

Intro to Behavioral Ethics: Sports Edition

This video introduces behavioral ethics, a relatively new field of study drawing on behavioral psychology, cognitive neuroscience, evolutionary biology, game theory, and other related disciplines. Behavioral ethics investigates why people make the ethical and unethical decisions that they do in order to gain insights into how people can improve their ethical decision-making and behavior.



Much behavioral ethics research addresses the question of why good people do bad things. John Walsh, who helped create the Office of Compliance Inspections and Examinations at the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, recently wrote that the “ultimate promise of behavioral ethics...is that it provides pragmatic tools that have been demonstrated to work.” Indeed, behavioral ethics may be the “next big thing” in ethics education.

To learn more about the behavioral ethics concepts mentioned in this video watch [Conformity Bias](#), [Role Morality](#), and [Overconfidence Bias](#). Many additional behavioral ethics concepts are explored in detail in the [Concepts Unwrapped](#) series, 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: [behavioral ethics](#), [conformity bias](#), [conflict of interest](#), [overconfidence bias](#), [moral emotions](#), [moral reasoning](#), [role morality](#), and [self-serving bias](#).

Discussion Questions

1. When asked the vast majority of people will agree with the following two statements. Would you agree with them also?
 - a. “I have solid, well-considered ethical beliefs that can be altered only by reasoned arguments or new evidence.”
 - b. “I have character and integrity that will carry me through when I face difficult moral choices.”
2. Probably the strongest finding from the last decade’s research in behavioral ethics is that people simultaneously think of themselves as good people yet frequently lie and cheat (typically in a minor way). Is this consistent with your experience? Do you agree or disagree with the following statements from researchers in the field?
 - a. “The empirical evidence seems to point to the conclusion that we lie and cheat much more often than we care to admit. At the same time, we strive to maintain a positive image of ourselves, and moral values are a central component of our self-image.” (Francesca Gino)
 - b. “Essentially, we cheat up to the level that allows us to retain our self-image as reasonably honest individuals.” (Dan Ariely)
 - c. “Evolution prepared us humans to be devious, self-serving, and only half-honest, inclined to grab the lion’s share of goodies without being thrown out of the group. Homo sapiens became wired for truthfulness only to the extent that it suited us, pleased others, and preserved our reputations. We are willing to break rules to benefit ourselves, but only within limits we can justify. We are good and fair, most of the time—at least in our own minds—but that doesn’t exactly make us straight shooters. Our internal cop stops us only when we contemplated big transgressions.” (Mark Matousek)
3. Do these statements from the experts who research in the field of behavioral ethics change your mind about your answers to the questions in #1?
4. Most empirical research indicates that religiosity is not a significant factor in ethical behavior. Atheists and religious people tend to say that the same actions are ethical and unethical. And while religious people tend to give more money and time to their churches and synagogues, religious and nonreligious people otherwise have similar profiles in terms of altruism and volunteerism. Does this surprise you?
5. Have you known good people to do bad things? Either personally, or you’ve heard or read about episodes in the media?
6. If so, how would you explain their conduct?

Transcript of Narration

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Most athletes understand that to help preserve the spirit of fair and honest competition that makes all sports possible, they must follow the rules of the game. Athletes, like all the rest of us, must act with integrity. But - as in business - the high stakes and intense competition athletes face in the world of sports can present ethical challenges.

High-profile coaches and famous athletes have been stripped of titles, dropped from Hall of Fame voting ballots, and banned from sports for life due to doping, cheating, and other breaches of integrity. For example, Olympic sprinting champion Ben Johnson was stripped of his medals and banned from competing because he used illegal performance enhancing drugs. And the 2017 World Series baseball championship is forever tainted because many of the winning Houston Astros' players were part of an illegal scheme to steal their opponents' pitching signs.

How can we avoid the ethical pitfalls that have tripped up other athletes? Well, just as research in sports psychology has improved people's athletic performance, research in the psychology of moral decision-making – called *behavioral ethics* -- can improve people's ethical performance.

Behavioral ethics focuses on why good people sometimes make bad moral decisions and don't live up to their own ethical standards. It describes the social and organizational pressures (like obedience to authority), the psychological biases and decision-making shortcuts (like the overconfidence bias), and situational factors (like stress and time pressure) that can lead all of us to make unethical choices. Sometimes, these missteps are made consciously; but more often, our poor moral choices are made subconsciously, which is why studying behavioral ethics is so important.

Learning about behavioral ethics gives us the chance to make better moral decisions by guarding against these biases and pressures that impact our thinking and decision-making. Consider the *conformity bias*, which is our tendency to take cues for proper behavior from our peers rather than use our own independent moral judgment. Research shows that if athletes believe their competitors are doping, they are more likely to dope themselves. And if college coaches believe that other coaches are cheating in recruiting, they're more likely to cheat also. Often, this won't even seem wrong because "everybody does it."

Obedience to authority is another potential pitfall for moral decision-making. For example, we may do something we're uncomfortable with simply because a coach, or a teacher, or a parent told us to. Sometimes, we consciously choose to do wrong to not lose playing time or to avoid being cut from the

team. But more often, we unconsciously go along with what we're asked to do because our brain is hard-wired to be obedient to authority. As the research shows, the pleasure centers of our brains light up when we please people in charge.

These behavioral ethics concepts — and many others covered in Ethics Unwrapped — introduce the ethical traps that the human mind can lay for us. We can all benefit from making the subconscious conscious.

And these ideas can help all of us live up to our own values and improve our moral decision-making. Integrating behavioral ethics into daily life, can make our friends and parents proud of us, and help our teams and communities flourish.

Bibliography

Albert Bandura, *Moral Disengagement: How People Do Harm and Live with Themselves* (2016).

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Cara Biasucci & Robert Prentice, *Behavioral Ethics in Practice: Why We Sometimes Make the Wrong Decisions* (2021).

Richard Cox, *Sport Psychology: Concepts and Applications* (2011).

Chris Gee, "How Does Sport Psychology Actually Improve Athletic Performance? A Framework to Facilitate Athletes' and Coaches' Understanding," *Behavioral Modification* 34(5): 386-402 (2010).

Andy Marino, *Cheaters: The Inside Story of the Astros Scandal and a Colorful History of Sign-Stealing* (2021).

Additional Resources

The latest resource from Ethics Unwrapped is a book, [*Behavioral Ethics in Practice: Why We Sometimes Make the Wrong Decisions*](#), written by Cara Biasucci and Robert Prentice. This accessible book is amply footnoted with behavioral ethics studies and associated research. It also includes suggestions at the end of each chapter for related Ethics Unwrapped videos and case studies. Some instructors use this resource to educate themselves, while others use it in lieu of (or in addition to) a textbook.

Cara Biasucci also recently wrote a chapter on integrating Ethics Unwrapped in higher education, which can be found in the latest edition of [*Teaching Ethics: Instructional Models, Methods and Modalities for University Studies*](#). The chapter includes examples of how Ethics Unwrapped is used at various universities.

The most recent article written by Cara Biasucci and Robert Prentice describes the basics of behavioral ethics and introduces Ethics Unwrapped videos and supporting materials along with teaching examples. It also includes data on the efficacy of Ethics Unwrapped for improving ethics pedagogy across disciplines. Published in *Journal of Business Law and Ethics Pedagogy* (Vol. 1, August 2018), it can be downloaded here: "[Teaching Behavioral Ethics \(Using "Ethics Unwrapped" Videos and Educational Materials\)](#)."

An article written by Ethics Unwrapped authors Minette Drumwright, Robert Prentice, and Cara Biasucci introduce key concepts in behavioral ethics and approaches to effective ethics instruction—including sample classroom assignments. Published in the *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, it can be downloaded here: "[Behavioral Ethics and Teaching Ethical Decision Making](#)."

A detailed article written by Robert Prentice, with extensive resources for teaching behavioral ethics, was published in *Journal of Legal Studies Education* and can be downloaded here: "[Teaching Behavioral Ethics](#)."

Another article by Robert Prentice, discussing how behavioral ethics can improve the ethicality of human decision-making, was published in the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy*. It can 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.