

Role Morality

This video introduces the behavioral ethics bias known as role morality. Role morality is the tendency we have to use different moral standards for the different “roles” we play in society. For example, we may follow one set of standards when among our co-workers and a different set of standards when among our friends.

To learn about related behavioral ethics concepts, watch *Conformity Bias* and *Obedience to Authority*. For a closer look at how role morality affected the behavior of former lobbyist Jack Abramoff, watch *In It to Win: Jack & Role Morality*.

The case study on this page, “Freedom vs. Duty in Clinical Social Work,” examines how role morality may affect social workers’ ability to properly do their job when their personal values come in conflict with the clients they are meant to serve. For a related case study about a medical doctor who facing a conflict at work because of role morality, read “Healthcare Obligations: Personal vs. Institutional.”

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: conformity bias, morals, obedience to authority, and role morality.



Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree that a person should have one set of morals for family and church and another set for his or her employer?
2. Have you ever done anything that made you feel uncomfortable to please an authority figure or to help your company that you would not have done to help yourself? Have you been tempted to?
3. Have you ever broken some rules to help out a friend in ways that you would never have done to help yourself? Have you been tempted to?
4. Have you ever seen someone act unethically and justify his or her actions by saying “I’m just doing my job?” What did you say or do in response? What should you have said or done?
5. Has an employer ever explicitly asked you to set aside your own ethical standards?
6. How can you guard against being the victim of role morality?

Additional Resources

Bingham, John B., W. Gibb Dyer, Isaac Smith, and Gregory L. Adams. 2011. "A Stakeholder Identity Orientation Approach to Corporate Social Performance in Family Firms." *Journal of Business Ethics* 99 (4): 565-585.

Gibson, Kevin. 2003. "Contrasting Role Morality and Professional Morality: Implications for Practice." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 20 (1): 17-29.

Jackall, Robert. 1988. *Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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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“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.”