In It To Win: Jack & Self-Serving Bias

In It To Win: Jack & Self-serving Bias introduces the concept of the self-serving bias, which refers to the tendency people have to gather information, process information, and even remember information not in an objective way, but instead in a way that serves to support their pre-existing points of view and their perceived self-interest.

Questions for classroom discussions:
In It To Win: Jack & Self-Serving Bias

1) Can you explain self-serving bias in your own words? How does it affect moral decision-making?

2) How does self-serving bias apply to Jack Abramoff? What examples from his story can you cite to support your argument?

3) Can you think of an example from your own life where you or someone else fell victim to self-serving bias?

4) How might you anticipate and/or mitigate the effects of self-serving bias in your own life or decision-making?
**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 the Transcript of *Self-Serving Bias* below (from our Concepts Unwrapped Series) for more on the concept of self-serving bias.
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.


Transcript of Self-Serving Bias (Concepts Unwrapped Series)
Written by Professor Robert Prentice

Psychological pressures – especially ones we’re not conscious of – often make it difficult for us to be as good as we would like to be. One of the most significant is the self-serving bias—the tendency we have to gather information, process information, and even remember information in such a manner as to advance our self-interest and support our pre-existing views. Because of this bias, even when people try their hardest to be fair and impartial, their judgments are inevitably shaded by their own self-interest, often in ways that seem indefensible to others.

The pleasure centers in our brains light up when we are told that our beliefs are correct or that a conclusion that advances our self-interest is accurate. Therefore it’s not surprising that people with conservative political beliefs are more likely to watch Fox News while liberals are more likely to watch MSNBC.
Not only does the self-serving bias affect the information that we seek out, it also affects how we process that information. Thus, supporters of competing political candidates who watch the same debate each tend to conclude that “their guy” won.

The self-serving bias even affects how we remember information. Studies show we are more likely to recall evidence that supports our point of view than evidence that opposes it.

Because of the self-serving bias, studies show that when scientists review articles, they will tend to conclude that those supporting their preexisting point of view are of higher quality than those opposing their point of view.

In 2000, an accounting industry official testified before the SEC, saying "We are professionals that follow our code of ethics and practice by the highest moral standards. We would never be influenced by our own personal financial well being.” This testimony reflects an embarrassing ignorance of the impact of self-interest upon all humans’ decision making.

The more subjective the judgment, the less certain the facts; and the more that’s at stake, the more influential the self-serving bias is likely to be. Inevitably, our self-interest clouds our ethical judgments, even in the most well-intentioned people. Don’t make the same mistake! Guard against the self-serving bias!