E-TOLL ROADS:
ANALYSING A CASE OF COLLECTIVE MORAL DISENGAGEMENT IN AN E-GOVERNMENT PROJECT

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ABSTRACT: There has been little research that examines how public managers involved in e-government decisionmaking can sometimes negatively affect the welfare of citizens and waste public resources. This case study analyses collective moral disengagement mechanisms used by leaders and their subordinates to justify a controversial urban e-tolling project in South Africa. Using deductive content analysis, legal documents and public records were coded for modes of moral disengagement. The results show that public managers morally exonerated their decision: by endowing it with socially worthy purposes; euphemistic labelling; displacing and diffusing responsibility; downplaying negative consequences; making favourable comparisons; and disparaging and blaming opposing groups. Enhancements to existing governance frameworks and broader societal safeguards are recommended to prevent moral transgressions and improve e-government decisionmaking. Specific tactics for reputation rebuilding are also recommended when the publicity of alleged moral transgressions is high. Further research is needed to investigate how e-government leaders and broader social actors can engage public managers to enhance transparency and accountability.

KEYWORDS:
Decisionmaking, e-government, ethics, e-tolls, moral disengagement, transparency and accountability

CASE STUDY CONTEXT: E-TOLLING PROJECT IN LIMBO

This research is conducted on one of South Africa's most controversial e-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 has been 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. SANRAL has partnered with private entities to design and build the facilities and manage these operations. 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 recognise 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 centres 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.

Lack of transparency has 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 organisations" (SAPA, 2012a).The decision to use a foreign company 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" (ibid). Opponents claim that the Government Employee Pension Fund (GEPF) holding R15.7 billion in SANRAL bonds was another reason for the lack of transparency (ibid). Some critics argued that this conflict of interest was the real reason government insisted on pursuing the project, despite its unfeasibility and despite it facing public resistance (ibid).

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 have 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, 2012a). 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 (ibid). 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.

PROBLEM: e-GOVERNMENT, MORAL AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS

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 risk whenever they engage in actions that can harm or benefit others (Gauld & Goldfinch, 2006).This poses an interesting dilemma in an era of hyper-privatisation, spurred on by powerful corporations, where the social arrangements between government and the citizen are being increasingly constructed in the image of the market (Jurik 2004; Leye, 2007). This is partly due to the increasing surveillance capability of new ICTs that have improved our ability to collect and manipulate the personal information of citizens for a variety of commercial ends (Walsham, 2012).

Electronic government refers to the important role that information and communication technologies (ICT) can play in reducing the administrative and operational costs, as well as enhancing the services that central and local government deliver to citizens and businesses (Kupe & Okello, 2012, Heeks & Bailur, 2007; Yildiz, 2007). While ICT can play an important role in government, it can also bring about a lack of attention to alternative, more cost-effective avenues of action to follow in a wide range of service-delivery situations. An over-reliance on ICT and associated private-sector providers can even obscure the state's priorities (Rose-Ackerman, 1999; Van Slyke, 2003; Irani et al, 2005). For instance, the increasing surveillance capability of ICT can be used for political ends (eg staying in power) and to bolster private interests (eg profit). Yet effective ICT 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 potentially harmful investments (Marche & McNiven, 2003; Hinrichs, 2007).

One of the potential harmful effects of the Gauteng ORT project is the widening of inequity, particularly for low income road users. In the absence of feasible alternatives, segregating the Gauteng road systems by affordability prevents many citizens from accessing the basic right to free movement. The decision to use private capital and expertise instead of considering alternative funding models is also likely to negatively influence future road pricing (toll rates), as private partners look to maximise their return on investment and the state looks to service the debt. Consequently, the project is likely to have a negative influence on the personal finances of many road users and the broader economy. The project's lack of transparency may also harm existing trust relations between the citizenry and the state.

This study's analysis is grounded in the social cognitive theory of moral agency (Bandura,1990; Bandura,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 neutralises the implications of a person's role and obscures their personal accountability in morally tenuous situations. Moral disengagement has explained political and military violence, organisational corruption, corporate transgressions, illicit consumer behaviour, unfair labour practices and the decline in civic behaviour (Caprara et al, 2009; Paharia & Deshpandé, 2009; Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2011).

To date, the role of moral disengagement has not been fully investigated in the e-government context. Since people use moral disengagement mechanisms to downplay the ethical content of their decisions and to make decisions that advance their organisational and personal interests, it is reasonable to assert that these mechanisms play an important role in explaining controversial project decisions made by e-government leaders and their subordinates. It is interesting to analyse whether moral disengagement mechanisms facilitate the cognitive dampening or exclusion of moral considerations in e-government decisionmaking. This study therefore seeks to contribute to knowledge about ethical decisionmaking in e-government projects by exploring the notion of moral disengagement as the process which influences morally dubious or unethical decisionmaking behaviour (Bannister & Lalor, 2001).

Thus, the purpose of this research is to answer the question: What are the collective cognitive strategies that public managers used to legitimise their e-toll investment decisions?

## LITERATURE REVIEW: ETHICS IN ᴇ-GOVERNMENT DECISIONMAKING

Jones (1991) defines unethical behaviour as any action in decisionmaking that is either illegal or morally unacceptable to the larger community. Ethical decisionmaking entails that the group makes a choice between what may be considered a right or wrong course of action based on some moral standard (Bandura, 2007). Research has attempted to explain unethical decisionmaking using macro-level factors such as environmental pressures, and individual differences between team members such as personality factors, demographics, and values and beliefs (Allmon, Page & Roberts, 2000). For instance Kohlberg (1976, 1984) suggests that advanced moral reasoning requires higher levels of cognitive complexity. However, these approaches reveal very little about the socio-cognitive processes that people employ when they decide to act in an unethical manner.

Rest and Barnett (1986) propose that moral failure in decisionmaking can occur due to group deficiency in any one of four phases (see Figure 1). The process starts with *recognition that a moral problem or opportunity exists*. During this phase, the group displays sensitivity towards the problem that exists and the welfare of others. In doing so, they know how possible alternatives will impact others and be viewed by them. The second phase involves making a moral judgment *concerning which course of action is morally right or wrong*. The group may consider a utilitarian (the greater good), care (the vulnerable) or justice perspectives (fairness of process and outcomes). The third phase, moral intention, involves *prioritising their choices in response to a given situation*. Here, the group faces up to its commitment to pursue a moral course of action. Members often find their moral values in conflict with their personal values, as a higher value needs to be placed on moral judgment and taking responsibility for moral outcomes. The final phase involves *executing and implementing a morally based course of action*. The group carries out its intentions by meeting the goals and outcomes of its chosen course of action. Individuals in the group should have the courage and persistence to overcome fatigue and temptations and implement the course of action that serves the moral goal (Rest et al, 1999).

Jones (1991) expanded upon Rest and Barnett's (1986) model by adding *issue contingencies* in the decisionmaking process. The model posits that moral intensity – the degree of moral relevance an *issue* holds for the decisionmaker or group – influences decision outcomes. Elements of moral intensity issues include: *magnitude of consequences, social consensus, probability of effect, temporal immediacy, proximity,* and *concentration of effect*. The *magnitude of consequences* considers the total harm or benefit that will arrive from a particular act. *Social consensus* assesses the extent of social agreement supporting the notion that the act is good or bad. *Probability of effect* gauges the likelihood that an action will occur and result in harm. *Temporal immediacy* looks at the perceived length of time between the act and its resulting consequences. *Proximity* appraises the feelings of closeness the decisionmaker has with those who would be affected by the act. Lastly, *concentration of effect* measures the number of people the decisionmaker believes will be affected by the act. An increase in any one of these issue elements increases the overall moral intensity of the decision (see Figure 1).

This issue-contingent model tends to emphasise the interaction between the person or group and the situation as a cause of unethical behaviour. Certainly these contingencies regarding the decision can override a person's moral compass and compel them to act in unethical ways, yet this approach also ignores the reasoning processes that occur when people collectively decide to act unethically.

FIGURE 1:   ISSUE-CONTINGENT MODEL
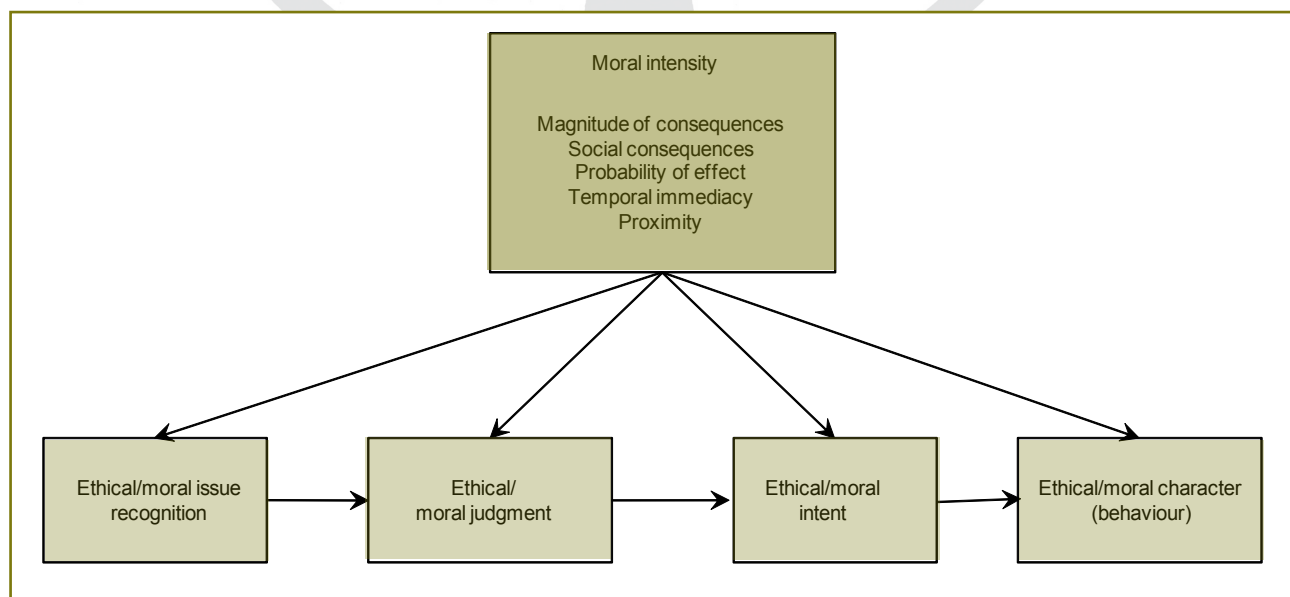
Source: Jones, 1991

Formal decisionmaking techniques seek to provide an objective and reliable information base to facilitate moral and ethical decisionmaking and justify the *overt goals* (tangible benefits) of e-government investments. However e-government decisionmaking can also be used to serve the covert goals of one or more stakeholders. Stakeholders with *covert goals* do not wish to admit publicly that their intentions on the project are to serve their private interests or their organisation's interests above the interests of others (Irani et al, 2005). Formal decisionmaking processes in e-government projects can also be viewed as a token gesture meant to serve *ritual goals* by expressing an image of rational and accountable management (Walsham, 1999). Public managers can use the idea of rationality to pursue their personal agendas.

Empirical research has found ample evidence to suggest that decisionmaking in most types of organisations is predisposed to elements of irrationality (Goldberg & Centers, 2012). Whereas rational decisionmaking is associated with measurable, calculated, factual, reasoned hard data, irrational elements such as personal preferences, gut feelings, subjectivity, politics, intuition, entrepreneurship, ambition, instincts and beliefs are very much at play (Land, 2000). Gauld and Goldfinch (2006) argue that irrationality in e-government decisions is a combination of:

- *Idolisation or technical infatuation* – where politicians and public managers vastly overestimate what transformational effects can be achieved by ICT.
- *Technophilia* – where the e-government profession perpetuates the myth that ICT is the solution to various government challenges.
- *Lomanism* – where public managers are seduced by overly enthusiastic and dedicated salespeople.
- *Managerial faddism* – the tendency for consultants and public managers to embrace the idea that a problem (funding road infrastructure) can be fixed along the lines of a new managerial fad (e-tolling), with advancements in ICT often being a key element.

However, arguments such as these say little about how decisions that are required for unethical conduct are collectively normalised in an e-government project. Applying the moral disengagement mechanisms explained by social-cognitive theory to an e-government case study may offer a new perspective for researchers and fill some of the void present in existing ethical decisionmaking frameworks. Recognition of these moral disengagement psychological processes and how they are activated will lead to a better understanding of why public managers are prone to engage in unethical or economically dubious decisionmaking behaviour.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social cognitive theory provides an appropriate conceptual apparatus to assess structures and processes through which moral agency operates in the realm of e-government decisionmaking; and to guide interventions aimed at promoting desirable or ethical decisionmaking behaviours (Bandura, 1991; Bandura et al, 1996). This theory assumes that people reflect on the consequences of their conduct, pursue goals in accordance with their own standards, enact actions that give them satisfaction and self-worth, and avoid behaviours that carry self-censure. Yet people can violate the principles of desirable and ethical decisionmaking behaviour 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 behaviour is morally permissible (see Figure 2 below).

FIGURE 2:   MECHANISMS THROUGH WHICH MORAL SELF-SANCTIONS ARE SELECTIVELY DISENGAGED
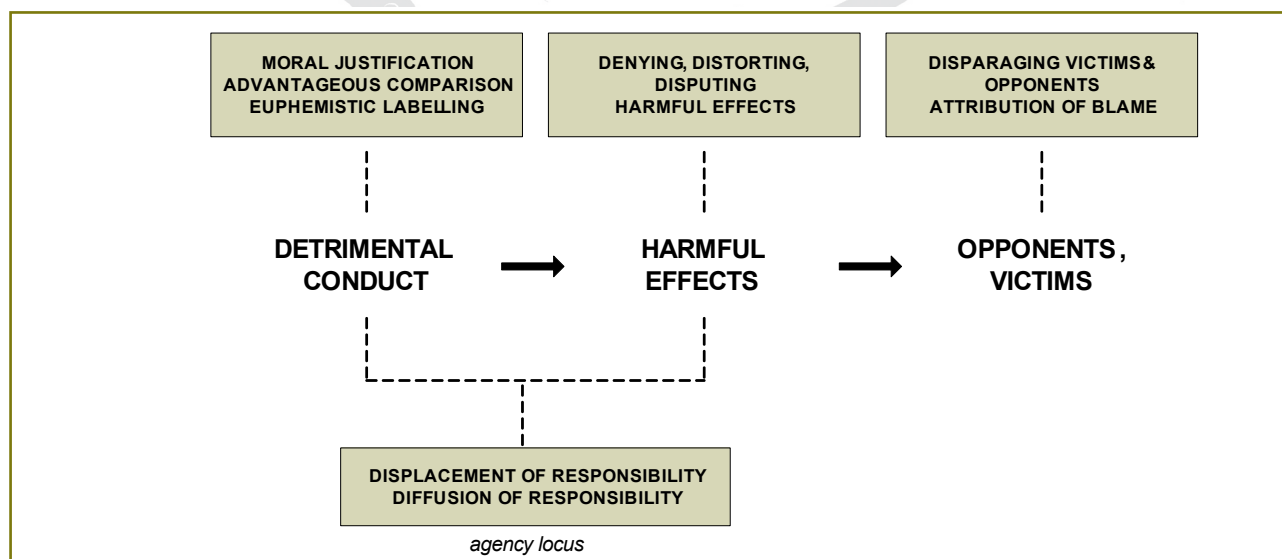
Source: White, Bandura & Bero, 2009

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 overemphasise the positive features of their chosen options compared to the negative features and have a strong motivation to bias their judgment to support their desired conclusion (Goldberg & Centers, 2012).

TABLE 1:   CATEGORIES AND THEMES OF MORAL DISENGAGEMENT MECHANISMS

Categories	Definition including key themes
Moral justification	The use of moral explanatrions to justify harmful decisions and to challenge rational decisionmaking norms. Harmful decisions are regarded as serving worthy purposes and actors reward themselves for performance.
Euphemistic labelling	The use of sanitising and convoluted language to make harmful decisions personally and socially acceptable.
Advantageous comparison	Comparing or contrasting harmful decisions to actions that make them appear benign, of little consequence, or of lesser negative effect.
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.
Diffusion of responsibility	Absolving the individual of personal responsibility for harmful decisions by giving responsibility to the group and various facets of decisionmaking to sub-groups. In this way no one is held personally accountable for the harmful decision taken.
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.
Attribution of blame	Blaming the victims for bringing harm to themselves by their behaviour. Other circumstances such as external conditions are also blamed for harmful effects.
Minimising, denying, disputing or distorting consequences	Any evidence of harm is discredited.

Adapted from: White, Bandura & Bero, 2009

IN-DEPTH 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 e-government decisions. The Gauteng ORT project requires scholarly analysis because it represents large-scale e-government 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 generalise the findings to a wide range of e-government decisions (Ruddin, 2006). Instead the goal was to perform an analytical generalisation – that is, to generalise a particular set of results to the study's theoretical propositions about moral disengagement. Four criteria were used to ensure the scientific rigour of this study (Guba & Lincoln, 1985): confirmability (use of standard coding protocol), credibility (minimising 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), transferability (assessing the degree of similarity of the viewpoints between the different decisionmakers, eg 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).

DIRECTED CONTENT ANALYSIS

The study of ICT public sector moral transgressions in 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, the National Treasury and the Department of Transport to the High Court, now publicly available, provided insight into how decisionmakers justified their actions. Consequently, published secondary sources become a pivotal source of data for the researcher. Over 60 documents were analysed, 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.

DOCUMENT SELECTION APPROACH

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 (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Bandura et al, 1996). It includes formal definitions of each of the mechanisms and exemples 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 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 categorised 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. The sections that follow document how each of the mechanisms of moral disengagement were enlisted by the actors.

MORAL JUSTIFICATION

Moral justification of the e-government project took the form of social, economic, legal and symbolic justifications (Bandura et al, 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, 2012b: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 coloured by what the e-tolling project was compared against. Decisionmakers used the contrast principle to make their decisions seem righteous (Cialdini, 1993). 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, 2012b: 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.

SANRAL's own research (Graduate School of Business, 2010: 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".

EUPHEMISTIC LABELLING

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 decisionmakers reduced their self-sanctions by presenting their activities in sanitised, convoluted and innocuous language. For example, the privatisation 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, 2012c: 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, 2012a). 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 (2012a) 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 neutralising 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" (SANRAL, 2012b). 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 (Justice Project South Africa, 2012a). So these words have negative connotations for most South Africans.

Public managers and their private sector partners resort to linguistic camouflage to increase their own willingness to engage in further dubious activities. These sanitising euphemisms are intended to neutralise public perception to the harmful realities of the decisions made.

DISPLACEMENT AND DIFFUSION OF RESPONSIBILITY

Decisionmakers 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, e-government projects contain complex divisions of labour in which the subdivided decisionmaking 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 organisations that served as their proxies in the decisionmaking process. For instance, one of the affidavits (SANRAL, 2012c: 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, decisionmakers 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 authorising 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, 2012c: 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 of these public managers created schemes of deniability that left them blameless, as global effects in decisionmaking were seen as the cumulative products of local actions.

DISPARAGING, DENIGRATING CRITICS AND VICTIMS

Decisionmakers related to naysayers and opposing groups in impersonal ways. They grouped, divided, devalued, and dehumanised those not in favour of their decision. Opponents such as OUTA were disparaged for being scaremongers and destabilising 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, 2012b):

> 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 depersonalising 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, 2012c).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, MINIMISING AND DISPUTING

Public managers also avoided facing up to the harm they cause through their decisions by disregarding, minimising or disputing the naysayers. The public documents revealed that they provided contradictory evidence to challenge their opponents. They also attempted to trivialise the impact of their decisions, thus neutralising any moral concerns. Another common tactic used for neutralising moral concern was the derogating and discrediting of opposition groups as misguided crusaders. The following comment by the Minister of Finance attempted to minimise the harmful economic effects to frequent travellers 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 (OUTA, 2012b; Justice Project South Africa, 2012c) 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: 14). OUTA's estimates of e-tolling costs were also viewed as "simplistic and patently incorrect figures" (Ali, 2012: 6). 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, 2012c: 130). A SANRAL report stated (SANRAL, 2012c: 77):

> This situation is caused by a combination of factors including the marginalisation 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, 2012c: 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 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, 2012b: 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.

CONCLUSION: WHERE TO FROM HERE?
The findings in this South African case demonstrate that role players in e-government initiatives sometimes resort to systematic and collective moral disengagement strategies to justify projects that are developmentally and economically dubious (White et al, 2009). The study contributes to previous research by confirming the analytical generalisation of the moral disengagement concept (Ruddin, 2006) to a specific e-government case. The results show that senior public managers morally exonerated their decision by: endowing it with socially worthy purposes; euphemistic labelling; displacing and diffusing responsibility; downplaying negative consequences; making favourable comparisons; and disparaging and blaming opposing groups. Given that these psychological devices were used for moral disengagement, additional safeguards are recommended to prevent dubious e-government investments. Researchers have often linked the success of e-government initiatives to strong leadership (OECD, 2003; Marche & McNiven, 2003). Strong ethical leaders are perhaps more cognisant of the developmental and economic consequences of e-government decisions. By adopting the safeguards proposed below, leaders can perhaps play a more important role in improving e-government decisionmaking.

HOW CAN E-GOVERNMENT LEADERS FACILITATE MORAL ENGAGEMENT?

The findings here re-emphasise the perspectives of previous research which advanced the role of leaders in reinforcing good governance (OECD, 2003). The empirical examination of moral disengagement provides an alternative theoretical path to advance the notion that leaders need to be transparent, they need to be accountable, and they also need to proactively prevent corrupt behaviour and promote honest behaviour (Beu & Buckley, 2004; Marche & McNiven, 2003).

This study has three major practical implications for leaders of e-government initiatives. The first major practical implication is concerned with the duty of leaders to promote moral engagement among subordinates. The evidence from the case corroborates prior research that found subordinates to be susceptible to moral disengagement as they displaced responsibility for their behaviour onto the leader (Beu & Buckley, 2004; Hinrichs, 2007). This study supports the notion that subordinates are particularly prone at holding leaders ultimately responsible for moral decisions. Table 2 presents guidelines that can be adopted by leaders to provide safeguards and promote moral engagement among subordinates:

TABLE 2:   PROMOTING MORAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG SUBORDINATES

No	Guidelines
1	Create and nurture an environment where subordinates are not blind followers and are able to voice their ethical concerns in an appropriate manner.
2	Openly convey and reiterate that subordinates are jointly accountable for moral and ethical issues.
3	Put in place mechanisms to hold a person or group accountable for questionable actions. Also engage in open communication that promotes and rewards ethical behaviour.
4	Insist that the group considers different options during decisionmaking (option analysis) to avoid poorly motivated reasoning or well-motivated forgetting.
5	Be aware of personal, as well as group, egocentric tendencies.
6	Recognise that a moral problem or opportunity exists when making decisions and demonstrate sensitivity towards the welfare of others (especially absent others like citizens).

Even where these guidelines are adopted, the evidence from the case suggests that e-government leaders cannot rely completely on the in-group to make ethical decisions (Beu & Buckley, 2004). Effectively engaging with external stakeholders is another avenue by which leaders can reinforce good governance (Ochara, 2008) (see Table 3 below). Therefore the second major practical implication is concerned with the effective engagement of external stakeholders. The following guidelines are offered:

TABLE 3:   ACTIVELY ENGAGE EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

No	Guidelines
1	Be transparent about the details of the project to citizens and other interested stakeholders.
2	Engage and value the role of dissenting voices from civil society, business and academia. Pay attention to these stakeholders to minimise group-think.
3	Appoint independent researchers rather than rely on contract research and consulting firms alone to inform policy decisions. The latter are more likely to be supportive of in-group norms which may bias their findings. Independent researchers are more likely to offer a more objective judgement.
4	Depending on the moral intensity of the initiative, hire external trainers to raise awareness and teach ethical decisionmaking, based on case examples similar to the ethical dilemmas being faced.

The concept of moral disengagement is also useful in advancing an understanding as to why e-government initiatives can sometimes be viewed as an ethical scandal by the public and how these scandals can lead to reputational damage. The third major practical implication, therefore, is for leadership to focus on rebuilding the initiative's reputation (Sims, 2009). Failure to deal with reputational issues may lead to permanent distrust between government and citizens (Marche & McNiven, 2003), as well as lower staff commitment to the initiative (Peterson, 2004). Reputational damage may even dissuade citizens from using the e-government service. To rebuild reputation, the following guidelines are offered in Table 4:

TABLE 4:   REBUILD REPUTATION

No	Guidelines
1	Repair unjust outcomes that led to the controversy by changing existing e-government systems, processes and policies.
2	Decouple parts of the initiative that morally transgressed from parts that still have their integrity intact and confront the individuals or groups responsible for the parts that transgressed.

HOW CAN CIVIL SOCIETY FACILITATE MORAL ENGAGEMENT WHEN REQUIRED?

The concept of moral disengagement advances our understanding of how leaders sometimes deal poorly with transgressions. Indeed, some leaders abuse their power to serve their self-interest, with little regard for the needs of the broader society (De Hoogh & Hartog, 2008; Beu & Buckley, 2004). Therefore, there will be times when civil society should organise counter-power to appropriately challenge leaders who do not deal effectively with transgressions (Castells, 2007).

For instance, one of the major issues that arise from the analysis of the Gauteng ORT case is that profit motives pertaining to the government pension fund and private interests were prioritised over democratic values, such as the principle of equality of access to public goods (Jurik, 2004; Rose-Ackerman, 2002; Rose-Ackerman, 1999). This was the case despite the risk of increased costs to users of the public road infrastructure. In this and other cases not studied here, powerful corporations have become the established engine for economic growth and employment, while public infrastructure appears to be reduced to little more than an opportunity for investment returns. Not surprisingly, there is potential for inappropriate relationships with private corporations and governments that tout narrow economic rationality over social responsibility (Marche & McNiven, 2003). From a policy reform perspective, civil society should ensure that safeguards are built into social systems and regulatory frameworks (see Table 5 below):

TABLE 5:   THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN FACILITATING MORAL ENGAGEMENT IN E-GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

No	Guidelines
1	Insisting on mandatorily high standards of disclosure from both private corporations and governments.
2	Insisting on regulating the role of the state and the private sector and their use of ICT. For instance, the state must not be allowed to collude with the private sector and multinationals to unfairly or unreasonably prevent citizens from accessing basic public services.
3	Insisting on a diversity of opinions by mandatorily involving a broad set of stakeholder representations in large scale e-government initiatives that have a significant impact on society.
4	Forming a cohesive organisation to challenge controversial e-government initiatives that defend morally dubious actions, by using initial consensus-seeking measures such as meetings, and conflict measures such as the use of regulatory mechanisms, by way of the courts to test the legitimacy of the project.
5	Mobilising society to challenge controversial e-government initiatives using social mechanisms such as the media, subtle forms of protest campaigns, more active forms from passive resistance, wider public demonstration and open civil disobedience.

In summary, the guidelines offered here for leaders and civil society suggest that current e-government discourse should not be led unevenly by economic rationalities at the expense of deeper intellectual debate over the role of leaders in reinforcing good governance and ensuring the active participation of civil society (Kupe & Okello, 2012). Deeper intellectual debate over the role of civil society in organising counter power to challenge unethical relationships between private corporations and governments is also needed (Castells, 2007). Lack of good governance and an overemphasis on economic rationalities can lead to collective moral transgressions by leaders, their subordinates and private corporations (Ochara, 2008). Although e-government intends to promote democracy, there is a need to be aware of the potential danger that actors responsible for these initiatives can sometimes infringe on democratic values such as participation, equity, fairness and social justice.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Further research is needed, including case studies that critically analyse e-government initiatives. More specifically, there is a need to understand the systemic influences that shape the form and level of moral engagement in these arrangements in order to improve decisionmaking and ultimately e-government success. For instance, future research could examine the extent to which moral engagement levels by leadership influence subordinate moral engagement levels; and whether e-government projects with complex governance arrangements (due to increased intergovernmental collaboration and public-private partnerships) are more susceptible to moral disengagement.

In conclusion, e-government research also needs to turn its attention to the prevention of moral transgressions and the improvement of future behaviours of e-government leaders, subordinates and private corporations. The insights provided by the concept of moral disengagement investigated in this paper will hopefully contribute towards improving existing governance frameworks for e-government initiatives – improvements that recognise the need to foster greater trust, closer engagement, responsible behaviour, effective decisionmaking and ultimately better service delivery to the citizen.

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