

Moral Muteness

This video introduces the behavioral ethics bias known as moral muteness. Moral muteness is when we communicate in ways that obscure our moral beliefs and commitments, or don't voice moral sentiments at all.

For teaching moral myopia and moral muteness, instructors can often tie in current events or scandals that likely involved moral myopia and moral muteness on the part of a number of people. 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.

This video is a part of the three-video Moral Trilogy package. The three videos in the Moral Trilogy—*Moral Myopia*, *Moral Muteness* (this video), and *Moral Imagination*—are intended to be used together. Moral myopia and moral muteness often reinforce each other, while breaking free of moral myopia and moral muteness can enable one to develop moral imagination.

Moral myopia and moral muteness reinforce the concepts covered in the documentary *In It to Win: The Jack Abramoff Story* and its accompanying short videos. These videos are about former lobbyist Jack Abramoff, who was convicted of a number of crimes and served time in a federal prison. In the documentary, Abramoff asserts 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 states that he did not talk about these activities with people who might have provided him with ethical counsel, indicating moral muteness.

To learn about the types of rationalizations that support moral myopia and moral muteness, watch *Conformity Bias*, *Obedience to Authority*, *Self-serving Bias*, and *Tangible & Abstract*.

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. Watch the GVV video series for a solid introduction to this approach. Visit the GVV website for more case studies and readings. Four GVV case studies were written by Professor Minette Drumwright and some of her students to help undergraduates recognize moral myopia and moral muteness 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)”).

The case study on this page, “Full Disclosure: Manipulating Donors,” explores an instance of moral muteness when an intern witnesses a donor making a large gift to a non-profit organization under misleading



circumstances. For a case study illustrating moral myopia, see “Cheating: Atlanta’s School Scandal,” in which teachers and administrators adjust struggling students’ test scores in an effort to save their school from closure.

The three behavioral ethics concepts in the Moral Trilogy and many of the rationalizations that underpin them are described and documented in an article published in the *Journal of Advertising* by Minette Drumwright and Patrick Murphy, “How Advertising Practitioners View Ethics: Moral Myopia, Moral Muteness and Moral Imagination” (2004, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 7-24).

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.

Discussion Questions

1. Why shouldn’t the client always be right except in situations that involve illegal behavior?
2. Think of a time when you should have spoken up about something that conflicted with your values, but instead you remained silent. What rationalizations did you use to justify not speaking up? What were the consequences of your not speaking up?
3. Think of a time when you did speak up about something that conflicted with your values. What motivated you to speak up? It often takes courage to speak up; what enabled you to have the courage to speak up?
4. In the video, a fraternity member described a situation in which he did not speak up to object to hazing in his fraternity because the people doing the hazing were his friends, and he did not want any harm to come to his friends. What would a real friend do in a situation like the one he described? What would he say; what arguments would he make?
5. In the video, a young woman referred to a friend of hers who writes essays for other students for money, which is academic fraud. What would a real friend do in a situation such as this? What would a real friend say; what arguments would she use?
6. The video makes a distinction between a “please-o-holic” and a trusted business adviser. What do you see as the characteristics of a trusted business advisor? (Note that the components of trust are typically competence, integrity, and compassion.)

Additional Resources**Academic Articles:**

Bird, Frederick B., and James A. Waters. 1989. "The Moral Muteness Of Managers." *California Management Review* 32 (1): 73-88.

Drumwright, Minette E., and Patrick E. Murphy. 2004. "How Advertising Practitioners View Ethics: Moral Muteness, Moral Myopia, and Moral Imagination." *Journal of Advertising* 33 (2): 7-24.

Gentile, Mary C. 2010. "Keeping Your Colleagues Honest: How to Challenge Unethical Behavior at Work—And Prevail." *Harvard Business Review* 88 (3): 114-117.

Gentile, Mary C. 2010. *Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What's Right*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Prentice, Robert. 2004. "Teaching Ethics, Heuristics And Biases." *Journal Of Business Ethics Education* 1 (1): 57-74.

Werhane, Patricia H. 1999. *Moral Imagination And Management Decision-Making*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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:

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)."

News Stories On Scandals:

Barrett, Paul M. 2014. "[The Scandal Bowl: Tar Heels Football, Academic Fraud, and Implicit Racism.](#)" *Businessweek*, January 2.

Belson, Ken. 2012. "[Sandusky's Trial Begins With Graphic Testimony.](#)" *New York Times*, June 11.

Boren, Cindy. 2013. "[A Brief History of Lance Armstrong Denying Doping Allegations.](#)" *Washington Post*, January 14.

Associated Press. 2013. "[Lance Armstrong Doping Denials Over the Years.](#)" *Huffington Post*, January 16.

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

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“We know problems occur when people don’t see ethical issues. And there are also problems that develop when people know deep down that something is wrong, but they find some way to rationalize not speaking up about it. Scholars, Frederick Bird and James Waters, refer to this as “moral muteness.” Moral Muteness is when people either don’t voice moral sentiments or they communicate in ways that obscure their moral beliefs and commitments.

In a study of people working in advertising agencies, Patrick Murphy and I found that moral muteness was supported by a number of rationalizations, and we think that these rationalizations are applicable to business more generally. For example, one common rationalization was that ethics is bad for business. As one person said:

If you bring up ethics, people will think that you don’t have business savvy. They say, “If you’re going to talk like that, go run a church.”

The fact of the matter is, when push comes to shove, many people would prefer to win than to be ethical, but this is often a short-term approach that can actually hurt both the individual and the organization in the long term.

Moral muteness can be supported by another kind of rationalization that involves a competing goal — something that seems like a higher good that trumps moral concerns. But usually, the analysis of the other goal is superficial. For example, the rationalization “The client is always right.” can lead to a please-o-holic syndrome in which you don’t tell your client things they don’t want to hear—like moral concerns. There is a big difference in a trusted business advisor and a please-o-holic. Trusted business advisors sometimes have to give uncomfortable advice in order to do their jobs well. Please-o-holics may feel like they are doing their jobs well in the short term, but in the long run, research shows that a different type of relationship is more productive and more profitable.

One way to avoid moral muteness obviously is to make a habit of talking about issues with people whom we trust. When we raise concerns, we can position ourselves as someone who is trying to help the organization, to protect it from problems, rather than as someone who is trying to slap hands, or judge. Often making persuasive arguments by illustrating the potential consequences for individuals and for the organization can be helpful. And it’s important to view our role as that of a trusted business advisor – an indispensable professional in any organization.”