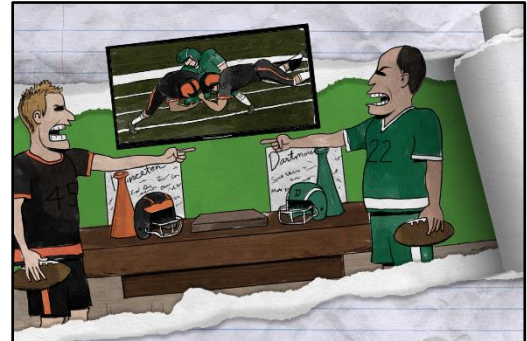


## Self-serving Bias: Sports Edition

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](#).

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

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.

### 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.

**Discussion Questions (Cont.)**

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?

**Transcript of Narration**

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The self-serving bias is the psychological tendency people have to gather information, process information, and even remember information in a way that advances their own self-interest. The self-serving bias influences every kind of decision we make, including moral ones.

Because of the self-serving bias, even when we try our hardest to be fair and impartial, our judgments are inevitably – and often unconsciously – shaded by our own self-interest, usually in ways that seem indefensible to those who see the situation objectively.

The self-serving bias influences how we see and interpret the world around us. For example, research shows that when a film of a rough football game was shown to fans of the two universities involved — Princeton and Dartmouth — the fans processed this information differently. Dartmouth fans mostly concluded that the Princeton players started the rough play. And Princeton fans concluded exactly the opposite.

Studies also show that basketball players who've had a good game tend to credit it to their own hard work and ability. But players who've had a bad game tend to attribute it to poor refereeing, or to coaches who didn't call plays for them, or to bad plays by their teammates.

The self-serving bias can negatively impact our ethical decisions and actions. For example, research shows that people who cheated in a game or contest are much more likely to forget the rules they broke while remembering the rules they followed. Their selective memory allows them to still think of themselves as good people even though they've cheated.

As David Solomon, a scholar of behavioral finance, explains, “[n]obody is ever the villain in their own narrative. So, if someone takes actions that threaten to paint them as a bad person, they are more likely to change their opinion of what's right and wrong, rather than change their opinion of themselves.”

No matter how well-intentioned we are, self-interest will inevitably cloud our ethical judgment. For example, a key player in the Houston Astros' illegal sign-stealing scheme said: "We felt in our hearts that we were being more efficient and smarter than any team out there. That's how we felt." Everyone else saw their cheating for what it was.

It's absolutely critical to guard against the self-serving bias. And it's important to remember that the more that is at stake for us, the more likely we are to be swayed by the self-serving bias. Also, the less certain the facts are, and the more subjective the decision is, the more likely it is that we'll be influenced by the self-serving bias. So, before we act, we'd be wise to view our decision through the eyes of others.

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## Additional Resources

The latest resource from Ethics Unwrapped is a book, [\*Behavioral Ethics in Practice: Why We Sometimes Make the Wrong Decisions\*](#), written by Cara Biasucci and Robert Prentice. This accessible book is amply footnoted with behavioral ethics studies and associated research. It also includes suggestions at the end of each chapter for related Ethics Unwrapped videos and case studies. Some instructors use this resource to educate themselves, while others use it in lieu of (or in addition to) a textbook.

Cara Biasucci also recently wrote a chapter on integrating Ethics Unwrapped in higher education, which can be found in the latest edition of [\*Teaching Ethics: Instructional Models, Methods and Modalities for University Studies\*](#). The chapter includes examples of how Ethics Unwrapped is used at various universities.

The most recent article written by Cara Biasucci and Robert Prentice describes the basics of behavioral ethics and introduces Ethics Unwrapped videos and supporting materials along with teaching examples. It also includes data on the efficacy of Ethics Unwrapped for improving ethics pedagogy across disciplines. Published in *Journal of Business Law and Ethics Pedagogy* (Vol. 1, August 2018), it can be downloaded here: "[Teaching Behavioral Ethics \(Using "Ethics Unwrapped" Videos and Educational Materials\)](#)."

An article written by Ethics Unwrapped authors Minette Drumwright, Robert Prentice, and Cara Biasucci introduce key concepts in behavioral ethics and approaches to effective ethics instruction—including sample classroom assignments. Published in the *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, it can be downloaded here: "[Behavioral Ethics and Teaching Ethical Decision Making](#)."

A detailed article written by Robert Prentice, with extensive resources for teaching behavioral ethics, was published in *Journal of Legal Studies Education* and can be downloaded here: "[Teaching Behavioral Ethics](#)."

Another article by Robert Prentice, discussing how behavioral ethics can improve the ethicality of human decision-making, was published in the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy*. It can 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.