

Self-serving Bias

This video introduces the behavioral ethics bias known as the self-serving bias. The self-serving bias causes us to see things in ways that support our best interests and our pre-existing points of view. The self-serving bias can affect our judgments and decisions in a number of ways. For example, the way we judge the actions of others may not consider the situational factors affecting others' decisions. Or, we may "frame" a political issue in a particular way that fits our own interests or point of view.

To learn about related behavioral ethics concepts, watch *Fundamental Attribution Error* and *Framing*. For a closer look at how self-serving bias affected the behavior of former lobbyist Jack Abramoff, watch *In It to Win: Jack & Self-serving Bias*.

The case study on this page, "*A Million Little Pieces*," explores the role of the self-serving bias in the controversy caused by author James Frey's popular memoir after it was revealed to contain numerous fabrications. For a case study that illustrates the self-serving bias in radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh's assessment of drug abuse in the United States, read "Limbaugh on Drug Addiction."

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.

Terms defined in our ethics glossary that are related to the video and case studies include: framing, fundamental attribution error, and self-serving bias.



Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever thought that a candidate you supported won a political debate you watched, while friends who supported the opposing candidate thought their candidate won? Why might that have happened?
2. Do you remember your grades from high school? If you wrote them all down and are like most people, you would have remembered doing better than you actually did. As time passes, the average memory becomes even less accurate and almost always in the same direction of remembering that you did better (rather than worse) than you actually did. What phenomenon is at work here?

3. Can you think of an ethical situation you have been in where the self-serving bias may have played a role in how you thought or acted?
4. Can you think of ways in which the self-serving bias may negatively impact a company's performance? Explain.
5. How can you guard against the self-serving bias in your ethical decision-making?
6. How can a firm protect itself from the potential bad side effects of the self-serving bias as it affects employees' decision making?

Additional Resources

Hastork, Albert H., and Hadley Cantril. 1954. "They Saw a Game: A Case Study." *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 49 (1): 129-134.

Koehler, Jonathan J. 1993. "The Influence of Prior Beliefs on Scientific Judgments of Evidence." *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 56 (1): 28-55.

Pronin, Emily, and Kathleen Schmidt. 2013. "Claims and Denials of Bias and Their Implications for Policy." In *The Behavioral Foundations of Public Policy*, edited by Eldar Shafir, 195-216. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

For 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.](#)"

An 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.

Transcript of Narration

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“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.”