In It To Win: Jack & Rationalizations

In It To Win: Jack & Rationalizations introduces the concept of rationalizations, which are the excuses people give themselves for not living up to their own, or society’s, own ethical standards. For example, an employee might pad their expense account while telling themselves that “everybody does it.” Rationalizations play an incredibly important role in facilitating unethical behavior.

Questions for classroom discussions

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 Teaching Note

The instructional resources in this series include a feature documentary, *In It To Win: The Jack Abramoff Story* (25 minutes), and six short videos (approx. 5 minutes each) that concentrate on specific decision-making errors people tend to make, as illustrated by Jack Abramoff’s story.

These decision-making errors are part of a new field of study known as behavioral ethics, which draws on behavioral psychology, cognitive science, and related fields to determine why people make the ethical decisions, both good and bad, that they do. A detailed article with extensive resources for teaching behavioral ethics is Prentice, Robert. 2014. “Teaching Behavioral Ethics.” *Journal of Legal Studies Education* 31 (2): 325-365; and may be downloaded here:


*In It To Win: The Jack Abramoff Story* draws from footage shot when Jack Abramoff visited The University of Texas at Austin campus in spring 2012 to talk about his experiences and his life as well as corrupt lobbying in Washington, which he is now dedicated to reforming. Jack Abramoff is not someone who just “doesn’t get” ethics; rather, he is a smart man, a family man, a religious man, and a man who thought he was one of the “good guys” as he battled for his clients. In retrospect, he can see where he went wrong and appears to regret his errors deeply. Why couldn’t he see it at the time?

Most obviously, this documentary exposes personal and systemic ethical concerns in government, business, and economics. But beyond those areas, it is also appropriate for use in courses on journalism, film, policy, American studies, history, law, communications, and psychology. The film explores the ethics of documentary film-making, the responsibility of the individual to organizations and communities, the relationship between law and ethics, issues of power and privilege, and above all, the potential pitfalls any ambitious person faces when operating within a hyper-competitive environment.

See *Rationalizations* and the additional resources below for more on this concept.
Additional Resources


Background on Jack Abramoff

During the Bush Administration, super-lobbyist Jack Abramoff was perhaps the most influential lobbyist in Washington D.C. His excesses led to his downfall and that of Congressmen with whom he was closely connected, including Tom Delay (R-Tex.) who left Washington in disgrace and Bob Ney (R-Ohio) who went to prison.

Because of the access that Abramoff had to members of the Bush administration and their allies, he was at the center of one of the most significant political scandals since Watergate. For more information about Jack Abramoff’s life and career, see his Wikipedia page: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Abramoff](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Abramoff).

Rationalizations
Written by Professor Robert Prentice

Rationalizations are excuses we give ourselves for not living up to our own ethical standards. They play an incredibly important role in facilitating unethical behavior.

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 nearly every day. Lance Armstrong told Oprah Winfrey: “It didn’t seem wrong at the time.” 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.
Anand, Ashforth, and Joshi wrote an incredibly helpful article in which they categorized the most common categories of rationalizations that people use in business and gave examples of each. If any of us hear ourselves using any of these rationalizations, alarm bells should go off in our heads:

- 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.")