Moral Myopia
Questions for classroom discussions

1) In your experience, what rationalizations are most likely to undergird moral myopia?

2) Why shouldn’t illegality be the sole determinant of moral behavior?

3) Early in the video, a young man talked about losing his perspective when he set his sights on gaining entrance to the Business Honors Program. He seemed to suffer from moral myopia, and he implied that he did some things that he regrets. Can you think of a time when you (or someone whom you know) became so absorbed in reaching a goal that you lost your perspective and did something unethical? If so, what rationalizations supported your behavior? What were the consequences of the moral myopia?

4) Think of a current event concerning a scandal that likely would have included moral myopia on the part of some of the people involved. How do you think that smart, talented people got caught up in a scandal such as this? What rationalizations do you think that they used to justify their behavior?

5) In the video, two young men talked about an example of organizational myopia in which their university touted the importance of diversity while a key area of student housing was not diverse at all. Can you think of an instance of organizational myopia, or could you imagine an example of organizational myopia and describe it?

6) In their research, Drumwright and Murphy found that moral myopia was most difficult for business people in advertising to identify at the societal level. When people look back at our society in 100 years, are there current issues that will make them wince and say, “How could they have been so blind?”

7) Are there, things that you have done or could do to avoid moral myopia?
Additional Teaching Note

The three videos in the Moral Trilogy—Moral Myopia, Moral Muteness, and Moral Imagination—are intended to be used together. Moral myopia and moral muteness often reinforce each other, and breaking free of moral myopia and moral muteness can enable one to develop moral imagination. These concepts and many of the rationalizations that underpin them are described and documented in a Journal of Advertising article by Minette E. Drumwright and Patrick E. Murphy, “How Advertising Practitioners View Ethics: Moral Myopia, Moral Muteness and Moral Imagination” (2004, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 7-24).

One way to teach the Moral Trilogy is to stop the videos at certain points and ask some of the discussion questions related to the specific situations referenced. For example, two different students talk about situations involving sharing answers for schoolwork. The instructor could stop the video at one of these points and ask questions such as, “Does this go on at our university? What kinds of rationalizations are used? Is there moral myopia or moral muteness about this topic? How would one overcome them?”

In teaching the videos on moral myopia and moral muteness, instructors can often tie in with current events about scandals that likely involved moral myopia and moral muteness on the part of a number of people. One example involves the recent allegations of academic fraud at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) and the criminal indictment of Professor Julius Nyang’oro, long-time chairman of the African American Studies Department at UNC. Nyang’oro was indicted for teaching dozens of barely existent or questionably led classes, including one lecture class that never met in which 18 out of 19 students were members of the UNC football team. He also presided over a department in which more than 500 grades were illicitly changed often with professors’ signatures forged. If the allegations are true, a scandal such as this could not have occurred absent moral myopia and moral muteness on the part of a number of people. As another example, Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong for years adamantly denied that he had taken performance-enhancing drugs, and then in 2013, he confessed on the Oprah Winfrey show that he had indeed taken drugs. Armstrong and those who supported him in the cover up most likely suffered from forms of moral myopia and moral muteness. Likewise, Penn State coach Jerry Sandusky’s sexual harassment of young boys and the related cover up likely involved moral myopia and/or moral muteness
on the part of a number of parties, including highly respected coaches and university officials.

Examples of moral myopia and moral muteness that involve illegal behavior are often some of the most dramatic. However, it is important to emphasize that moral myopia and moral muteness do not always lead to criminal behavior, and they are not limited to situations that involve breaking the law. For example, one could imagine that the recent disastrous roll out of the Obamacare website involved moral myopia and moral muteness on the part of a number of individuals.

The videos on moral myopia and moral muteness tie in nicely and reinforce the concepts and ideas in the Ethics Unwrapped film, In It to Win, about the infamous lobbyist Jack Abramoff, who was convicted of a number of crimes and served time in a federal prison. In the film, Abramoff asserted that he did not realize that he was involved in highly illegal and unethical lobbying activities as he was committing the crimes, indicating a severe form of moral myopia. He also said that he did not talk about these activities with people who might have provided him with ethical counsel, indicating that he had moral muteness.

The rationalizations that support moral myopia and moral muteness illustrate the perceptual biases of behavioral ethics, which are illustrated by a number of Ethics Unwrapped videos, such as those on the conformity bias, obedience to authority, the self-serving bias, and tangible and abstract. Many of these biases are described in a forthcoming article by Robert Prentice, “Teaching Behavioral Ethics” in the Journal of Legal Studies Education (2014). The Moral Trilogy videos can be used in conjunction with the behavioral ethics videos and Prentice’s article.

Moral imagination is illustrated in two forms in the video: 1) finding a way to be both ethical and successful (e.g., the advertising agency CEO who resigned a big client rather than do something unethical that the client was insisting that he do and found a way to cut costs, pitch new business, and keep everyone employed) and 2) finding a way to make money and serve society (e.g., TOMS Shoes’ one-for-one donation; for each pair of TOMS shoes that is purchased, the company donates a pair to someone in need). It can be helpful to make a distinction between these two forms of moral imagination; the former involves integrity, while the latter involves corporate social responsibility.
Drumwright and Murphy (2004) found that advertising practitioners who used moral imagination worked in advertising agencies that encouraged moral sensitivity. In these agencies, organizational values related to ethics had been articulated and broadly embraced. Advertising practitioners in these agencies often talked about ethical issues with their co-workers and their clients, and they viewed providing ethics counsel to their clients as part of their roles as trusted business advisors.

The ideas related to mitigating moral myopia and moral muteness and encouraging moral imagination are very much in sync with the Giving Voice to Values (GVV) approach created by Mary C. Gentile. See the Ethics Unwrapped video series on Giving Voice to Values and Gentile’s website of GVV cases and readings. Four GVV cases were written by Drumwright and some of her students to help undergraduates recognize moral myopia and moral muteness and the rationalizations that can support them and to help them understand how to give voice to their values and exercise moral imagination (See “Part-time Job with a Full-time Challenge”, “Market Research Deception”, “Student Privileges with Strings Attached”, and “Online Identities (A) & (B).” Cases such as these can be used in conjunction with the Moral Trilogy videos.

http://www.babson.edu/Academics/teachingresearch/gvv/Pages/curriculum.aspx
Additional Resources

Academic Articles:


Cases:

See the Giving Voice To Values (GVV) Curriculum for cases that provide evidence of Moral Myopia and Moral Muteness. All GVV curriculum materials are free to instructors and students here:

http://www.babson.edu/Academics/Teaching-Research/Gvv/Pages/Home.Aspx

Especially see the GVV cases written by Minette E. Drumwright and her students, “Part-Time Job With A Full-Time Challenge,” “Market Research Deception,” “Student Privileges With Strings Attached,” and “Online Identities (A) & (B).”

http://www.babson.edu/Academics/Teaching-Research/Gvv/Pages/Curriculum.Aspx
News Stories On Scandals:

Transcript of Narration
Written by Associate Professor Minette Drumwright

The truth is that there are many people with good intentions out there, people who pledge to abide by honor codes in college and ethics codes in the workplace, who make bad decisions and get caught up in ethical problems and even scandals. How is it that these people who don’t intend to do anything wrong get into trouble?

My coauthor, Patrick Murphy, and I have found in our research that some people have moral lapses because of what we have called “moral myopia.” “Moral myopia” is a distortion of moral vision that keeps ethical issues from coming clearly into focus. In fact, moral myopia can be so severe that an individual is blind to ethical lapses and doesn’t see them at all.

Moral myopia can take many forms, but it generally occurs at one of three levels—the individual, the organization, or society. At the individual level, a person with moral myopia may not see a problem with something like fudging the numbers on a timesheet or an expense report or with lying to a supervisor or a client in order to look a little better.
Assume that a salesperson lies and claims falsely to have sold a major piece of equipment to a client in the current quarter when she knows that the client will not actually want to purchase the equipment until next quarter. She does this to qualify for a bonus. But think of the costs—the order has to be processed; the equipment has to be shipped to a warehouse, and the company has to bear the costs of storage until next quarter. Sales information is inaccurate, and there are distortions in expectations that can jeopardize effective decision-making. There also will be the cost of records clean-up when the distortion eventually comes to light; and so on. This can create an addictive cycle because the salesperson has cannibalized next quarter’s sales. Most likely, she’ll have to find a way to inflate next quarter’s sales to compensate. And all this assumes that the salesperson is not caught and penalized for gaming the system.

At the organizational level, an advertising executive might say, “I could just never advertising cigarettes,” but if her agency simultaneously has a tobacco account as a client, and she doesn’t see an ethical problem, then she has a form of moral myopia.

We found that moral myopia tends to occur most often at the societal level, and here’s an example of the form it might take. Again, think about an advertising executive. Assume that she knows that ultra-thin models in ads can have a negative impact on young women’s perceptions of beauty and contribute to problems such as eating disorders, but she doesn’t see any connection between the models that she selects for the ads and this societal problem or feel any responsibility for contributing to it.

How can smart people miss these things that should be so apparent? The culprit seems to be rationalizations—we use them with our parents, with our teachers and supervisors, and we use them with ourselves. Some of the most common rationalizations that underpin moral myopia are rationalizations such as “If it’s legal, it must be moral.” Or if it’s not illegal, it must be ethical. Listen to what the CEO of a major company said to me:

I think this is probably one of the most ethical businesses there is. It is so regulated. Everything that we do has to go through our lawyers to make sure it’s conforming to law, and then our client’s lawyers . . . . It’s really hard to be unethical in this business even if you wanted to.
He’s making a classic mistake. Most all ethicists and legal scholars view the law as the minimum, yet we get comfort from the law. Guess what this CEO’s industry is—advertising. In poll after poll on industry ethics, advertising comes in second to last. The only industry less trusted than advertising is used car sales.

What occurs in the companies—and in other types of organizations as well—is that someone gets so caught up in the enthusiasm of her organization and its efforts to reach certain goals that she doesn’t see signs that should be red flags.

And then there’s the ostrich syndrome—just sticking your head in the sand and ignoring ethical issues, and we all know that that’s never a solution.

It’s important to be aware of moral myopia and the rationalizations that support it, so that the rationalizations will raise red flags and prompt a careful examination. It’s also important to talk about the issues that prompt rationalizations with people whom we respect. It can be helpful to have trusted advisers outside of our work unit, company, industry, or profession because sometimes an entire group of people can suffer from moral myopia. We all know that ethical issue can be difficult, but are certainly more likely to make sound ethical decisions if those issues come clearly into focus.