

## 7.6: The Role of Ethics and National Culture

### Learning Objectives

1. Consider the role of ethics and emotion.
2. Consider the role of national culture on stress.

### Emotions and Ethics

We have seen before how a gap between our true feelings and the feelings we display at work can cause distress. What happens when there is a gap between our feelings and our true beliefs?

Joshua Greene is a philosopher and neuroscientist who uses magnetic imaging of the brain to show how our minds and bodies react to difficult questions. In one example, Greene asked a group of subjects to consider a situation in which a trolley is racing down a track, about to kill five people. The subjects have the ability to steer the trolley onto another track, where it will kill only one person. Most agree this feels like the right thing to do—the best of possible evils.

Greene then asks his subject to consider the same situation with one major shift: In this case, to save the five bystanders the subject must push a large man in front of the trolley to stop it in its tracks.

This time, Greene's subjects felt the sacrifice was emotionally wrong. Greene's research shows that the difference between his subjects' valuations of life in these cases was that the second was more emotional. The thought of pushing someone to his death, understandably, had brought up strong feelings among the group. If humans were computers, one person's death might be seen as "less bad" than the death of five. But human decisions are based on emotion. It was considered emotionally—and therefore, morally—unacceptable to push the man in front of the trolley to save five others.

Greene's magnetic images of his subject's brains showed that while considering the second scenario, people were using more of their brains. Greene writes, "These differences in emotional engagement affect people's judgments" (Greene, et al., 2001).

Emotions are a powerful force in work and life. They are spontaneous and unpredictable elements of human beings that separate us from machines, and in some moments, from one another. By learning to identify and maximize the uses of our emotions at work, we can more appropriately respond to emotional situations.

### Lack of Leisure Time and Stress Around the Globe

As economist Steven Landsburg notes, "Compared with Europeans, Americans are more likely to be employed and more likely to work longer hours—employed Americans put in about 3 hours more per week than employed Frenchmen. Most important, Americans take fewer (and shorter) vacations" (Landsburg, 2006). That is, if they take a vacation at all. A recent poll showed that 40% of Americans do not plan to take a vacation within the next year (Egan, 2006).

Juliet Schor, a senior lecturer in economics and director of women's studies at Harvard University, adds to the portrait of the overworked American with a shocking statistic on Americans' free time. According to Schor's book, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, Americans have 16.5 hours per week of leisure time after their work and household obligations are fulfilled (Schor, 1993). This is a huge concern, as research has established that recovery is a key to well-being and that the lack of recovery can lead to health concerns associated with stress (Sonnentag & Zijlstra, 2006). Even more challenged for leisure time are some Japanese employees, working an average of 236 more hours per year than their American counterparts and 500 more hours than employees in France or Germany (Nishiyama & Johnson, 2006). Leisure and recovery are key aspects to remaining healthy throughout one's lifetime.

While Europeans normally plan on taking the month of August off, Americans do not have a similar ritual. PricewaterhouseCoopers became so concerned that they have instituted a 10-day shutdown as a winter break and a 5-day shutdown around July 4 so that everyone takes that time off without feeling peer pressure to work through vacations.

### Key Takeaways

Emotions play a role in shaping what we feel is ethical and what is not. Leisure time is important for avoiding the exhaustion phase of the stress cycle. Countries vary a great deal in how many hours the average worker puts in at work, with Japan working the most hours, followed by those in the United States.

## Exercises

1. Explain a time when you have seen emotions help someone to be *more* ethical than they might have otherwise been.
2. Explain a time when you have seen emotions help someone to be *less* ethical than they might have otherwise been.
3. Why do you think some countries have so much vacation time compared to others? In your opinion, is this a problem or not? Why?

## References

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