

Ethical Fading

Questions for classroom discussions

- 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

JACK ABRAMOFF, *CAPITOL CRIMES: THE HARD TRUTH ABOUT WASHINGTON CORRUPTION FROM AMERICA'S MOST NOTORIOUS LOBBYIST* (2011).

Ann E. Tenbrunsel & David M. Messick, *Ethical Fading: The Role of Self-Deception in Unethical Behavior*, 17 *SOCIAL JUSTICE RESEARCH* 223 (2004).

Chen-Bo Zhong & Katie Liljenquist, *Washing Away Your Wins: Threatened Morality and Physical Cleansing*, 313 *Science* 1451 (2009).

JONATHAN HAIDT, *THE RIGHTEOUS MIND: WHY GOOD PEOPLE ARE DIVIDED BY POLITICS AND RELIGION* (2012).

Albert Bandura, *Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement*, in *ORIGINS OF TERRORISM* (W. Reich, ed., 1990).

Neeru Paharia & Rohit Desphande, *Sweatshop Labor Is Wrong Unless the Jeans Are Cute: Motivated Moral Disengagement*, Harvard Business School Working Paper No. 09-079.

MAX H. BAZERMAN & ANN E. TENBRUNSEL, *BLIND SPOTS: WHY WE FAIL TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT* (2012).

Additional Note

This video introduces students to concepts explored in more detail in several other “Concepts Unwrapped” videos on the Ethics Unwrapped website, as well as to the “In It to Win: The Jack Abramoff Story” documentary, and its accompanying short videos. Anyone who watches all or even a good part of these videos will have a pretty solid introduction to the concept of behavioral ethics.

Behavioral ethics is a new field drawing on behavioral psychology, cognitive science and related fields to determine why people make the ethical decisions, both good and bad, that they do. Much behavioral ethics research addresses the question of why good people do bad things.

Behavioral ethics may be the “next big thing” in ethics education. N.Y.U. recently asked Prof. Jonathan Haidt, whose research is a major part of the new learning in behavioral ethics, to create a behavioral ethics course there. And John Walsh, who helped create the Office of Compliance Inspections and Examinations at the SEC, recently wrote in *Corporate Counsel* that the “ultimate promise of behavioral ethics...is that it provides pragmatic tools that have been demonstrated to work.”

A detailed article on teaching behavioral ethics with extensive teaching resources will be published in *Journal of Legal Studies Education* (Forthcoming August 2014, Volume 3, Issue 2). To download a PDF of this article by Robert A. Prentice, "[Teaching Behavioral Ethics](http://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Teaching-Behavioral-Ethics-by-Robert-A.-Prentice.pdf)," go to <http://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Teaching-Behavioral-Ethics-by-Robert-A.-Prentice.pdf>

A somewhat dated, but still serviceable introductory article on teaching behavioral ethics is: Robert A. Prentice, *Teaching Ethics, Heuristics, and Biases*, 1 *Journal of Business Ethics Education* 57-74 (2004), which is accessible through Google Scholar.

Transcript of Narration

Written by Professor Robert Prentice

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.