

Role Morality: Sports Edition

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](#).



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](#).

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. 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?

Transcript of Narration

Written and Narrated by

Robert Prentice, J.D.
Business, Government & Society Department
McCombs School of Business
The University of Texas at Austin

Organizational pressures can cause even good people to act unethically. For example, a man was injured in a car wreck and sued the driver of the other car. The other driver's insurance company demanded that its doctor examine the injured man. When the doctor did, he discovered the man had a life-threatening brain aneurysm. But the doctor didn't tell the man because the information was damaging to the insurance company.

So why would a doctor keep this vital information secret? Clearly, the doctor viewed his job as protecting the insurance company's financial interests, Hippocratic Oath be damned. This is what ethicists call role morality.

Role morality involves acting in ways that we know are unethical. But because we're acting on behalf of our employer, or team, or client, we view our actions as okay. We give ourselves permission to harm others in ways we know are wrong, simply because of the role we're playing at the time.

Research by sociologist Robert Jackall found that many corporate employees segregate their personal beliefs from the ethics of their workplace. As one executive said: "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."

As in the corporate world, role morality can lead to unethical behavior in the world of sports. For example, Chris Correa — acting as a loyal front office employee of the St. Louis Cardinals — hacked into the Houston Astros' webmail system to steal competitive information to help his team. Did Correa ever illegally hack websites for personal gain? There's no evidence of it. But in his role as a loyal employee, he did just that.

Research shows that athletes in team sports are more accepting of doping and other forms of cheating than athletes in individual sports. Perhaps an athlete's willingness to ignore their own morality in order to fulfill their role as a loyal teammate explains this difference.

Whatever our circumstances, if we wish to live a life we can be proud of, we'd be wise to look out for the influence of role morality on our thinking, decisions, and actions. Whether we're athletes, managers, coaches, or fans, we can strive to be guided by our own moral compass regardless of whether we're on the playing field, in an office, in the classroom, or at home.

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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.