

Obedience to Authority

This video introduces the behavioral ethics bias known as obedience to authority. Obedience to authority describes our tendency to please authority figures. We may place too much emphasis on that goal and, consciously or subconsciously, subordinate the goal of acting ethically. We all need to monitor ourselves to ensure that we are not unduly suspending our own independent ethical judgment in order to please our superiors. If students are not aware of this vulnerability, they cannot guard against it. Many white-collar criminals trace their downfall to an excessive obedience to authority. Many successful students are “pleasers,” so they can understand how strong the motive to please authority can be.

The “Milgram experiment” offers a glimpse into the effects of obedience to authority. Psychologist Stanley Milgram studied whether Americans might be as obedient to authority as Germans seemed to be under Hitler. The question addressed was whether subjects would deliver apparently painful electric shocks to another person who had missed a question in an apparent test of whether negative reinforcement through electric shocks would improve memory, just because someone in a white lab coat told them to do so. Although people predicted before the experiment that very few American subjects would show excessive obedience to authority, in actuality, as Professor Francesca Gino writes:

“All of Milgram’s participants—who were well-adjusted, well-intentioned people—delivered electric shocks to victims who seemingly were in great pain, complaining of heart problems, or even apparently unconscious. Over 60 percent of participants delivered the maximum shock.”

Perhaps this should not have been too surprising. The pleasure centers of our brains light up when we please authority. We are trained from childhood to please authority figures—parents, teachers, and police officers.

Law and order are generally good things, so some level of obedience to authority is definitely a good thing. But if people go too far and suspect their own independent ethical judgment, either consciously or unconsciously, they are dropping the ball.

Employers, we argue, pay employees for their brains, their education and training, and their judgment. Employers are short-changed if employees do not use their best strategic judgment, their best operational judgment, and their best moral judgment, because errors in any of the three areas can be quite costly.

To learn about related behavioral ethics concepts, watch *Conformity Bias* and *Role Morality*.



The case study on this page, “Stangl & the Holocaust,” explores an extreme example of obedience to authority, in which Nazi officer Franz Stangl, who was responsible for the killing of nearly one million Jews, claimed he was simply following orders. For a related case study that examines the dangers of conformity bias during the Holocaust, read “Reserve Police Battalion 101.”

Behavioral ethics draws upon behavioral psychology, cognitive science, evolutionary biology, and related disciplines to determine how and why people make the ethical and unethical decisions that they do. Much behavioral ethics research addresses the question of why good people do bad things. Many behavioral ethics concepts are explored in detail in [Concepts Unwrapped](#), as well as in the video case study [In It to Win: The Jack Abramoff Story](#). Anyone who watches all (or even a good part) of these videos will have a solid introduction to behavioral ethics.

Terms defined in our ethics glossary that are related to the video and case studies include: conformity bias, obedience to authority, and role morality.

Discussion Questions

1. Does the claim that an excessive desire to please authority may cause people to act unethically ring true to you?
2. Can you think of a situation where you deferred to authority and later regretted it? Perhaps because you facilitated a stupid decision that you could have stopped? Perhaps because you facilitated an unethical decision that you could have stopped?
3. Which is scarier—that Joe might not have the courage to stand up to a superior requesting unethical action because Joe doesn’t want to lose this job, or that Joe might not even see the ethical issue because he is so intent upon pleasing the boss?
4. Does Bud Krogh’s explanation for how he went off the ethical rails sound plausible to you?
5. How can people guard against suspending their own ethical judgment in order to unduly defer to authority?
6. Following is a description from Prof. Jesse Prinz of Stanley Milgram’s famous experiment on obedience to authority. Read the description and then tell the class how you think that you would have acted had you been one of the subjects of the experiment.
 - “Subjects in this experiment were instructed to ask another volunteer, located in an adjacent room, a series of questions. Each time the second volunteer failed to answer a question correctly, the subject asking the questions was asked to administer an electric shock using a dial with increasing voltages. Unbeknownst to the subject the second volunteer was really a stooge working with the experimenter, and the voltage dial was a harmless prop. The stooges were instructed to make errors so that the subjects would have to administer shocks. At preplanned stages, the stooges would express pain, voice concerns about safety, make sounds of agony, pound on the wall, or, ultimately, stop making any noise at all. If a subject conveyed reluctance to continue increasing the voltage, the experimenter would reply that it was crucial for the experiment to

continue. The experiment ended if and when a subject persistently refused to continue.”

Additional Resources

Ariely, Dan. 2012. *The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone—Especially Ourselves*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Bazerman, Max H., and Ann E. Tenbrunsel. 2011. *Blind Spots: Why We Fail to Do What’s Right and What to Do about It*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

De Cremer, David (Editor). 2009. *Psychological Perspectives on Ethical Behavior and Decision Making*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

De Cremer, David, and Ann E. Tenbrunsel (Editors). 2012. *Behavioral Business Ethics: Shaping an Emerging Field*. New York: Routledge.

DeSteno, David, and Piercarlo Valdesolo. 2011. *Out of Character: The Surprising Truths about the Liar, Cheat, Sinner (and Saint) Lurking in All of Us*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Dienhart, John William, Dennis J. Moberg, and Ronald F. Duska (Editors). 2001. *The Next Phase of Business Ethics: Integrating Psychology and Ethics*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing.

Gino, Francesca. 2013. *Sidetracked: Why Our Decisions Get Derailed, and How We Can Stick to the Plan*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.

Heffernan, Margaret. 2011. *Willful Blindness: Why We Ignore the Obvious at Our Peril*. New York: Walker Publishing Company.

Matousek, Mark. 2012. *Ethical Wisdom: The Search for a Moral Life*. New York: Anchor Books.

Mayhew, Brian W., and Pamela R. Murphy. 2014. “The Impact of Authority on Reporting Behavior, Rationalization and Affect.” *Contemporary Accounting Research* 31 (2): 420-443.

Messick, David M., and Ann E. Tenbrunsel (Editors). 1996. *Codes of Conduct: Behavioral Research into Business Ethics*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Milgram, Stanley. 1974. *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. New York: Harper & Row.

Rhode, Deborah L. (Editor). 2006. *Moral Leadership: The Theory and Practice of Power, Judgment, and Policy*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Werhane, Patricia H., Laura Pincus Hartman, Crina Archer, Elaine E. Englehardt, and Michael S. Pritchard. 2013. *Obstacles to Ethical Decision-Making: Mental Modes, Milgram and the Problem of Obedience*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

The latest teaching resource from Ethics Unwrapped is an article, written by Cara Biasucci and Robert Prentice, that describes the basics of behavioral ethics, introduces the videos and supporting materials along with teaching examples, and includes data on the efficacy of Ethics Unwrapped for improving ethics pedagogy across disciplines. It was published in *Journal of Business Law and Ethics Pedagogy* (Vol. 1, August 2018), and can be downloaded here: "[Teaching Behavioral Ethics \(Using "Ethics Unwrapped" Videos and Educational Materials\)](#)."

For resources on teaching behavioral ethics, an article written by Ethics Unwrapped authors Minette Drumwright, Robert Prentice, and Cara Biasucci introduces key concepts in behavioral ethics and approaches to effective ethics instruction—including sample classroom assignments. The article, published in the *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, may be downloaded here: "[Behavioral Ethics and Teaching Ethical Decision Making](#)."

A detailed article by Robert Prentice with extensive resources for teaching behavioral ethics, published in *Journal of Legal Studies Education*, may be downloaded here: "[Teaching Behavioral Ethics](#)."

An article by Robert Prentice discussing how behavioral ethics can improve the ethicality of human decision-making, published in the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy*, may be downloaded here: "[Behavioral Ethics: Can It Help Lawyers \(And Others\) Be their Best Selves?](#)"

A dated but still serviceable introductory article about teaching behavioral ethics can be accessed through Google Scholar by searching: Prentice, Robert A. 2004. "Teaching Ethics, Heuristics, and Biases." *Journal of Business Ethics Education* 1 (1): 57-74.

Transcript of Narration

Written and Narrated by

Robert Prentice, J.D.
Business, Government & Society Department
McCombs School of Business
The University of Texas at Austin

"When we are young, we naturally wish to please our parents, our teachers, and ministers and rabbis. Even as adults, we desire to please authority figures, such as our boss at work. If obedience to authority causes us to ignore our own ethical standards, however, big trouble can result.

When people in organizations make decisions, they are often much more concerned about the acceptability of the decision to the people to whom they are accountable than they are about the

content of the decision itself. Studies show that an underling who is pressured by a CFO to cook the books is much more likely to act improperly than an employee who is not so pressured. Another recent study showed that CFOs are more likely to illicitly manage earnings when it profits their CEOs than when it profits themselves. In other words, they act unethically primarily to please their bosses, not to put money in their own pockets.

A study of nurses by Hofling and Brotzman found that when members of one group were asked whether they would follow a physician's instructions to give a patient an injection of an obviously excessive dose of a drug that was not even on the hospital's approved list, almost all the nurses said that they would not do so. But when a second group of nurses were actually given such instructions, virtually every one of them was prepared to do so before they were stopped by the experimenters. Most of us do not realize how much our desire to please our superiors and our consequent tendency to defer to authority will cloud our ethical judgment when the time comes to make decisions.

Private e-mails sent by stock analysts during the dot.com boom often indicated that the analysts wished they had the courage to stand up to their superiors and "call them like they saw them." But usually these analysts failed to do so. Instead, they continued to knuckle under to supervisory pressure to hype questionable stocks so that their firms could gain investment banking business.

More concerning than people consciously acting unethically in order to stay in their boss's good graces is the fact that sometimes employees are so intent upon pleasing their superiors that they do not even notice the ethical aspects of a decision. Egil "Bud" Krogh, who became infamous as head of the "Plumbers Unit" operating out of President Nixon's White House, was instructed to oversee a break-in at the office of the psychiatrist of Daniel Ellsberg, who had leaked the Pentagon Papers to the New York Times, embarrassing the Nixon Administration. Krogh later explained that he was so intent upon pleasing his superiors who were, after all, among the most powerful people in the world, that he never even activated his own ethical sense to judge the morality of what he was trying to accomplish. He did not see the ethical dimensions of his situation until it was too late.

Bud Krogh's experience should be a warning to us all. While it is usually a fine thing for us to please our superiors, we must keep a lookout for ethical issues and we must never defer so completely to our bosses that we check our own ethical standards at the door."