In It to Win: Jack & Rationalizations

This video introduces the concept of rationalizations in the context of the story of former lobbyist and convicted felon Jack Abramoff. During the Bush Administration, Abramoff was the most influential lobbyist in Washington, D.C. He was also at the center of one of the most significant political scandals since Watergate.

Rationalizations are the excuses we give ourselves for not living up to our own ethical standards. If there is one overarching finding in behavioral ethics research in the past decade, it is that people tend to simultaneously think of themselves as good people and yet lie a little and cheat a little almost every day. Indeed, most white-collar criminals, at the time they are committing their crimes, do not think they are doing anything wrong. Even after being convicted in a court of law, some still have difficulty admitting to themselves that they screwed up.

Rationalizations are one of the major facilitators of unethical behavior because they allow us to act unethically, but still tell ourselves that what we are doing is okay. As Luban pointed out: "In situation after situation, literally hundreds of experiments reveal that when our conduct clashes with our prior beliefs, our beliefs swing into conformity with our conduct, without our noticing that this is going on." For example, we may realize that insider trading is wrong. But if we are given an opportunity to engage in insider trading, make a lot of money, and probably not get caught, all of a sudden we will probably view insider trading as not as bad as we had previously thought it was. And we won't even notice our "everybody does it" rationalization.

Usually what happens, points our De Waal, is that we see something we really want (lots of money, for example), our mind intuitively decides that it is okay for us to do what we have to do to get that money (engage in insider trading, for example), and then the cognitive part of our brain kicks in to rationalize the (un)ethical conclusion we have already reached.

To learn about the six categories of rationalizations described by Anand, Ashforth, and Joshi in their article identifying the most common rationalizations used in business, watch *Being Your Best Self, Part 3: Moral Intent*. The six categories of rationalizations are:

- Denial of responsibility ("I know I shouldn't do this, but my boss is making me, so it's not really my fault.")
- Denial of injury ("I know that I shouldn't do this, but who's really being hurt?")
- Denial of victim ("I know that I shouldn't do this, but this guy is so stupid that he deserves to get ripped off."
- Social weighing ("I know that I shouldn't do this, but my competitors are doing even worse stuff.")

- Appeal to higher loyalty ("I know that I shouldn't do this, but I have a family to feed.")
- Metaphor of the ledger ("I know that I shouldn't do this, but I give a lot of money to charity."

For more details and examples of rationalizations, watch *GVV Pillar 7: Reasons & Rationalizations*. To understand how cognitive biases may affect our behavior in ways similar to rationalization, watch *Moral Equilibrium* and *Self-serving Bias*. To learn more about the process of making ethical decisions, watch *Being Your Best Self, Part 2: Moral Decision Making* and *Systematic Moral Analysis*.

The kinds of decision-making errors that are the subject of *Jack & Rationalizations* and the other five shorts in this video case are the focus of a field of study known as behavioral ethics, which draws upon psychology, cognitive science, evolutionary biology, and related disciplines to determine how and why people make the ethical and unethical decisions that they do.

This video draws from footage shot at The University of Texas at Austin when Abramoff visited campus to talk about his life and corrupt lobbying in Washington, D.C. It is part of a video case that includes a 25-minute documentary, *In It to Win: The Jack Abramoff Story*, six short videos that focus on specific behavioral ethics biases illustrated by Abramoff's story, and a written case study. The documentary exposes personal and systemic ethical concerns in government and illustrates how well intentioned people can make serious ethical errors—and even commit crimes.

To learn more about Abramoff's own rationalizations and the scandal that ended his lobbying career, read the case study on this page. For a case study on rationalizations and systematic moral analysis, read "Pardoning Nixon," which examines how Ford made the controversial decision to issue Nixon a full pardon after Nixon resigned from the presidency. For an example of rationalizations and moral reasoning, read "Retracting Research: The Case of *Chandok v. Klessig*," in which a researcher makes the difficult decision to retract an article published in a peer-reviewed journal after the results of the original research cannot be reproduced.

Terms related to this short video and defined in our ethics glossary include: behavioral ethics, fundamental attribution error, moral emotions, moral equilibrium, moral reasoning, rationalizations, self-serving bias, and utilitarianism.

Discussion Questions for Jack & Rationalizations

1) Can you explain in your own words how rationalizations work to facilitate unethical activity?

2) Can you give examples of common rationalizations that are used in the business world?

3) Can you give examples of rationalizations that Jack Abramoff used?

4) Can you think of situations where you have used rationalizations?

5) How can we guard against rationalizing our own wrongdoing?

6)   Dan Ariely and colleagues ran an experiment where a clerk gave too much change to the subject of the experiment. In general 45% of the subjects returned the extra change. However, when Ariely had the clerk annoy the subject by rudely ignoring them for just a bit, only 14% returned the extra change. How might the rationalization process have played a role in the outcome of these experiments?

7)   Murphy and Mayhew ran a study in which they learned that when people misreport numbers they generally feel bad, but they don't feel as bad if they were instructed to do so by superiors. How might the rationalization process play a role in this outcome?

Additional Resources

Books and articles about rationalization include:

Anand, Vikas, Blake E. Ashforth, and Mahendra Joshi. 2004. "Business as Usual: The Acceptance and Perpetuation of Corruption in Organizations." Academy of Management Perspectives 18 (2): 39-53.

Ariely, Dan. 2012. The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone—Especially Ourselves. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

de Waal, Frans. 2013. The Bonobo and the Athetist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Luban, David. 2006. "Making Sense of Moral Meltdowns." In Moral Leadership: The Theory and Practice of Power, Judgment, and Policy, edited by Deborah L. Rhode, 57-76. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mayhew, Brian W., and Pamela R. Murphy. 2014. "The Impact of Authority on Reporting Behavior, Rationalization and Affect." Contemporary Accounting Research 31 (2): 420-443.

Books about the lobbying scandal include Jack Abramoff's own account, "Capitol Punishment: The Hard Truth About Washington Corruption from America's Most Notorious Lobbyist" (WND Books, 2011) and an exposé from journalist Peter H. Stone, "Heist: Superlobbyist Jack Abramoff, His Republican Allies, and the Buying of Washington" (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

Movies about the scandal include a documentary, Casino Jack and the United States of Money (Dir. Alex Gibney, 2010), and a dramatization starring Kevin Spacey, Casino Jack (Dir. George Hickenlooper, 2010).

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 more 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."

Another 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.