Ethical Fading

This video introduces the behavioral ethics bias known as ethical fading. Ethical fading occurs when we are so focused on other aspects of a decision that its ethical dimensions fade from view. Ethical fading can happen in a variety of contexts and for many different reasons. For example, we may fail to see the ethical dimensions of a decision depending on the "role" we're playing at work or in our broader lives. Or, the way in which we "frame" a situation may omit or obscure the ethical dimensions. Or, we may experience "moral myopia" and keep ethical issues from coming into focus.

To learn about a related behavioral ethics concept, watch *Incrementalism*, *Framing*, *Moral Myopia*, and *Role Morality*.

The case studies on this page illustrate how individuals and organizations may face issues of ethical fading. "Krogh & the Watergate Scandal" shows how a promising young lawyer in the Nixon Administration came to play a part in the Watergate break-in. "Apple Suppliers & Labor Practices" questions whether the tech company properly addresses the ethical issues of other companies further down its supply chain. "Sports Blogs: The Wild West of Sports Journalism?" examines the effects of paying for information in sports journalism. For a related case study about the teachers and school administrators in Atlanta who gradually participated in changing struggling students' test scores, read "Cheating: Atlanta's School Scandal."

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: ethical fading, framing, incrementalism, and moral myopia.

Discussion Questions

1. Can you explain the concept of ethical fading and perhaps give an example of when it happened to you?
2. Can you think of a situation where you were so intent upon pleasing an authority figure, fitting in with your friends, or achieving a goal that you failed to give an ethical issue your full attention? Did that situation cause you regret?

3. Can you think of an example of a friend who might have been the victim of ethical fading? Or a person in the news recently?
4. Is it plausible to you that when we think we are engaged in ethical reasoning often times we are merely justifying decisions we have already made?
5. How can we as well-meaning individuals guard against being the victims of ethical fading?
6. How can organizations help their employees to guard against ethical fading?

Additional Resources

Abramoff, Jack. 2011. *Capitol Punishment: The Hard Truth About Washington Corruption From America's Most Notorious Lobbyist*. Washington, D.C.: WND Books.

Bandura, Albert. 1990. "Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement." In *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, edited by Walter Reich, 161-191. Washington, D.C.: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

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.

Haidt, Jonathan. 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Vintage Books.

Paharia, Neeru, and Kathleen D. Vohs. 2013. "Sweatshop Labor is Wrong Unless the Shoes are Cute: Cognition Can Both Help and Hurt Moral Motivated Reasoning. *Organization Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 121 (1): 81-88.

Tenbrunsel, Ann E., and David M. Messick. 2004. "Ethical Fading: The Role of Self-Deception in Unethical Behavior." *Social Justice Research* 17 (2): 223-236.

Zhong, Chen-Bo, and Katie Liljenquist. 2006. "Washing Away Your Sins: Threatened Morality and Physical Cleansing." *Science* 313 (5792): 1451-1452.

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

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"In the book he wrote about his crimes, disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff—Casino Jack—asked: "What was I thinking?" This is a familiar refrain among white collar criminals. Why can they see their ethical failings in retrospect, but not earlier when it really mattered?

Part of the explanation is what professors Ann Tenbrunsel and David Messick call ethical fading. Imagine that you work for a company in internal audit and your boss asks you to inappropriately massage some earnings numbers. And it happens to be the week that the company is deciding whom to lay off in the most recent round of cutbacks. And you want to keep your job, of course. It is possible that you will not even notice the ethical dimensions of the action you have just been asked to take by your boss. These ethical dimensions may just fade from view.

Ethical decisions are often made almost automatically by the parts of our brain that process emotions. Only later do our cognitive processes kick in. When we think we are reasoning to an ethical conclusion, often all we are really doing is searching for rationalizations to support the decision that we have already made instinctively.

As time distances us from the decision we have made, the ethical issues may start to reappear. We may feel the need to reduce the dissonance that results from the conflict of our view of ourselves as ethical people and the unethical action we have committed. Studies show that offering people an

opportunity to wash their hands after behaving immorally is often enough to restore their self-image. There's a reason we talk about starting with a "clean" slate.

Even if our minds cannot cause an ethical issue to fade from view, a process known as moral disengagement can mitigate the sting of an unethical decision. Moral disengagement is a process by which our brain enables us to turn off our usual ethical standards when we feel the psychological need to do so, just like we'd turn off a TV when a show comes on that makes us uncomfortable.

Studies show, for example, that people who want to buy an article of clothing that they know was manufactured with child labor will suddenly view child labor as less of a societal problem than they thought before. Moral disengagement allows us to suspend our personal codes of ethics, yet continue to view ourselves as ethical people.

There is no easy cure for ethical fading and moral disengagement. Our only option is to be vigilant in looking out for ethical issues and equally circumspect in monitoring our own actions and rationalizations."