Obedience to Authority: Sports Edition

This video introduces the behavioral ethics bias known as obedience to authority. Obedience to authority describes our tendency to please authority figures. We may place too much emphasis on that goal and, consciously or subconsciously, subordinate the goal of acting ethically. We all need to monitor ourselves to ensure that we are not unduly suspending our own independent ethical judgment in order to please our superiors. If students are not aware of this vulnerability, they cannot guard against it. Many white-collar criminals trace their downfall to an excessive obedience to authority. Many successful students are "pleasers," so they can understand how strong the motive to please authority can be.

The "Milgram experiment" offers a glimpse into the effects of obedience to authority. Psychologist Stanley Milgram studied whether Americans might be as obedient to authority as Germans seemed to be under Hitler. The question addressed was whether subjects would deliver apparently painful electric shocks to another person who had missed a question in an apparent test of whether negative reinforcement through electric shocks would improve memory, just because someone in a white lab coat told them to do so. Although people predicted before the experiment that very few American subjects would show excessive obedience to authority, in actuality, as Professor Francesca Gino writes:

"*All* of Milgram's participants -who were well-adjusted, well-intentioned people- delivered electric shocks to victims who seemingly were in great pain, complaining of heart problems, or even apparently unconscious. Over 60 percent of participants delivered the maximum shock."

Perhaps this should not have been too surprising. The pleasure centers of our brains light up when we please authority. We are trained from childhood to please authority figures – parents, teachers, and police officers.

Law and order are generally good things, so some level of obedience to authority is definitely a good thing. But if people go too far and suspect their own independent ethical judgment, either consciously or unconsciously, they are dropping the ball.

Employers, we argue, pay employees for their brains, their education and training, and their judgment. Employers are short-changed if employees do not use their best strategic judgment, their best operational judgment, and their best moral judgment, because errors in any of the three areas can be quite costly.

To learn about related behavioral ethics concepts, watch *Conformity Bias* and *Role Morality*.

Terms defined in our ethics glossary that are related to the video and case studies include: conformity bias, obedience to authority, and role morality.

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.

Discussion Questions

1. Does the claim that an excessive desire to please authority may cause people to act unethically ring true to you?
2. Can you think of a situation where you deferred to authority and later regretted it? Perhaps because you facilitated a stupid decision that you could have stopped? Perhaps because you facilitated an unethical decision that you could have stopped?
3. Which is scarier: that Joe might not have the courage to stand up to a superior requesting unethical action because Joe doesn't want to lose this job, or that Joe might not even see the ethical issue because he is so intent upon pleasing the boss?
4. Does Bud Krogh's explanation for how he went off the ethical rails sound plausible to you?
5. How can people guard against suspending their own ethical judgment in order to unduly defer to authority?
6. Following is a description from Prof. Jesse Prinz of Stanley Milgram's famous experiment on obedience to authority. Read the description and then tell the class how you think that you would have acted had you been one of the subjects of the experiment.

"Subjects in this experiment were instructed to ask another volunteer, located in an adjacent room, a series of questions. Each time the second volunteer failed to answer a question correctly, the subject asking the questions was asked to administer an electric shock using a dial with increasing voltages. Unbeknownst to the subject the second volunteer was really a stooge working with the experimenter, and the voltage dial was a harmless prop. The stooges were instructed to make errors so that the subjects would have to administer shocks. At preplanned stages, the stooges would express pain, voice concerns about safety, make sounds of agony, pound on the wall, or, ultimately, stop making any noise at all. If a subject conveyed reluctance to continue increasing the voltage, the experimenter would reply that it was crucial for the experiment to continue. The experiment ended if and when a subject persistently refused to continue."

Transcript of Narration

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Obedience to authority is the tendency people have to try to please those in charge. It is natural for children to wish to please parents, teachers and coaches. Even adults generally feel good about pleasing authority figures.

From the very first time athletes step onto a court or a field or a pitch, it's drilled into them that they must always follow their coaches' instructions. When athletes do as coaches instruct, individual and team chances for success generally increase. But what if a coach asks a player to intentionally injure a player on another team? Or to cheat on an exam to remain eligible to play? Or to take illegal performance-enhancing drugs? We all tend to believe that because we are good people, we would never do such a thing. But athletes — like everyone else — have been socialized to obey authority.

Athletes especially have a self-serving incentive to follow their coaches' instructions. Obeying a coach's orders often translates into more playing time and more perks. Disobeying orders often means less of those good things. So it's easy to rationalize doing as we're told… to think, "It's not my fault… the coach told me to do it, and players are supposed to do what their coaches say, right?"

Research shows that when we make decisions, we often are more concerned about the acceptability of the decision to the people we're accountable to, than we are about the moral content of the decision itself. Sometimes we are so intent upon pleasing those in charge that we do not even notice the moral aspects of the decision itself. The ethical dimensions simply fade away, which is why the obedience to authority phenomenon should worry us all.

Our innate desire to please those in charge combined with our tendency to defer to authority can cloud our ethical judgment when the time comes to act. While it is usually a fine thing for athletes to please their coaches, students to please their teachers, and employees to please their bosses, keeping an eye out for ethical issues is a must. And it is never wise to defer so completely to those in charge that we ignore our own moral standards.

Bibliography

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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.