**Module 1: Cultural Relativism**

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**Cultural Relativism**

Cultural relativism is the view that social standards reflect the cultural context from which they are derived (Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, 2024). In other words, moral and social rules are not universal but instead they are specific to the culture that they come from. What is normal in one area may not be normal in other.

With respect to software engineering ethics, cultural relativism can manifest in many different ways considering the global nature of software development (Casey, V. September 2010). There will be diverse teams of developers and users with different backgrounds. Because of this, software developers have to face ethical challenges head on.

**Data Privacy**

Different cultures will have different views on data privacy and how much control they have over their data. An personal example I have is when I visited Vietnam two years ago. We went to a resort and after we checked in, they scanned our face. When we would go to different areas of the resort, they would scan our face and their system would verify if we were guests and let us in.

In Vietnam, this was a higher class resort and a privilege to go to. If that same system was implemented here in America, there would be a lot of concern on what the resort would do with sensitive data like biometrics.

For software engineers, this means that they may have to change their project scope to adhere to cultural norms to respect the regions privacy practices. This is also an example of how available data can be limited to software engineers which can restrict their development process.

**Censorship and Social Media**

Freedom of speech and acceptable content is something that varies greatly on a global scale. Countries like China, Iran, and India, to name a few, have different censorship laws and are able to block content that is not approved by their government (Barry, E., January 18, 2022). Western cultures, on the other hand, are more relaxed on censorship laws and promote freedom of speech.

Social media is a great example of this. Apps like Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok are banned in other countries because they are seen to promote hate speech, propaganda, and misinformation and is widely used by activists.

This forces software engineers to either develop apps with more cultural awareness or to discontinue development completely. Some companies have developed “twin” apps that are the same as the original but have more restrictions such as blocks on international content. This allows the governments to control and censor the information on social media (Barry, E., January 18, 2022).

**Opinion**

In my opinion, software engineers should follow the cultural norms of the region that their product will be released in. Just like how we want other regions to respect our culture, they will want us to respect theirs. However, I believe that we are allowed to toe-the-line to help promote change and progression but it is very important not to cross that line as it will result in negative consequences.

If a product were to be released in various regions, twin apps can be developed. In my opinion, this is a win-win situation. The area that this twin app will be released will enjoy new entertainment or services that align with their cultural beliefs while the software developers will be able to enter a new market and grow their company.

**Conclusion**

Data privacy and censorship are examples of how cultural relativism influences software development. Cultural relativism help engineers understand the ethical challenges in software development on a global scale.

**References**

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