

## ***In It to Win: Jack & Self-Serving Bias***

This video introduces the concept of the self-serving bias 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.

The self-serving bias causes us to gather information, process information, and even remember information not in an objective way, but in ways that support our best interests and our pre-existing points of view. For more details and examples of this concept, watch *Self-serving Bias*. To learn about how our own biases may affect the ways we judge others, watch *Fundamental Attribution Error*. To understand how our views are affected by the way issues and situations are presented, watch *Framing*.

The kinds of decision-making errors that are the subject of *Jack & Self-serving Bias* 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 and the scandal that ended his lobbying career, read the case study on this page. For a case study on self-serving bias, read “*A Million Little Pieces*,” which examines how the self-serving bias influenced multiple perspectives in the controversy over James Frey's memoir after it was revealed to contain fabrications and exaggerations.

Self-serving bias is defined in our glossary. The terms framing and fundamental attribution error are also covered in our glossary.

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



**Discussion Questions for 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 Resources**

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.

**Transcript of Narration - *Self-Serving Bias* (From the Concepts Unwrapped Series)**

*Written and Narrated by*

**Robert Prentice, J.D.**

**Department of Business, Government and Society**

**McCombs School of Business**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

“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.”