, by using an interpretative research methodology, the research shows how socio-political dynamics impacted the execution of espoused policy regarding ethical decision-making within this corporation.

Practical implications – This research should prompt enterprises to rethink the organisational factors, which include values and political interests, that impact ethical decision-making and the responsible/ethical use of data.

Originality/value – Much of the extant research on this topic has adopted a positivist methodology, with few studies exploring the topic in a defined corporate setting by an embedded researcher. This ethnographic study, conducted by an insider-researcher, contributes findings that highlight the role of socio-political practices in the enactment of an espoused policy of ethical decision-making within a global corporation.

Keywords Corporate ethical decision-making, Responsible/ethical use of data, Business ethics, Ethnography, Organisational theory, Insider-researcher

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The nature and scale of unethical behaviour in business is a significant problem (Howard, 1979). Chang and Smithikrai (2010) claim that such behaviour is costing businesses in the United States up to USD50 million annually. This figure may not include indirect costs such as the loss of organisational reputation, employee stress and reduced employee motivation (Mitchell *et al*., 2019).

The research reported in this paper explored the role of social dynamics in the enactment of an espoused commitment to ethical decision-making within a defined corporate context. Given the socio-political dimensions of the research question, the researchers adopted an ethnographic research methodology to address this phenomenon as it pertained to the everyday relational interactions of a broad range of stakeholders within the defined context of a global corporation. Soon into the study, global COVID-19 events resulted in the closure of offices and an increase in "work from home" practices. This impacted the data collection methods conducted in the study by creating the need for a digitally native approach to ethnographic practice that required greater use of digital tools and methods, as well as better understanding

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of digital contexts. Furthermore, the focus of the study on the development of a data-driven digital product required the researchers to be attuned to the nuances of data systems and associated metadata, required by digital workplaces.

2. Literature review

Much of the extant research on ethical decision-making in organisations has adopted a positivist methodology (Craft, 2013; O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005). Thus, a central element of the body of research literature reflects a rationalist approach, with Rest (1984) ethical decision-making model one of the most cited frameworks (Zollo *et al*., 2017). However, Mitchell *et al*. (2019) lamented the scarcity of embedded qualitative studies that explore this important topic within a defined organisational setting. Exceptions include the ethnographic research by Reinecke and Ansari (2015) into the decision-making practices of *Fairtrade International* in the establishment of a fair minimum price for Rooibos tea, and the ethnographic research by Burton *et al*. (2018) into decision-making within the Quaker religious organisation.

Most relevant to this study, is qualitative research into the psycho-social dimensions of ethical decision-making in organisations (Maitlis *et al*., 2013, cited by Beveridge and Höllerer, 2023; Rajeev, 2012; Dane and Pratt, 2007; Haidt, 2001; Forgas and George, 2001). In this respect, Carlson *et al*. (2009, p. 536) define ethical decision-making as a "process by which individuals use their moral base to determine whether a certain issue is right or wrong." This endorses a point made by Jones (1991) that the main elements that characterise such a process are moral issues and how moral agents recognise and act upon these issues. Moral dilemmas – situations in which ethical decision-making is pertinent – have been shown to heighten activity in brain regions associated with emotions (Greene *et al*., 2004; Greene *et al*., 2001, as cited in Umphress and Bingham, 2011). This has provided ground for research into the impact of specific emotions on ethical behaviour. with specific studies on emotions related to morally problematic behaviour. These include the role of envy (Gino and Pierce, 2010); fear (Kish-Gephart *et al*., 2009), anxiety (Kouchaki and Desai, 2015), guilt (Eisenberg, 2000), shame (Treviño *et al*., 2006) and anger (O'Reilly *et al*., 2016). The findings of Celuch *et al*. (2015) reveal regret as having a significant effect on judgements and intentions associated with unethical decisions. Other research has shown that more complex emotions such as desire, disgust, jealousy and empathy, can impact reasoning associated with ethical decision-making (Haidt, 2003; Metcalfe and Mischel, 1999).

The assumption that individuals only have two primary behaviours when making ethical decisions (i.e. to lie or tell the truth) belies a far more complex phenomenon that cannot be devoid of context (Cooper *et al*., 2023). Research has identified several important contextual factors in unethical organisational behaviour, including time and culture (Paik *et al*., 2019), nature of leadership (Kuenzi *et al*., 2019; Brown and Treviño, 2006), organisational climate (Mayer *et al*., 2009) and codes of conduct (Weaver and Treviño, 1999). Organisations with weak ethical infrastructure, where the policies, and procedures regarding ethical behaviour are ambiguous or not reinforced, leads to those in managerial positions relying on their own judgement when navigating ethical decisions (Gonsalves, 2022; Benton and Cobb, 2019). Pimentel *et al*. (2010) theorised that the context of decision-making in organisations involves interplay between individual-level variables [for example, biography and position of the decision-maker(s) in the organisation], the organisational structure and climate and the socio-political features of the business environment. Moore *et al*. (2012, citing Kish-Gephart *et al*., 2010), however, claim that research into organisational ethical behaviour has failed to explain variance using contextual features alone. Similarly, Mitchell *et al*. (2019), referencing the Wells Fargo account fraud scandal, argue that behavioural ethics has rarely tackled higher levels of analysis, such as divisions, departments and organizations, in a meaningful way. Further, Mitchell *et al*. (2019, p. 14) view events such as ethical dilemmas and breaches, as constituting, more than just the sum of individual behaviours – they involve unique cross-level

processes that give rise to situations that are largely inconsistent with our understanding of individual-level behavioural ethics.

The research literature shows support for the link between moral disengagement and workplace deviance (Ogunfowora *et al*., 2021; Chui and Grieder, 2020). Kaptein (2011, as cited in Smith *et al*., 2014) found that an atmosphere of accepting disagreement helps to avoid a situation wherein employees refrain from reporting wrongdoings despite their awareness thereof. Palazzo *et al*. (2012, p. 325) refers to "ethical blindness" as "the temporary inability of a decision maker to see the ethical dimension of a decision at stake". This is pertinent in organisational contexts, "where economic, financial, and political interests frequently stimulate insensitivity to ethical dilemmas" (Zollo *et al*., 2017, p. 696). De Cremer and Moore (2020) demonstrated that if employees have blind spots about how unethical their behaviour is, they can justify ethical violations. These insights stem from what is referred to as behavioural ethics (De Cremer and Vandekerckhove, 2017).

Similarly, Alpaslan and Mitroff (2021, p. 1) argue that making decisions in times of crisis is an ethically laden task that triggers inevitable, complex and urgent trade-offs (e.g. the greater good versus individual rights; responsibilities toward society versus fiduciaries).

Another important factor influencing ethical decision-making is that of learning. Tacit learning in a dynamic environment has been shown to influence ethical decision-making in organisations (Hegarty and Sims, 1978). Gould and Kaplan (2011) note that peer effect can neutralise unethical behaviour, allowing it to become socially acceptable. Ibarra (1999) argues that unethical behaviour can be learnt from the actions of people we admire, in attempts to emulate their career path and the decision-making practices (unethical as these may be) that have underpinned their career success. In this respect, Parks *et al*. (2003) show that reflexivity is critical to learning within the intense social interactions that prevail in organisational settings. As Reynolds (2006, p. 742) states, "anyone who has lain awake at night contemplating the experiences of the previous day, knows that retrospection is a key component of the ethical experience and learning". Bowie (2013, as cited in Silver, 2015, p. 280), however, is critical of the practice of business ethics as it often is enacted in the current global context:

> . . . business ethics in the twenty-first century, as it is actually practiced, is not really about efficiency or shareholder value; rather, it is an effort that rationalizes a transfer of wealth to those who, in the minds of decision makers, truly deserve it.

In this respect, Craft (2013) stated that researchers need to look beyond individual antecedents in ethical decision-making and advocated a renewed focus on organisational variables in future research. Smith *et al*. (2014) agree, pointing to inconsistencies between espoused and enacted values as being the mark of unethical organisations. This leads to our exploration of the socio-political dynamics of ethical decision-making in a corporate setting; a phenomenon that is inadequately addressed in the extant research literature.

3. Organisation in focus

The organisation in which this study was conducted (referred to hereafter as The Organisation), was founded in the 1960s and is headquartered in Asia–Pacific (APAC) with a global presence. Its founder instilled the ethos of the "triple bottom line", with The Organisation's performance measured on social and environmental impact, as well as profit. At the time of the study there were approximately 11,000 employees globally. Its core business is construction, property development, investment and asset management of buildings, precincts and places. The introduction of a digital business unit in 2018 saw the IT department shift from being a service provider to a business function – one that would build its own digital products. One of these products, referred to as "The Product", was the focus of this study.

The principal author was recruited into The Organisation late in 2019 to build its data science practice. The role introduced the "responsible use of data", which fed into and extended the "triple bottom line" mantra. Responsible use of data was defined in this context as the "ethical" means that went beyond legislation and standards to meet the transparency and accountability expectations in data collection, usage and analysis, and in decision-making related to the digital products. With The Product being wholly digital and data-oriented, aspirations for the ethical use of data were for it to be a transparent and co-operative practice, on which consensus prevailed on the "right" and "responsible" means for decision-making within The Organisation.

4. Research methodology

The research reported in this paper addresses the question of the nature of the social dynamics impacting the espoused commitment of a global organisation to ethical decision-making within the defined context of the development of a digital product (hereafter referred to as The Product). The data collection process was conducted by the principal author who was employed in The Organisation. As an "insider-researcher" she observed the everyday activities related to the development of The Product, as these related to the execution of the organisation's espoused commitment to ethical decision-making. The research was conducted with the approval and oversight of the Human Research Ethics Committee at the authors' university.

Given the socio-political nature of the research question, the research context and the knowledge sought, the research was located within the interpretivist research paradigm (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). We assumed the social reality in which decision-making in The Organisation occurs to be socially constructed and, thus, subjective and inter-subjective in nature (Crotty,1998; Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991). Ethnography was adopted as the most appropriate research methodology to explore decision-making practices in this socially constructed reality through the "everyday ethnography" conducted by the principal author as an insider-researcher (Watson, 2012; Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011).

Data collection methods included interviews, observations, participant experiences and access to relevant data (i.e. annual reports, project artefacts) associated within the field of The Organisation. Data synthesis and analysis followed the methods advocated by LeCompte and Schensul (1999) and Gioia *et al*. (2012). These methods were supported by multi-layered reflexivity and triangulation [i.e. triangulation across data, researchers and theory prescribed by Denzin (2017)].

Data were collected over a period of 18 months. The principal author's professional role enabled the participative observation required for the collection of the data, as the process was aligned to The Organisation's agile product delivery cycles. In compliance with ethics processes sensitive information was omitted, and care taken to ensure the responsible use of data in the research process. A briefing session was held for the people selected to be part of the interview process, namely those engaged in the development of The Product. The research period occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in the closure of offices and The Organisation switching to a video conferencing mode. Field notes were written daily where there were observations/interactions of note and catalogued weekly. The activity of journaling was conducted by the principal author for the collated observations.

19 interviews were conducted in total, 6 after the first three-month Agile cycle, which coincided with the end of two significant releases (six months) and the remaining 13 in the cycle thereafter. All interviews began with the question: "What has been your experience, as it relates to [The Product], of the use, management and analysis of data in decision-making?" This was followed by a series of probes and requests for greater explication of points made. The sessions were recorded to allow a focused conversation with the interviewee.

The recorded interviews were listened to three times: first, to identify "units of meaning" within each interview; second, to identify the themes across interviews and third, to validate

the dominant themes occurring across interviews. In this final stage, these themes were cross-referenced with the dominant themes occurring across the weekly journal reflections.

The principal researcher engaged the two co-authors in triangular synthesis and analysis of all data, where independent identification of units of meaning and dominant themes were reconciled through reflexive dialogue regarding their relation to the research question.

The intent and aspiration of this research was for every stage and aspect to be transparent and open to reflexivity and critique, as a way of "being honest and ethically mature in research practice" (Ruby, 1980, p. 154). This involved moments of "benign introspection" (Woolgar, 1988) in the constant self-evaluation by the insider-researcher as a research instrument, and the potential bias she brought to the data collection and analysis process. Following the methodical way to engage reflexively offered by Alvesson and Sköldberg in Table 1, risks prior to data collection, such as potential confusion among participants regarding the purpose of the research given this researcher's dual role, and the identification of key points at which reflexivity should occur, were addressed.

5. Findings

To answer the research question, the data from observations, field notes, interviews and relevant organisational collateral were synthesised and interpreted. Six themes emerged from the analysis of the synthesised data (see Table 2). These provided the explanatory foundation for why ethical decision-making manifested poorly within the socio-political context of The Organisation.

5.1 Theme 1. Responsible use of data is not considered a value proposition

Ethical decision-making (and by association, responsible use of data) was not deemed a priority in the development of The Product or in The Organisation generally. Only a brief, unclear, set of materials, intended to educate teams on this concept was distributed. One participant explains the lack of clarity on how this concept applied to day-to-day roles:

Table 1. Levels of reflexivity (Alvesson and Sköldberg,2009, p. 273)

Level	Focus
Interaction with empirical material	Accounts in interviews, observation of situations and other empirical materials
Interpretation	Underlying meanings
Critical interpretation	Ideology, power, social reproduction
Reflection on text production and language use	Own text, claims to authority, selectivity of the voices represented in the text

Table 2. Thematic findings of the research

Themes	
Theme 1	Responsible use of data is not considered a value proposition
Theme 2	Product managers, appointed leads, provide no steer to leadership
Theme 3	External factors are a greater prompt for change
Theme 4	Pretence of formal decision making – mask of formal layers
Theme 5	Infantilising the organisation, leading to kakistocracy
Theme 6	The influence of Silicon Valley

Source(s): Authors' own work

> I've never really been exposed to how I should ethically be using the data that I've been given. (Interviewee 7)

In the first spiral of interviews there was strong critique of decision-making regarding the responsible use of data. By the second spiral of interviews, the situation had worsened with the concept reported to have little-to-no value for The Product team.

> How much do they care about it is – I don't know – it's questionable. I really don't know from a management perspective how critical is responsible use of data to them. (Interviewee 2)

> In the tribes I've been working with, it's never been talked about. The conversation about data really is, "do we have data? What do you want us to do with this data?" It's never, "okay, let's reflect, take a step back, reflect, where are we going to store this data?" People are not used to thinking about the responsible use of data and thinking about the permissions associated with data. I think we've got a long way to go to educate people on the ethical use of data. (Interviewee 10)

> I honestly think that data has been missing from the conversation; it's just completely missing from the conversation. They've gone through and printed out a whole load of physical work. But in terms of the actual data, there haven't been robust conversations. (Interviewee 11)

It was not just educational materials that were developed. Ethical use of data was embedded into a "go-live" check for customers. Most of the participants were unaware that it existed in an already voluminous process and there was no clear ownership of its application. When the participants were asked who is responsible for its monitoring and advocacy, a list of nine types of roles in various departments of The Organisation were offered. Those in these roles who were identified, appeared to be unaware of any responsibility for this task, at times abdicating to others more senior to them:

> I'm pretty sure if it was given to [senior manager name redacted] or [senior manager name redacted], they would share that. (Interviewee 8)

When a practice has value, how it is being managed and enacted should be monitored and revered by all. However, in The Organisation, one participant stated that the practice of ethical use of data was being "treated as a second-class citizen" (Interviewee 2). This contrasted strongly with the hunger for revenue; a factor that eclipsed all other considerations in delivering The Product to clients.

> I don't know. [Head of Digital] probably is sending the wrong signals by focussing on revenue. The customer, I guess, has a role to play. (Interviewee 9)

> I think the purpose was to just ensure we had revenue. We didn't really care what we were building for a customer, as long as someone was going to pay us money. (Interviewee 5)

5.2 Theme 2. Product managers, appointed leads, provide no steer to leadership

In a product-oriented and Agile organisation, the product manager role is pivotal to the leadership and direction of the teams, and to being the voice of the customer. However, for The Product this was far from the case. Interviewees were hyper critical of The Product management function and the lack of understanding of what the business or customer wanted:

> Some of the features we are building, which the customers have not been happy with, raise the issue that maybe our product managers don't create features that either the customer or the business really likes. (Interviewee 5)

> It's crazy and embarrassing how many times we've approached the customer and asked them, what features would you like? They've told us multiple times to no avail. (Interviewee 13)

All interviews – bar one where the interviewee was associated early with The Product – made strong and frequent reference to the lack of clarity of direction of The Product. The Product management function seemed unable to provide clear direction, or clarity as to who should

provide it, with the experts and delivery teams excluded from what seemed to be a secretive process. For some in the delivery teams, their exclusion from the decision-making process was interpreted as autocratic behaviour by The Product management:

> There's stuff in the *plan* that I know that I'm the only person who knows how that works and how much is going to be required. It's in the *plan*, but nobody spoke to us about it. (Interviewee 2)

> Certain things come up from The Product that are being dictated in a way that they [product management] think that's the right thing to do. (Interviewee 3)

Some of the decisions by The Product management showed failure to understand the technical implications thereof. Some work was seen as having no value and only there to "tick a box" to appease the powers that be. Priorities were often unclear and were noted to focus on "dodgy" workarounds which would warrant heavy retrofitting activity later.

During the 18-month period of data collection there were three restructures and, in every interview, the sentiment to each iteration thereof was the same: that The Product managers' insufficient technical knowledge and the lack of a proper plan and roadmap, was leading to promises being made in desperation to show progress. This uncertainty and change within The Product "leadership" did not provide an environment for innovation but rather one associated with frustration and exhaustion (emotions observed and articulated by many interviewees). It also was not conducive to an environment in which features were considered as they relate to the ethical use of data.

5.3 Theme 3. External factors are a greater prompt for change

At almost every level of The Organisation, external factors influenced the path to be taken in moving forward. In the past, one of the biggest factors in prompting positive cultural change has come from large customers who insisted on changes as a condition of their contract with The Organisation:

> It was ultimately a customer of The Organisation who drove that whole change program because they were insisting that they weren't going to work with us anymore. So, it was actually an external market factor that influenced change within The Organisation. (Interviewee 13)

In a rare instance for The Product, there had been another customer who had championed the ideals of ethical use of data. This, however, did not lead to lasting and pervasive cultural change, as the economic value of this customer was minor in comparison to the customer mentioned in the quote above by Interviewee 13. Thus, while there have been strong cases of external pressure to introduce progressive change within The Organisation, such pressure came from the demands of a few high economic value customers. The sustained adoption of ethical use of data practices was not deemed to warrant distraction from a focus on monetary value:

> It's just not seen as important, and it's not seen as a risk. (Interviewee 1)

5.4 Theme 4. Pretence of formal decision-making – the mask of formal layers

It was espoused that The Product and The Digital Unit would run in an Agile fashion in the manner of a start-up. A veneer of flexibility and agility through some lightweight decision-making forums and practices was created. This thin layer hardly masked what was openly perceived by those interviewed as an ineffective and insincere initiative:

> We might get it recorded in a meeting, but it's not formal. It all gets back to that system that we've never put together, which is monitoring. (Interviewee 10)

> I think it's common knowledge that no one really owns that process. I think now we have to support the team established in Singapore, but they need to sign up for that responsibility. (Interviewee 5)

> It's hard to debate. Is it right or wrong? No one knows. There is no proper process to vet that sort of idea, to say this thing is very . . . this thing is [unclear]. Everything is just an opinion. (Interviewee 5)

Processes and forums were created that failed to provide meaningful decisions due to participants being ill-equipped to make informed decisions. This led to the Agile approach taken by The Product and The Digital Unit being blamed, with the executive sponsors taking over the decision-making process. This reinforced the belief among participants that decisions were being "dictated":

> Most of the decisions were made by [name redacted]. Normally it should be a team, to be transparent. (Interviewee 4)

A perfect structure of equivocation was created, with forums attended by too many participants, roles and responsibilities not being clear and those with ideas not being enabled and supported. The veneer of some structure of decision-making existed, but beyond the surface it was a never-ending labyrinth. This all led to a version of the *Phoenix Project* (see Kim *et al*., 2013) under the guise of a Product and Agile organisation that aspired to be innovative with a "start-up" structure. Even if the "ethical use of data" was embedded in governance processes, such practice would not have been enacted.

Amidst the loose decision-making structure, one key assumption was paramount: that The Organisation could operate as a start-up with no defined exclusion zone, despite its financial and legal obligations. In a 60-year-old listed enterprise with operational responsibilities and fiduciary obligations, this was never going to work:

> This is part of a listed business. As a listed business you have to have those processes and decision-making forums in place. You can't operate like a start-up. The fact of the matter is when you're five people and it doesn't work, you can just dissolve it and everybody's learnt their lessons. Whereas we will have to answer for the decisions that have been made in that process, so they need to be documented, and they need to be understood. (Interviewee 11)

5.5 Theme 5. Infantilising the organisation, leading to kakistocracy

The term "kakistocracy" refers to a country or organisation where those who are least fit and capable are in leadership and key decision-making roles. This theme, which was persistent and widespread across the research data, referred to activities leading to the *infantilisation* of the core business of The Organisation (see Mazzucato and Collington, 2022). This term gained credence through its use by British politician Lord Agnew in 2020 in his accusation that Whitehall was being "infantilised" due to its reliance on expensive management consultants.

Infantilisation in The Organisation occurred through a multistage process not too dissimilar to Lord Agnew's concerns about Whitehall. From the observations gained by the insider-researcher, these stages included treating key human capital without due respect by failing to recognise and utilise their capabilities and managing business operations in a way that constrained the agency of the delivery teams. These imposed constraints were used as a weapon in blaming the poor outcomes on delivery teams. While global priorities were set at the board level, little support for the enactment of these priorities was provided. The poor outcomes were exacerbated by the selection of external partners (consulting organisations) who had no intent other than absorbing the IP of The Organisation.

Those who resigned from The Organisation, or were forced to leave, were often replaced by more than one person, each without the requisite knowledge or capability. Those who stayed and had capability, showed fear and exasperation:

> I will lose my job over this (participant J).

> I will leave if this continues (participant O).

> I feel thrown under the bus (participant K).

These comments were made in reference to delays caused by senior management that were impacting these participants' responsibility to deliver on time. Multiple restructures of The Organisation, and engagement of consultant organisations without clarity of role, exacerbated the confusion within roles and responsibilities.

5.6 Theme 6. The influence of Silicon Valley

The final theme centres on the additions to the leadership team of those based in Silicon Valley, and their influence upon decision-making in The Organisation. Their presence, while pronounced, occurred mostly in a virtual capacity as these US members visited the APAC region only once during the 18-month duration of this ethnographic study. These US leaders introduced Silicon Valley strategies that were not always appropriate for the Australian context. An example from observations made within the first six months of the study involved an executive from the US advocating using technology that was "agnostic" (meaning that such technology was essentially not being wedded to any technology provider or technology stack). One of his early decisions, however, was for the initially selected technology platform to be transferred to a new competitor product. This was enforced with such efficiency that all workloads were switched off from the original technology and nothing maintained. While the "agnostic" approach was documented in strategies, and verbally upheld, it was not enacted in practice and attempts to introduce alternative products were rejected. Furthermore, even if the introduction of the agnostic technology was temporally being delayed, the existing architecture and design of The Organisation would have been unable to facilitate an agnostic environment.

Adopting this style of Silicon Valley approach went beyond cost and technical discussions. The US leaders vehemently maintained that individuals could only hold one role rather than contributing to a multi-capability perspective. Australian executives occupying a role theoretically had three "hats", but the US leadership preferred splitting this amongst others as it provided better optics. This, ironically, significantly increased cost. Furthermore, certain roles could only be filled with a capability with which these US managers were familiar and comfortable. The "Product Manager" role as a concept had originated from Agile approaches in mostly software development companies and, at the time of this research, most product engineering teams were head quartered in the US (specifically Silicon Valley). When Australia tried to hire a local Product Manager, they received constant push back from the US. Their assumption was that anyone outside of the US would not be able to fill such a role as they would not have the requisite experience and were unlikely to develop it in the future. As such, the inferior option of an "Acting Project Manager" ensued for a period of 12 months, causing multiple unnecessary issues.

6. Discussion

This study shows that ethical decision-making in organisations cannot be achieved through enterprise structure, processes and policy alone. The recognition of the value proposition of ethical decision-making, in combination with an appropriate cultural context, is vital to support such behaviour. In The Organisation, it was the actions of individuals, particularly those with senior roles, that contradicted the espoused commitment to ethical decisions. While the overt Agile methodology and "start-up" culture were intended to encourage an ecosystem that supported collaboration and ethical decision-making, the practices within The Organisation endorsed a culture of individual power play *masked behind a pretence of formal decision-making*.

The pretence of a formal structure, where policies and practices regarding ethical behaviour are rhetorical and not taken seriously, led to individuals often acting in their own interests (Noval and Stahl, 2017). In The Organisation, the espoused commitment to ethical decision-making was over-ridden by revenue being the sole value proposition that mattered. In the

literature, this is referred to as the "business frame" (Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe, 2008; Tenbrunsel and Messick, 1999; Bandura, 1986). In The Organisation, the business frame was endorsed by those holding powerful positions. With leadership endorsing revenue as the sole value proposition, individuals complied with such an approach (Gould and Kaplan, 2011). Fuqua and Newman (2006) argue that certain foundational practices need to exist, and be taken seriously, in an organisation before ethical leadership can manifest. Given the kakistocratic nature of leadership within The Organisation, such practices did not exist, resulting in decisions which infantilized the organisation.

Executive product decision-making positions and customer-facing roles were insular in their approach to decision-making. Most of those holding product technical decision-making roles in The Organisation, had started their careers in engineering or IT. Once these individuals were promoted into executive leadership roles, they continued to exercise their strong technical mind-set [see Weber (1995) on this phenomenon]. This was held in high regard within the *silicon-valley-influenced* culture of The Organisation, leading to decision-making that was focussed on revenue-raising technical features rather than on how the customer would gain value from The Product. Weber (1995) also postulated that those in customer or boundary spanning departments would have a more "cosmopolitan" locus. As is evident in this study, The Product managers did not display such behaviour, with their previous experience disabling them from taking a broader perspective on issues. Aligned to this, is the failure by The Product executives to champion and understand the value sought by customers, in an organisational culture in which revenue was the sole value proposition (Weber and Seger, 2002).

A strategy endorsed by MacDougall *et al*. (2014, p. 17) to overcome individual decision-making that favours "business frame" judgement and self-interest, is the use of smaller units, such as a team in decision-making. This, they posit, will facilitate team members holding each other accountable for the nature of decisions made. Generally, this was not evident within The Organisation, where those with decision-making responsibility in technical and delivery teams failed to hold one another accountable for ethical decision-making and for the responsible use of data. As these decisions were not illegal, but ethically questionable, they did not attract notice, scrutiny, nor any other reaction (Mohliver, 2019). Holding each other accountable for ethical decision-making was not regarded as necessary, and there is no evidence that the failure to use data responsibly was ever questioned. Given that The Product was intended to be data rich, and that the data team contained several "ethical champions" (see Chen and Treviño, 2023; Kish-Gephart *et al*., 2009; Morrison, 2014), it could be expected that the data team would play a pivotal decision-making role in its nature. This, however, did not occur due to the decision-making power of the data team being curtailed by the politics impacting the reporting structure.

The establishment of a code of ethics within The Organisation had little-to-no effect on decision-making. While there was a set of principles to guide the review of the development and release of The Product, these principles were never enacted in practice. Contrary to the findings of McKinney *et al*. (2010), the establishment of principles for responsible use of data was ineffective in transforming decision-making behaviour in The Organisation. The research data show that ethical codes need to work in concert with an appreciation of their value proposition and the existence of a strongly ethical organisational eco-system. When these features are in place, ethical codes can provide binding principles that guide ethical decision-making.

The study shows, however, that The Organisation did have the ability to adopt the "ethical frame" when forced to do so (Yuthas *et al*., 2004). This only occurred when a large customer demanded, and monitored, ethical practices by The Organisation. Beyond this compliance with the demand of a powerful customer, a state of "ethical blindness" prevailed and the "business frame" was fanatically pursued within The Organisation. Ethical blindness ensured that within The Organisation the rhetoric of ethical decision-making substituted for its enactment in practice.

7. Conclusions

The data collected in this study, would have been unattainable without the enactment of digitally augmented ethnographic research methods by the "insider researcher". Over an eighteen-month period, these research methods relied on relevant technologies to generate digitally rich data from the dispersed contexts imposed by the COVID-19 restrictions upon work practices. Through these means, this interpretivist research was able to provide insight into "what was going on" regarding the influence of socio-political dynamics on the enactment of The Organisation's espoused commitment to ethical decision-making as it attempted to develop The Product.

While The Organisation strongly encouraged the use of video in all meetings with a virtual presence, digital access to other key sources of data further enabled this study. Observations extended to the digital shadows that participants presented across interactions within virtual meetings, conferences, asynchronous messaging on collaboration tools such as Microsoft Teams, SharePoint or Jira and even the use of avatars and emoticons to communicate and reflect their sentiment. The interviews, most of which were conducted on Microsoft Teams, allowed for sessions to record the audio only and have an expiry of the digital copy after synthesis was completed. As participants had access to the same system, this alleviated any concerns some may have had regarding the need for a physical recorder or mobile phone to capture the audio in an in-person meeting. The annotated interviews from digital transcripts were distributed to participants to allow them to mark their changes to ensure an accurate representation of their intended meaning.

Since the completion of this ethnographic research, new digital capabilities have emerged which surpass those used at the time of the study. Examples include video conferencing tools that have improved embedded features that provide direct transcription without the need to record audio and video. Even language barriers are being broken with automated translation services that make it possible to enable free flowing conversations in multi-lingual contexts. Such technology capability is encouraged to supplement the future workplace ethnographers' digital toolkit.

In using a digital toolkit, organisations and ethnographers may be drawn to the use of more advanced technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI). The continued global rise of AI, and related technologies, has highlighted the issue of the ethical and responsible use of technology as it pertains to the ethics embedded in organisational practices. Whilst data gained through generative AI and agentic AI means, may enhance insights into the social construction of organisational realities, and the enactment of key practices, such as those related to decision-making in these social realities, vigilance and reflexive practices are required to maintain scrutiny of the ethical nature of such decisions.

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Further reading

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Corresponding author
Dorotea Baljević can be contacted at: dorotea.baljevic@uts.edu.au