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# **Understanding Collective Moral Disengagement in a Controversial Urban Electronic Tolling Project: Implications for e-Skills Education**

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## **Abstract**

This case study analyses modes of collective moral disengagement used by decision-makers to justify a controversial urban electronic tolling project in South Africa. Legal documents and public records were coded for these modes using deductive content analysis. The results suggest the following modes were present: endowing the project with socially worthy purposes; euphemistic labeling; displacing and diffusing responsibility; downplaying negative consequences; making favorable comparisons; and disparaging and blaming dissidents and victims. The empirical examination provides an alternative theoretical path to understand how collective moral disengagement can sometimes lead to decision-makers surrendering their rational decision-making abilities. Several guidelines are offered for educators keen to promote moral engagement in the classroom setting. Future research needs to investigate how educators can morally engage students involved in complex and controversial technology decisions.

**Keywords:** decision-making, ethics, technology, moral disengagement, e-skills, case study

## **Introduction**

Although ordinary people may care about behaving ethically, they tend to justify and distance themselves from their unethical behaviour in everyday life (Tenbrunsel, Diekmann, Wade-Benzoni, & Bazerman, 2010). Similarly, public managers are vulnerable to moral and ethical issues whenever they engage in actions that can harm or benefit others (Gauld & Goldfinch, 2006). This poses an interesting dilemma in an era of new information and communication technologies that have improved the ability to collect and manipulate the personal information of citizens for a variety of commercial ends (Walsham, 2012). While technologies can play an important role in reducing the administrative and operational costs, as well as enhancing the services that central

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and local government deliver to citizens and businesses, they can also bring about a lack of focus and clarity to alternative, more ethical and cost-effective avenues of action to follow in a wide range of service delivery situations. An over reliance on both technologies and their private sector providers can even obscure the state's priorities (Naidoo, 2013; Rose-Ackerman, 2002; Van Slyke, 2003). For instance, the increas-

ing surveillance capability of technologies can be used for political ends (e.g., staying in power) and private interests ends (e.g., profit). Yet, effective technology investments can contribute positively to the state's credibility with citizens and provide political return for leaders (Savas & Schubert, 1987). However, this requires that public managers must hold themselves collectively accountable for their actions when they enter into these investment decisions.

Despite a growing awareness that decision-making in general is not an entirely objective rational process (Ariely, 2009; Milgram, 1963; Zimbardo, 2007), studies on irrational decision-making behavior have continued to make way for rational decision-making studies. Although advancing our knowledge in certain contexts, the objective rational approaches may be implicitly defending unethical decisions by dressing it up as being generally bounded by cognition or the limitations of moral heuristics (Simon, 1996; Sunstein, 2005) thereby somewhat neglecting the irrational side of human behavior. To some extent these perspectives treat irrational decision-making as atypical and reveal little about how people collectively normalize irrational decisions and unethical conduct. In this paper, it is argued that applying the moral disengagement mechanisms explained by social-cognitive theory to a case study of a controversial decision may offer a new perspective for researchers and fill some of the void present in existing ethical decision-making frameworks (Bandura, 1990, 1991). Recognition of moral disengagement psychological processes and how they are activated may also contribute to a potentially richer understanding of why public managers are prone to unethical and economically dubious decision-making. This type of understanding is also crucial if educators wish to integrate broader considerations such as ethics, equity and justice in e-skills education.

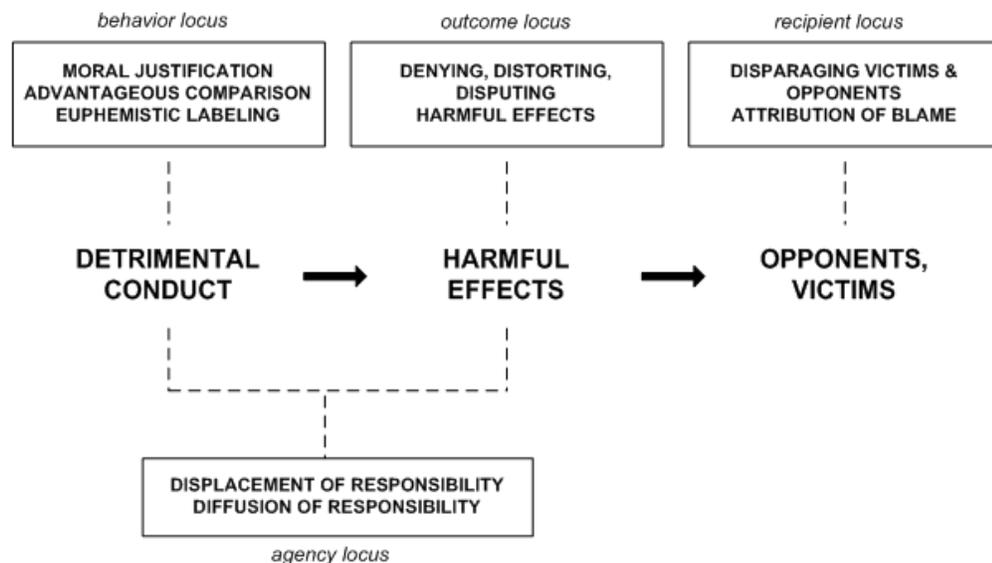
This study suggests a theoretical shift by acknowledging the existence of the irrational side of decision-making and by grounding its analysis in the social cognitive theory of moral agency (Bandura, 1990, 1991). According to Bandura (1991), moral disengagement is the self-regulatory process through which people free themselves from guilt and self-sanctions allowing them to engage in unethical conduct. This theory also asserts that being part of a group also neutralizes the implications of a person's role and obscures their personal accountability in morally tenuous situations. Moral disengagement has been able to explain political and military violence, apathy with ecological sustainability, organizational corruption, corporate transgressions, illicit consumer behavior, unfair labor practices and the decline in civic behavior (Bandura, 2004, 2007; Bandura, Caprara, & Zsolnai, 2000; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Beu & Buckley, 2004; Caprara, Fida, Vecchione, Tramontano, & Barbaranelli, 2009; Paharia & Deshpandé, 2009; Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2011; White, Bandura, & Bero, 2009). To date, the role of moral disengagement has not been fully investigated in a major technology decision. Since people use moral disengagement mechanisms to downplay the ethical content of their decisions and to make decisions that advance their organizational and personal interests, it is reasonable to assume that these mechanisms will play an important role in explaining a controversial technology decision. It will be interesting to observe whether moral disengagement mechanisms facilitate the exclusion of moral considerations in these decisions. This study therefore seeks to contribute to knowledge about ethical decision-making in a complex technology project by exploring the notion of moral disengagement as the process which influences morally dubious or unethical decision-making behavior.

Specifically, the purpose of this research is to answer the following question: What were the collective moral disengagement strategies that were used by public managers to justify a morally questionable technology decision? Educators can use this knowledge to teach students to recognize that e-skill decisions are also not free from ethical dilemmas. A continued emphasis on the current, arguably overly amoral approach to e-skill education may result in students relinquishing their moral or ethical responsibilities to broader society (Ghoshal, 2005).

## Theoretical Framework

Social cognitive theory provides an appropriate conceptual apparatus to understand how learning occurs in a social context (Bandura, 2001). It views learning as a product of continuous interaction between personal and contextual factors. For instance, learning is shaped by factors within the classroom environment but is also affected by a student's individual experience of the classroom context. While SCT acknowledges that people have agency over their own learning, it also retains the importance of the learning environment in influencing student behavior.

SCT also provides a useful approach to assess structures and processes through which moral agency operate in the realm of complex technology decision-making and to guide interventions aimed at promoting desirable or ethical decision-making behaviors (Bandura, 1991). This theory assumes that people reflect on the consequences of their conduct, pursue goals in accordance to their own standards, enact actions that give them satisfaction and self-worth and avoid behaviors that carry self-censure. Yet people can violate the principles of desirable and ethical decision-making behavior despite being ethically committed while continuing to profess the same principles without incurring any blame or guilt or feeling compelled to provide any kind of reparation (Bandura, 2007, White, Bandura, & Bero, 2009). They use moral disengagement mechanisms to make their unethical conduct acceptable by convincing themselves that their questionable behavior is morally permissible. People who behave unethically are also prone to "motivated forgetting" of ethical standards – they are serial "revisionist historians", recalling their past selectively in ways that support their decisions (Mather, Shafir & Johnson, 2000; Shu, Gino, & Bazerman 2011). They also tend to overemphasize positive features of their chosen options as compared to the negative features and have a strong motivation to bias their judgment to support their desired conclusion (Goldberg & Centers, 2012).



**Figure 1: Mechanisms of moral disengagement (White, Bandura, & Bero, 2009)**

Moral self-sanctions can be disengaged from wrongdoing by mechanisms of moral disengagement operating at four major loci in the self-regulatory system (White, Bandura, & Bero, 2009). Figure 1 shows how mechanisms operating at the behavior locus allow people to transform reprehensible conduct by portraying them as aimed at social and moral purposes (moral justification),

by labeling their actions with euphemistic language (euphemistic labeling), or by comparing their behavior with worse and more flagrant conduct (advantageous comparison). Mechanisms operating at the agency locus allow people to obscure or to attenuate the personal relation between their actions and their consequences by considering their behavior as dictated by social pressure or by a legitimate authority (displacement of responsibility) or by diffusing their responsibility to joint action, making their individual contribution undistinguishable (diffusion of responsibility).

Mechanisms operating at the outcome locus allow people to avoid acknowledging the blameful effects of their behavior by disregarding and distorting its consequences. Finally, mechanisms at the recipient locus allow people to withdraw empathetic and sympathetic feelings for those who will suffer by considering them responsible for their condition and deserving harm and punishment (attribution of blame) or by impersonalizing and dehumanizing them (dehumanization).

These mechanisms allow people to behave poorly without feeling obliged to any kind of reparation and without carrying any need to change the moral standards they are ignoring. In fact, they use these mechanisms to recode their actions so that they appear less immoral.

This theory also claims that people involved in collective decision-making situations cannot be viewed simply as socially detached, autonomous moral agents – they are also enmeshed in social systems. The social forces emanating from social groups can operate on a person in such a manner that they can provide moral exonerations for each other (Janis, 1972; White, Bandura, & Bero, 2009). Therefore at the emergent group level, people engage in groupthink and collective moral disengagement, since being part of a group neutralizes the implications of their role and obscures their personal accountability. Public managers working in state bureaucracies are especially vulnerable as superiors can use their authority with the expectation that the subordinate accepts their decisions (Beu & Buckley, 2004; Hinrichs, 2007). If these public managers feel “ordered,” they may simply displace the responsibility for their actions on their superior. While it is plausible that decision-makers sometimes rely on their biased intuitions (Sunstein, 2005), it will be argued that in this case study, group (political party) and individual interests were being advanced instead of the greater public good. In other words, as a result of social and environmental influences, decision-makers behaved irrationally and did not simply make erroneous judgments due to their unreliable intuitions. The next section details the selection of a case study that can help us explore the full range of these behaviors – behaviors that have several implications for e-skills education. Knowledge gained from such a case may provide a broadened perspective of complex technology decision-making that can be fruitfully applied in the classroom to cultivate morally engaged students.

### **Case Study Background: Urban Tolling Sparks Controversy**

This research is conducted on one of South Africa’s most controversial government projects – the Gauteng Open Road Tolling (ORT) project. The project, initiated in 2006, has sparked a challenge from various groups in civil society and was embroiled in a lengthy legal battle. The South African National Roads Agency Limited (SANRAL), a state-owned enterprise, is primarily responsible for the financing, development, maintenance and rehabilitation of South Africa’s 16 170km national road network. Its activities include non-toll and toll operations. Toll roads are self-funding based on the user-pays principle. SANRAL has used two types of tolling: traditional toll collection at a toll plaza; and electronic toll collection (ETC), where either credit cards or an electronic transponder system (e-tag) identifies the vehicle and allows it to pass. Most of the conventional tolls are on newly built routes for long distance destinations, mainly found on regional roads. There has been increasing interest in private toll roads as an alternative way of meeting highway needs.

The controversial ORT project intends to use overhead gantries approximately every 10km along Gauteng's existing urban highway system to collect toll fees electronically. The gantries are fitted with electronic readers that recognize vehicle identifiers such as e-tags or vehicle number plates – and are set to automatically deduct toll fees from a road user's registered e-toll account. Users would be serviced by a complex of service channels including a call centre and website, e-toll kiosks and e-tag outlets at various shopping malls, and e-toll customer-service centers situated along the freeway network. SANRAL has also procured a central account management and clearing system, and established a violations processing centre as part of the operation. Not surprisingly, an independent research team hired by SANRAL's (Graduate School of Business, 2010, p. 36) conceded that: "paying for roads through taxes or a dedicated fuel levy is simply cheaper than imposing tolls on a road even if this is through an ORT system. The cost of collection is far lower because it does not incur the cost of the toll collection system". In this sense and assuming that the decision-makers had full access and time to reflect on this information, the decision was irrational. A rational decision would have weighed the pros and cons of alternative funding options and chose the decision that maximized overall benefits while minimizing overall costs.

Meanwhile lack of transparency and conflict of interest has also been the hallmark of the e-toll project. Public managers voiced their reluctance to share vital information. For instance SANRAL initially refused to disclose details of the Electronic Toll Collection Joint Venture: "The information requested by Opposition to Urban Tolling Alliance (OUTA) is and remains the intellectual property of third party organizations" (SAPA, 2012). SANRAL chose to partner with private entities to design and build the facilities and manage these operations. The decision to use a foreign company as the primary partner instead of stimulating the development of local technology was also questionable. Headquartered in Austria, the e-tolling and traffic solutions firm and the largest shareholder in the e-tolling consortium, reported in the 2010/11 financial year that its road solutions projects segment, under which e-tolling falls, grew 247% year-on-year (Rasool, 2012). According to the CEO: "This positive development resulted largely from electronic toll collection system implementations in SA and Poland" (Rasool, 2012). Opponents claim that the ruling party's links to the joint venture and Government Employee Pension Fund (GEPF) holding R15.7 billion in SANRAL bonds were other reasons for the lack of transparency (Rasool, 2012). Some critics argued that these conflicts of interest were the real reason government insisted on pursuing the project, despite its unfeasibility and despite it facing public resistance (Rasool, 2012). However, given that the public service is accountable for the greater public interest, ahead of the compensation of its employees and financial opportunities for party members and party donors, it is realistic to view this behavior as both unethical and irrational.

Not surprisingly, a cross-section of society, including Gauteng residents, business, trade unions, civil society groups, a few opposition party politicians and senior government officials such as the Deputy Minister for Transport voiced strong opposition to the ORT project. Drive-slow demonstrations and other civil disobedience protests were held to voice opposition to tolling. There is a general consensus among Gauteng residents that e-tolling was a bad decision and will result in harm. Despite pressure from SANRAL and the state, reports suggested that only 350 000 out of an estimated four million registered vehicles in Gauteng had registered to pay e-tolls (OUTA, 2012). In late 2011, the opposition groups formed an alliance to legally challenge the project. The Opposition to Urban Tolling Alliance (OUTA) received over R5 million in financial support from business and citizens around the country to cover their legal costs (OUTA, 2012). On 29 April 2012, just two days prior to the official launch, the High Court granted the interdict sought by opposition groups to halt the commencement of tolling pending a full review of the e-tolling records and decisions.

## Case Study Approach

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach because it has the advantage of enabling the examination of the rich social, political and economic influences on public sector technology decisions. The Gauteng ORT project requires scholarly analysis because it represents large-scale technology initiatives that involve complex arrangements among civic participation, inter-governmental collaboration and public-private partnerships. Yin (2008) endorses a single case approach, explaining that it can often produce a more in-depth study and consequently greater insight. The case study approach and the use of the selected theoretical framework allowed the researcher to make an informed analysis of the case. The intention was not to generalize the findings to a wide range of government technology decisions (Ruddin, 2006). Instead the goal was to perform an analytical generalization – that is, to generalize a particular set of results to the study's theoretical propositions about moral disengagement. Four criteria were used to ensure the scientific rigor of this study (Guba & Lincoln, 1985): confirmability (use of standard coding protocol), credibility (minimizing bias and improving the neutrality of the results by establishing a match between the different codes, by using content obtained from multiple sources, by employing an academic blind to this study to check the research design, all provided reasonable verification of the accuracy of the coding procedure), triangulation (assessing the degree of similarity of the viewpoints between the different decision-makers, e.g. Finance Ministry and Transport Ministry) and dependability (reliability, accuracy and consistency of the data were achieved by resorting to public records, which reflect the candid view of the person) and by creating an audit trail of documents (Darke, Shanks, & Broadbent, 1998).

The study of moral transgressions in technology and related decision-making is not easily examinable using conventional research approaches. Researchers tend to rely on scandals, the media, public enquiries, police investigations, whistleblowers and legal battles to get a momentary peek into the 'cloaked' world of public managers and their involvement in morally dubious activities (Bandura, Caprara, & Zsolnai, 2000). A number of documents and records supplied by SANRAL, OUTA, the National Treasury and the Department of Transport to the High Court, now publicly available, provided insight into how decision-makers justified their actions. Consequently, published secondary sources become a pivotal source of data for the researcher. Over 60 documents were analyzed, including publicly available copies of affidavits, court transcripts, letters, internal memos, internal planning documents, correspondence, public statements, press releases and newspaper articles. Sources included public sector officials, executives, lawyers, public relations experts, contracted researchers and consultants. Public managers also used television and radio interviews as strategic tools in the social management of moral disengagement to present a different perspective from the opposing groups. Some of these transcripts were also examined for moral disengagement mechanisms.

Documents were coded for the pre-defined categories of moral disengagement described in Table 1. These coding modes of moral disengagement served as the guide for the coding procedure (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 1996; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). It includes formal definitions of each of the mechanisms and examples representing the different ways in which moral disengagement is manifested. The author independently coded the content and achieved consensus with an assistant researcher in the case of any discrepancies. Another academic blind to the purpose of the study acting as an independent judge, coded 20 randomly chosen excerpts, assigning 18 of them to the same categories as the author, yielding a 90% level of agreement. Seventy examples of moral disengagement were observed in the documents and entered into a database. Examples were selected for each moral disengagement category based on the following: (1) the example is unambiguous as an indicator of moral disengagement; (2) it is representative of a number of statements in the dataset; (3) it reflects an important development in the response of public managers with regard to the impact of their decision. The most illustrative

of these were included in this article. The sources of the 70 statements were categorized by the functional role of the personnel (examples: Minister, Director General, consultant, executive, lawyer, researcher or public relations expert). Version 5 of ATLAS.ti was used to code and store the categories and themes.

## Results and Discussion

All eight different moral disengagement mechanisms were evident in the Gauteng ORT case (see Table 1). The sections that follow document how each of the mechanisms of moral disengagement were enlisted by the actors.

**Table 1: Modes and Examples of Moral Disengagement**

<b>MODES OF MORAL DISENGAGEMENT</b>	<b>DEFINITION INCLUDING KEY THEMES</b>	<b>EXAMPLES FROM THE CASE DOCUMENTS</b>
Moral justification	The use of moral explanations to justify harmful decisions and to challenge rational decision-making norms. Harmful decisions are regarded as serving worthy purposes and actors reward themselves for performance.	“I know what the value of my time is. SANRAL, as far as I am concerned, should get a medal for what they have done in terms of time saving ( Sankaree & Botha, 2012).”
Euphemistic labeling	The use of sanitizing and convoluted language to make harmful decisions personally and socially acceptable.	“The current ‘free at the point of use’ system comes at a very high economic cost. ‘Free’ roads breed congestion; ‘free’ roads slow up freight delivery, ‘free’ roads get people to work late; ‘free’ roads reduce economic growth, and they slow employment creation (SANRAL, 2012a, p.182).”
Advantageous comparison	Comparing or contrasting harmful decisions to actions that make them appear benign, of little consequence, or of lesser negative effect.	“I must state that tolling remains one of the most viable means of funding transport infrastructure all over the world. Many countries – developing and developed – including China, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, use tolling to raise funds for the construction of much-needed transport infrastructure (South African Government Online, 2011).”

## Understanding Collective Moral Disengagement

Displacement of responsibility	Absolving the individual or group of personal responsibility for harmful decisions by viewing it as being ordered by others, and by creating systems of deniability that keep actors intentionally uninformed.	“The reinstatement of a “dedicated fuel fund” is debated and demanded by many....The draft RISFSA initially proposed that this funding mechanism be reintroduced however National Treasury was not in support of the proposal. The DOT has indicated that it will investigate this matter further with the intention of tabling it again at a later stage (SANRAL, 2012a, p. 99).”
Diffusion of responsibility	Absolving the individual of personal responsibility for harmful decisions by giving responsibility to the group and various facets of decision-making to sub-groups. In this way no one is held personally accountable for the harmful decision taken.	“Two auditing firms namely Deloitte and PWC were appointed to review the SANRAL financial model. Deloitte reviewed the inputs to the SANRAL Cost Model and the overall results presented. PWC reviewed the formulae and outputs of SANRAL Cost Model, and the inputs, formulae and outputs of the SANRAL Revenue Model (SANRAL, 2012a, p.135).”
Disparaging, denigrating critics, and victims	Attributing disparaging qualities to other opponents and/or those who will suffer the consequences, accusing them of irresponsible or sinister motives.	“If you don’t like it, catch a taxi (Justice Project South Africa, 2011).”
Attribution of blame	Blaming the victims for bringing harm to themselves by their behavior and blaming dissidents for bringing harm to the economy. Other circumstances such as external conditions are also blamed for harmful effects.	“This situation is caused by a combination of factors including the marginalization and under-use of public transport within the province (SANRAL, 2012b, p. 77).”

Minimizing, denying, disputing or distorting consequences	Any evidence of harm by victims and dissidents are discredited.	The High Court's intervention was "overstepping the line", in "fundamental breach of the division of powers" and interfering in "a crucial aspect of government of policy in the form of the revenue procurement and allocation (South African Government Online, 2011)."
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Adapted from: White, Bandura, & Bero, 2009

### ***Moral Justification***

Moral justification of the project took the form of social, economic, legal and symbolic justifications (Bandura, Caprara, & Zsolnai, 2000). These included promoting the importance of the road infrastructure to the national economy; the purported social benefits of e-tolling; protecting the integrity of the decision to use e-tolling compared with alternatives such as a fuel levy; the promotion of the free enterprise system and black economic empowerment; legal justification to protect the "intellectual property rights" of their private partners, and to symbolically project South Africa as being prepared to host the 2010 FIFA World Cup® soccer tournament. An economist for the public sector portrayed the decision to introduce e-tolling in a positive light (Sankaree & Botha, 2012): "I know what the value of my time is. SANRAL, as far as I am concerned, should get a medal for what they have done in terms of time saving". The e-tolling system was invested with further economic justifications. In a television interview (Sankaree & Ali, 2012), the CEO of SANRAL stated that: "The studies that everybody is doing aren't showing that ... we have created about 10 000 jobs and what we have been contributing to the economy of Gauteng is over R14 billion in one year". The following excerpt from SANRAL's business plan (OUTA, 2012, p. 38) presented to the Minister of Transport in 2005 provides evidence that the soccer world cup was used as a reason to expedite the project at the expense of legal processes: "The environmental process will be a major stumbling block, if this project needs to be completed or partially completed for the FIFA 2010 Soccer World Cup®. If some of the sections are not completed by then, there will be severe traffic congestions by 2010".

### ***Advantageous Comparisons***

The legitimacy of decisions was colored by what the e-tolling project was compared against. By using comparative exoneration they freed themselves of restraint over the morality of their investment decisions, by the following examples of statements (South African Government Online, 2011): "I must state that tolling remains one of the most viable means of funding transport infrastructure all over the world. Many countries – developing and developed – including China, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, use tolling to raise funds for the construction of much-needed transport infrastructure". Although the Minister of Transport approved tolling on the basis that users would be required to pay between 28.5% and 36% of the capital cost of the project, opposition groups calculate that road users would actually be paying 162% of the capital costs in the form of toll collection. The resulting financial consequences of this decision to road users, taken over a 20-year period, would amount to a staggering R33.4 billion in toll collection costs (OUTA, 2012a, p.76). The Minister of Finance denied that the tolling costs were disproportionate (South African Government Online, 2012): "From what we've been informed the cost of collection would be about 20% once the initial phases have gone through to set up machinery and so on. And by international comparison in respect of these sorts of mechanisms that's fairly low.

So we've satisfied ourselves that it is within acceptable limits if you like, in terms of international experience."

### ***Euphemistic Labeling***

Politicians and corporate leaders are aware that language shapes the citizenry's perceptions and thoughts about their actions. These actions take on quite a different meaning depending on terminology used. The analysis confirms that decision-makers reduced their self-sanctions by presenting their activities in sanitized, convoluted and innocuous language. For example, the privatization of once public roads was disguised as "e-roads" and citizens were rendered new as "e-road users" or "beneficiaries". The notion of "free roads" was viewed as a taboo; the use of roads was posed as a "benefit", not a right paid for by taxpayers. A SANRAL report stated that (SANRAL, 2012, p.182): The current 'free at the point of use' system comes at a very high economic cost. 'Free' roads breed congestion; 'free' roads slow up freight delivery, 'free' roads get people to work late; 'free' roads reduce economic growth, and they slow employment creation. Banks and private investment firms are also turning once publicly owned road infrastructure into a "new asset class"; a "fixed-income proxy" which "delivers similar yield expectations to high-yield bonds and real estate, with less risk". E-Roads have become investments that are "safe like high-grade bonds" but with "stock market-like returns". After all, competition is limited and it is difficult to build a rival e-road. Citizens have become "captive customers" from whom "cash flows are guaranteed" (Thornton, 2007). The new traffic police are to be called "peace officers" – an oxymoron (SANRAL, 2012b). Are toll highways meant to be managed like a conflict zone? SANRAL and government appear unclear about the enforcement procedures for non-payers and how the debt collection process is to be enforced by an already backlogged judicial system. SANRAL (SANRAL, 2012b) is also seeking to legislate that "an employee in full or partial uniform" may "at any time enter any motor vehicle and inspect such vehicle and any electronic device installed therein for the purpose of toll collection". This proposal ignores both the Criminal Procedure Act and the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa that protects the right of every citizen not to have their person, home or property (which includes a motor vehicle) searched without a warrant.

Furthermore, the marketing of the project portrays technology in morally neutralizing terms to persuade "e-road users" to get "e-tagged" at "e-toll customer service outlets", and transform themselves into a responsible "e-toll account holder" who accepts the concept of "road pricing" (Justice Project South Africa, 2012). Citizens are being influenced by a combination of bullying tactics and psychological persuasion intended to create a desire to use the "new" e-road products. Ironically, the opposition's reference to "e-tags" as a modern "electronic dompas" is perhaps a more fitting description of reality – the paper dompas curtailed the movement of black citizens into so called white areas during the apartheid era (SANRAL, 2012c). Tolling is arguably discriminatory in the same perverse way that the apartheid dompass system was. Like its apartheid predecessor, this new technology segregates the road systems by affordability and prevents poor citizens from accessing a basic right. From an ethical standpoint, it is arguably arbitrary whether racial differences or affordability differences are used to curtail a citizen's basic right to free movement. Yet, public managers and their private sector partners resort to linguistic camouflage to increase their own willingness to engage in these ethically dubious activities. These sanitizing euphemisms are also intended to neutralize public perception to the harmful realities of the decisions made.

### ***Displacement and Diffusion of Responsibility***

Decision-makers spare themselves self-disapproving reactions by shifting responsibility to others or to situational circumstances. In this way, they absolve themselves of personal responsibility for the harm they are causing. For instance, government projects contain complex divisions of labor

in which the subdivided decision-making activities can seem harmless in themselves. People can easily divert themselves from the morality of what they are doing to the operational details and efficiency of their specific tasks. In this case, public managers absolved themselves of personal responsibility for the harm caused by their decision by viewing their activities as ordered by others and by creating systems of deniability that kept them intentionally uninformed. They shifted responsibility for their decisions to consultants, contracted researchers, and partnering organizations that served as their proxies in the decision-making process. For instance, one of the affidavits (SANRAL, 2012a, p. 135) read: “Two auditing firms namely Deloitte and PWC were appointed to review the SANRAL financial model. Deloitte reviewed the inputs to the SANRAL Cost Model and the overall results presented. PWC reviewed the formulae and outputs of SANRAL Cost Model, and the inputs, formulae and outputs of the SANRAL Revenue Model”. Furthermore, since this was a group decision, decision-makers collectively reduced their personal accountability for the harm they produced. In addition, the very structure of the state bureaucratic machinery obscured personal accountability. These insulated structural arrangements provided public managers with protection from self-criticism and spared them loss of self-respect for authorizing a morally dubious investment. For example, SANRAL held the National Treasury and the Department of Transport (DOT) responsible for not considering the use of the fuel fund to finance the development and maintenance of the roads (SANRAL, 2012a, p. 99): The reinstatement of a “dedicated fuel fund” is debated and demanded by many... The draft RISFSA initially proposed that this funding mechanism be reintroduced however National Treasury was not in support of the proposal. The DOT has indicated that it will investigate this matter further with the intention of tabling it again at a later stage”. So some public managers created schemes of deniability that left them blameless, as global effects in decision-making were seen as the cumulative products of local actions.

### ***Disparaging, Denigrating Critics and Victims***

Decision-makers related to dissidents and victims in impersonal ways. They grouped, divided, devalued, and dehumanized those not in favor of their decision. Opponents such as OUTA were disparaged for being scaremongers and destabilizing the country’s economy. Furthermore, SANRAL belittled OUTA’s actions in a press release, referring to it as nothing more than a “fund-raising exercise” (SAPA, 2012): “SANRAL remains concerned about ongoing statements made in the media about various aspects of this matter, which appear to be designed to cast doubt on the process and litigate the matter rather in a court of public opinion, as part of an ongoing fund-raising exercise.” The strength of moral self-censure depends on how those who suffer the consequences of our actions are regarded. Those who are not part of the in-group are easily removed from moral considerations when they conflict with the in-group’s interests. As a result, moral self-sanctions are disengaged or blunted by depersonalizing and stripping opposing groups of the right to be treated with respect. For instance, when faced with mounting public resistance SANRAL attempted to intimidate motorists by introducing a punitive rate – a rate that was almost 580% higher than the discounted rate – for those who did not purchase an e-tag (Justice Project South Africa, 2012a). To further intimidate motorists into complying, another public official suggested that those who do not register for e-tolling will not have their licence disc re-issued (Justice Project South Africa, 2012b): “... it would be considered in the same light as not paying your traffic fines, which was a cause for disallowing the renewal of a vehicle licence”. The Minister of Transport was reported to have said: “If you don’t like it, catch a taxi” (Justice Project South Africa, 2011). A protester stated: “This must send a message to government that they should not treat us like subjects but like human beings who brought them into office” (Sankaree & Mseleku, 2012).

### ***Disregarding, Minimizing and Disputing***

Public managers also avoided facing up to the harm they cause through their decisions by disregarding, minimizing or disputing the naysayers. The public documents revealed that they provided contradictory evidence to challenge their opponents. They also attempted to trivialize the impact of their decisions, thus neutralizing any moral concerns. Another common tactic used for neutralizing moral concern was the derogating and discrediting of opposition groups as misguided crusaders. The following comment by the Minister of Finance attempted to minimize the harmful economic effects to frequent travelers using these urban routes, arguing that the opposition groups were putting out inflated numbers to the public (Bizcommunity.com, 2012): "... statistics derived from the gantries on the highway showed that people would not be paying more, on average, than R100 to R150 a month". Some opposition groups (Justice Project South Africa, 2012b) argue that apart from negatively influencing the wallets of lower-income motorists, e-tolls will effectively redistribute a once public service by income class. Yet, according to Ngoepe (2012), a Treasury official argued that their study showed that the poor would not be affected in using the vital public facility because the poor used public transport. "We have done a study on the people who use the highway and we are certain that we are not touching the poor. People who use public transport are the poor". Meanwhile OUTA's contentions of harm were viewed as "inaccurate and exaggerated", as having "no basis" and as being "misconceived" (Gordhan, 2012). OUTA's estimates of e-tolling costs were also viewed as "simplistic and patently incorrect figures" (Ali, 2012). Senior public officials dismissed the High Court's intervention in granting the interdict that tolling should not commence, arguing that the court was "overstepping the line", in "fundamental breach of the division of powers" and interfering in "a crucial aspect of government of policy in the form of the revenue procurement and allocation" (South African Government Online, 2012).

### ***Attribution of Blame***

The e-tolling project was initially conceived to be delivered within a broader context of an integrated public transport system and improvements to non-toll alternative routes. The opposition groups argue that SANRAL and the Minister of Transport failed to consider their own social impact assessment, which assumes that an integrated transport plan and viable alternative routes exist before e-tolling may commence. Instead of SANRAL and the Minister answering these charges, they blamed people who are adversely affected for their position. Adverse effects were ascribed to the personal choice of citizens for their "ineffective use of private transport" or the poor use of the beleaguered public transport system, or were displaced to other factors such as environmental concerns (SANRAL, 2012a, p.130). A SANRAL report stated (SANRAL, 2012a, p.77): "This situation is caused by a combination of factors including the marginalization and under-use of public transport within the province...the increasing use and reliance on private cars within a context of historically sub-optimal public transport systems and the spill-over effects of a failing rail system that has suffered years of under-investment and poor service quality." The same document stated that "the private car and freight car users should be paying a greater portion of the real costs of using the road network" (SANRAL, 2012a. p.87).

### ***Moral Engagement***

At times, some public managers expressed reservations or concerns about the project. A prominent trade union leader whose union played a leading role in the protests – despite reportedly making a significant profit from the road infrastructure portion of the project – framed the pricing of existing urban routes as a form of economic apartheid (Vavi, 2012): "The logic of those that say that the poor do not use the motorways, except by public transport, is that they should be permanently excluded from access to the best roads. They must find the pot-holed side roads to get from point A to point B, while the rich glide along in their fancy cars on these highways. Tell

me about economic apartheid, again.” The CEO of SANRAL acknowledged that “the economic benefits would have been even higher if they were to be funded in part or wholly from the National Treasury”, because “tolling reduces user benefits by the cost of the tolling infrastructure” (OUTA, 2012, p.56). The previous Minister of Transport also expressed doubts about the benefits of e-tolling in response to a question on the scheme’s efficiency raised in parliament (COSATU, 2012). These individuals at times adhered to moral standards. However, they also succumbed to strong social pressures and consequently compromised their standards by allowing the project to continue, without taking reasonable steps to address their concerns about the public good.

## Discussion

The findings support the applicability of moral disengagement concepts in a controversial technology decision-making context (Bandura, 1990, 1991). The case study demonstrates that public managers are vulnerable to resorting to systematic and collective moral disengagement strategies to justify projects that are morally and rationally dubious. The results show various instances where senior public managers morally exonerated their decision: by endowing it with socially worthy purposes; euphemistic labeling; displacing and diffusing responsibility; downplaying negative consequences; making favorable comparisons; and disparaging and blaming opposing groups (White, Bandura, & Bero, 2009). Given that all eight moral disengagement psychological devices were used for in this case, society cannot rely solely on public managers – however righteous their personal standards may appear to be – to make ethically sensitive economic and social development decisions. While professional bodies insist that their members apply the highest ethical and professional conduct when assessing the impact of technology decisions on the welfare of the public – this study suggests that despite the existence of these principles – public managers are not mindful of these principles. Instead, when their decisions are challenged, they may resort to irrational actions such as rhetorical manipulations and unwarranted rationalizations to justify their decisions.

It is recommended that more safeguards be built into our social systems that regulate the role of the state and the private sector and their use of technologies. e-Skill educators whose current educational perspectives follow an overly amoral pedagogical approach are at risk of being part of the social environment that is complicit in legitimizing dubious e-skill practices, if they fail to acknowledge the importance of moral disengagement in their classrooms (Ghoshal, 2005). The state must also not be allowed to collude with the private sector and multinationals to unfairly or unreasonably get in the way of citizens accessing basic public services. Ethical guidelines should also encourage diversity of opinions by genuinely involving a broad set of stakeholders. Leaders in the public service should develop the self-awareness and humility to detect when their ego-centric thinking is impeding them from deliberating over the rights of others. Public managers as a collective should genuinely value the role of dissenting voices (Sunstein, 2003) from both the citizenry and the business sector and pay particular attention to these stakeholders to avoid groupthink (Goldberg & Centers, 2012). Strong external experts that are largely neutral should also be used to assist with moral/ethical aspects of decision-making. Public managers should also use independent researchers rather than contract research for potentially controversial policy decisions. They should also be more transparent about the details of the project, and citizens and other opposition groups must continue to insist on high standards of disclosure. However, operationalizing these measures will remain a challenge if moral engagement is not systematically encouraged in a decision-making body and the natural susceptibility to moral disengagement is not openly acknowledged by these bodies.

This study offers two major guidelines for e-skill educators. The first major guideline proposes that educators create and nurture a classroom environment where students are urged to voice their ethical concerns. This can be achieved by openly conveying and reiterating that e-skill practices

are not free from moral and ethical dilemmas and by challenging students to examine their personal egocentric tendencies. Second, group activities should be used to demonstrate to students how naturally and quickly a group's egocentric tendencies can emerge to thwart ethical considerations. The negative influence of egocentric tendencies can be minimized by instilling open communication among group members, and by engaging students to explore moral problem or opportunities that may exist in an e-skill practice by directing sensitivity towards the welfare of others – especially absent others like citizens. Students should also be taught to value the role of dissenting voices within their group and pay attention to these members to minimize potentially harmful groupthink. This type of moral engagement in the classroom may influence students to value a diversity of opinions – by learning to appropriately involve a broad set of stakeholder representations in real world e-skill decisions.

## Conclusions

Educational researchers and policymakers should pursue the irrational tendencies that often elude us in order to assist educators and students to address the ethical implications of complex technology decisions. We need more case studies that critically analyze technology projects and the systemic influences that shape the form and level of moral disengagement in these arrangements. The academy and professional bodies should also be cautious of overselling technology at the expense of deeper intellectual debate over the way in which they can advance or weaken equity, fairness and social justice as opposed to uncritically spreading a pervasive technology discourse lured by economic spin. One thing is for certain, there will be an ongoing need to conduct quality research on moral issues in complex technology projects in order to improve ethical decision-making and the teaching thereof.

Finally, we cannot rely on amoral educational approaches to safeguard us from moral and ethical concerns with complex technology projects. If students are to be responsible stewards of public resources, our academic institutions and classrooms must “toughen” them so that they engage their moral sanctions when making decisions – decisions that support our hopes for using technology to make a better world. We need to focus our efforts on moral engagement in the e-skills classroom for sounder social and economic development decisions and the creation of a more rational society.

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## Biography



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