

Moral Myopia

This video introduces the behavioral ethics bias known as moral myopia. Moral myopia is a distortion of moral vision that keeps ethical issues from coming clearly into focus. This video is a part of the three-video Moral Trilogy package.

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.

The three videos in the Moral Trilogy—*Moral Myopia* (this video), *Moral Muteness*, 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 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, “Cheating: Atlanta’s School Scandal,” illustrates moral myopia in the actions of teachers and administrators who adjusted struggling students’ test scores in an effort to save their school from closure. For a case study illustrating moral muteness, see “Full



Disclosure: Manipulating Donors,” about an intern who witnesses a donor making a large gift to a non-profit organization under misleading circumstances.

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. 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 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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“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 advertise 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."