

In It to Win: Jack & Role Morality

This video introduces the concept of role morality in the context of the story of former lobbyist and convicted felon Jack Abramoff. During the Bush Administration, Abramoff was the most influential lobbyist in Washington, D.C. He was also at the center of one of the most significant political scandals since Watergate.

Role morality is the tendency we have to use different moral standards for the different “roles” we play at work, at home, and in society. For example, a person might take an ethically questionable action in their role as loyal employee to advance their company’s profit goals that they would never take at home to put money in their own pocket. For more details and examples of this concept, watch *Role Morality*. To learn about related behavioral ethics concepts that may influence one’s role in group or work settings, watch *Conflict of Interest*, *Conformity Bias*, *Framing*, and *Obedience to Authority*.

The kinds of decision-making errors that are the subject of *Jack & Role Morality* and the other five shorts in this video case are the focus of a field of study known as behavioral ethics, which draws upon psychology, cognitive science, evolutionary biology, and related disciplines to determine how and why people make the ethical and unethical decisions that they do.

This video draws from footage shot at The University of Texas at Austin when Abramoff visited campus to talk about his life and corrupt lobbying in Washington, D.C. It is part of a video case that includes a 25-minute documentary, *In It to Win: The Jack Abramoff Story*, six short videos that focus on specific behavioral ethics biases illustrated by Abramoff’s story, and a written case study. The documentary exposes personal and systemic ethical concerns in government and illustrates how well intentioned people can make serious ethical errors—and even commit crimes.

To learn more about Abramoff and the scandal that ended his lobbying career, read the case study on this page. For a case study on role morality, read “Freedom vs. Duty in Clinical Social Work,” which raises questions about social workers’ role when their personal values come in conflict with the clients they are meant to serve. For a case study on how role morality affects a doctor who finds conflict patient care and upholding institutional recommendations, read “Healthcare Obligations: Personal vs. Institutional.”

Role morality is defined in our glossary. The terms conformity bias, morals, and obedience to authority are also covered in our glossary.

Terms related to this short video and defined in our ethics glossary include: behavioral ethics, conformity bias, conflict of interest, framing, morals, rationalizations, role morality, and self-serving bias.



Discussion Questions for Role Morality

- 1) Can you explain role morality in your own words? How does it affect moral decision-making?
- 2) How does role morality apply to Jack Abramoff? What examples from his story can you cite to support your argument?
- 3) Can you think of an example from your own life where you or someone else fell victim to role morality?
- 4) How might you anticipate and/or mitigate the effects of Role Morality in your own life or decision-making?

Additional Resources

Books about the lobbying scandal include Jack Abramoff's own account, "Capitol Punishment: The Hard Truth About Washington Corruption from America's Most Notorious Lobbyist" (WND Books, 2011) and an exposé from journalist Peter H. Stone, "Heist: Superlobbyist Jack Abramoff, His Republican Allies, and the Buying of Washington" (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

Movies about the scandal include a documentary, *Casino Jack and the United States of Money* (Dir. Alex Gibney, 2010), and a dramatization starring Kevin Spacey, *Casino Jack* (Dir. George Hickenlooper, 2010).

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 more 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.](#)"

Another 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 - *Role Morality* (From the Concepts Unwrapped Series)

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“Sometimes organizational and psychological pressures cause even good people to act unethically. In a lawsuit over a car wreck, an insurance company representing the defendant demanded the right to have its doctor examine the plaintiff. When he did, the doctor found that the plaintiff had a life-threatening brain aneurysm. Because it would have disadvantaged the insurance company’s defense, the doctor did not tell the plaintiff, who did not find out for two more years. Why would a doctor keep this vital information from an injured man? Obviously, the doctor viewed his job as protecting the insurance company’s financial interests, Hippocratic Oath be damned. This is an example of something ethicists call role morality.

Role morality has been defined as feeling that you have permission to harm others in ways that would be wrong if it weren’t for the role that you are playing. Role morality often involves people acting in ways that they would view as clearly unethical if they were acting on their own behalf, but because they are acting on behalf of their employer or a client, they view their actions as permissible. In a detailed study of a corporation, sociologist Robert Jackall found that many employees segregated their personal beliefs from the ethics of their workplace. He quoted an officer as saying: “What is right in the corporation is not what is right in a man’s home or in his church. What is right in the corporation is what the guy above you wants from you. That’s what morality is in the corporation.” When people check their personal moral code at the door, they can suddenly become capable of doing horrendous things. After World War II, Albert Speer, Hitler’s Minister of Armaments and War Production, said that he viewed his role as an “administrator.” As a mere administrator, he convinced himself that matters relating to human beings, including, of course, the Holocaust, were not his concern. This man checked his humanity at the door.

A study by professors at Brigham Young University found that family businesses are more likely to act in a socially responsible way than bigger companies. The family name is on the door and officers want to act in ways that reflect well upon their family. However, people working in bigger corporations find it easier to separate their personal feelings of how business should be done from their role inside the organization. We cannot leave behind our personal beliefs as to right and wrong when we walk through our office doors.”