"I read *Playboy* for the articles": Justifying and rationalizing questionable preferences

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So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do.

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790)

He uses statistics as a drunken man uses lamp-posts – for support rather than illumination.

Andrew Lang (1844-1912)

Humans are masters of lying and self-deception. We want others to believe us good, fair, responsible and logical, and we place just as much importance on thinking of ourselves this way. Therefore, when people behave in ways that might appear selfish, prejudiced or perverted, they engage a host of strategies designed to justify questionable behavior with rational excuses: "I hired my son because he's more qualified." "I promoted Ashley because she does a better job than Aisha." Or, in the example from our title and the subject of an experimental investigation we report below, "I read *Playboy* for the articles."

Masking immoral behavior is not a new phenomenon, of course: A large body of research, dating back at least as far as Freud's (1894/1962) elaboration of defense mechanisms, suggests that people's perceptions of the world – and of themselves – are self-serving. Social scientists have long been interested in exploring cases where the human desire to appear moral fails to result in moral behavior, frequently focusing on situations in which people attempt to justify questionable or immoral behavior (Tsang,

2002). Indeed, the many ways in which questionable decisions, policies, or actions are justified and legitimized have been well-documented (Kelman, 2001; Scott & Lyman, 1968). Organizations gain the appearance of morality by conducting affairs in line with accepted standards and values even as they engage in unethical behavior (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Suchman, 1995). Individuals, too, are quite skilled at justifying their own immoral behavior while maintaining a view of themselves as moral. Examples abound: People viewed their own showers during a water shortage as justifiable but the showers of others as reflecting their lack of moral fiber (Monin & Norton, 2003), or, in an extreme example, doctors who participated in genocide in Nazi Germany failed to see how their behavior violated the Hippocratic oath (Lifton, 1986).

In this chapter, we first describe two means by which individuals rationalize and justify questionable behavior, one which focuses on *preemptive* actions people take before engaging in such behavior and one which focuses on *concurrent* strategies, examining how people restructure situations such that their behavior seems less questionable. We conclude by briefly reviewing two additional strategies for coping with such difficult situations: either *forgoing* making decisions, or *forgetting* one's decisions altogether.

Preemptive Justification of Questionable Behavior

One common means of rationalizing questionable behavior is using the moral "credentials" gained from good behavior in the past to justify behaving badly in the present; people thus engage in preemptive justification, using desirable behaviors to license questionable ones. In a series of clever experiments, Monin and Miller (2001)

gave some people the opportunity to credential themselves in a preliminary exercise, and then examined the impact of such licensing on subsequent behavior. For example, participants who had the opportunity to disagree with blatantly sexist statements subsequently felt more licensed to express sexist opinions; similarly, participants who selected an obviously-qualified Black applicant for one position were then more likely to favor a White candidate in a second, more ambiguous situation.

Moral credentials can also apply to matters of personal willpower, with future virtue licensing present misbehavior. Khan and Dhar (2007) explored licensing in acts of self-control. They asked participants to choose between a virtue (fat-free yogurt) and a vice (a cookie), manipulating whether the decision was presented as a series of choices or in isolation. Because participants believed that they would choose the virtuous option in the future, when they viewed the current choice within the context of their future choices, they were more likely to select the vice in the present – and to feel less guilty about it. Most importantly, Khan and Dhar (2007) found that people were deceiving themselves about their likelihood of future virtuous behavior: Two-thirds of participants predicted that they would make the virtuous choice in the second round of decisions, but when that time came, half of them chose the vice (see also Khan & Dhar, 2006). Thus licensing had a net negative effect on behavior, allowing people to engage in suboptimal behavior while feeling good about doing it.

Concurrent Justification of Questionable Behavior

In addition to this kind of preemptive justification, with preemptive good licensing subsequent bad, individuals are also skilled at justifying their behavior in the

moment. In Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf and Wilson (1997), people were asked to allocate two tasks between themselves and a partner. The person who performed the "positive consequences" task would have the opportunity to win money, while the other person would be forced to perform a "neutral consequences" task, described as dull and boring. Some people allocated the tasks by flipping a coin. If the process were truly random, coin flippers would have assigned the positive task to themselves roughly fifty percent of the time, of course; Batson et al., however, found that coin flippers allocated the positive consequences task to themselves ninety percent of the time, suggesting that many of those who called "heads" only to see the coin come up "tails" managed to concoct an exception that favored themselves.

Similarly, in Mazar and Ariely (2006), participants were allowed to grade themselves on a test with monetary incentives and take the appropriate payment from a jar of money, while others had their tests graded by the experimenter. Not surprisingly in light of Batson et al.'s (1997) results, those people who graded their own performance somehow managed to perform much better on the test – sometimes twice as well as those whose exams were graded by the experimenter – and therefore took home more money as a result. As a final example of concurrent justification, Hsee (1996) asked participants to take on the role of real estate appraiser and evaluate two condominiums; some were told to imagine that their fiancé was interested in buying (or selling) one of the condominiums, and others were not. Participants who appraised on behalf of their fiancé estimated a lower (or higher) buying price, presumably justifying their questionable behavior by rationalizing that their behavior was on behalf of a loved one.

"I Read *Playboy* for the Articles"

But what processes underlie this impressive ability to mask questionable behavior? How did those individuals who altered the outcome of their coin flip, for example, manage to convince themselves that this was a legitimate outcome? We conducted an experiment to examine one means by which people engage in concurrent justification, by explaining decisions made on the basis of questionable criteria – for example, choosing to buy a magazine because it contains pictures of scantily clad ladies – in terms of other, more acceptable criteria – for example, the quality of the articles in that publication.

We asked 23 male participants (M_{age} = 20.9) to complete this experiment as part of a class requirement. We told participants we were interested in the criteria they thought were important in choosing magazines, and introduced two sports magazines. Both had won the same number of Associated Press Journalism Awards, and had similar average issue lengths.

We manipulated two attributes of the magazines, such that each magazine dominated on one attribute. One magazine had a *higher* number of sports covered per issue than the other (9 vs. 6), while also having a *lower* average number of feature articles per issue (12 vs. 19). In addition, each magazine was advertised as having one special issue: either a Swimsuit Issue (a questionable preference) or a "Year's Top 10 Athletes" special issue. Most importantly, we varied which magazine came with the Swimsuit Issue; for half of our participants, it accompanied the magazine with more sports, while for the other half, it accompanied the magazine with more feature articles.

We expected our male participants to select the magazine subscription with the Swimsuit Issue regardless of whether it covered more sports or contained more articles, and then, in an effort to justify their questionable behavior, to inflate the value of the attribute favoring that magazine – either the number of sports covered or the number of articles per issue.

Participants examined the descriptions of the two magazines, circled the magazine they would choose, and then ranked criteria (average issue length, number of awards, annual special issues, number of sports covered, average number of articles, and "other") in terms of how important they were in their decision. Overall, and as expected, participants overwhelmingly picked the magazine with the Swimsuit Issue (74%), $\chi^2 (1) =$ 5.26, $p < .03$. While 92% of participants selected the magazine with more articles when that magazine was paired with the Swimsuit Issue, only 46% picked this magazine when it did not have the Swimsuit Issue paired with it, meaning that 54% of participants suddenly preferred the magazine with more sports covered, $\chi^2 (1) = 5.79, p < .02$, which just *happened* to include the Swimsuit Issue (see Table 1).

Most important for our argument is that participants also subsequently inflated the value of the attribute that favored the magazine with the Swimsuit Issue, justifying their questionable preference on the basis of less suspect criteria. We created a dichotomous variable by coding whether participants ranked number of sports or number of articles more highly. Mirroring the results above, while 83% of participants ranked number of articles higher when the magazine coupled with the Swimsuit Issue contained more articles, this number dropped to just 36% when this magazine covered more sports,

meaning that 64% now reported that number of sports was more important, $\chi^2(1) = 5.32$, $p < .03$ (see Table 1).

Similar effects of using acceptable criteria to mask preferences based on questionable criteria have been shown in many other domains. Norton, Vandello and Darley (2004) asked men to choose between male and female candidates for a stereotypically male job, managing a construction company. Half of the participants read that the man was better educated but had less experience; the other half, that he had more experience but less education. In both conditions, the majority of participants selected the male applicant; when asked why they had made that choice, males claimed that gender had not influenced their decisions, instead citing education (when the male had more education) or experience (when the male had more experience) as the basis for their choice, in each case downgrading the criteria on which the female candidate was superior (see also Uhlmann & Cohen, 2005). This same strategy – citing acceptable criteria to justify questionable preferences – has been shown to be used to exclude Blacks and women from juries (Norton, Sommers, & Brauner, 2007; Sommers & Norton, 2007).

In addition, the strategy is remarkably flexible, and can be used to justify decisions with completely different motivations. In Hodson, Dovidio, and Gaertner (2002), participants scoring high on a prejudice measure rated a Black candidate for college as worse than a similarly qualified White candidate, and then inflated the value of criteria that favored the White candidate (e.g., his grades). Individuals scoring low on the prejudice measure, however, demonstrated the opposite preference, rating the Black candidate as better, yet used the very same strategy to justify that decision, inflating the

value of whichever criteria favored the Black candidate to support their judgment (see also Norton, Sommers, Vandello & Darley, 2006).

Are People Aware That They are Justifying?

In the *Playboy* study reported above, study participants might have been cognizant of the true reasons behind their choice ("I want to look at scantily-clothed women") and dissembled merely in an effort to deceive the experimenter ("I don't want to look like a pervert."); more troubling, however, is the possibility that people are blissfully unaware of the extent to which they rationalize their regrettable actions. The extent to which people are consciously deceiving versus unconsciously is obviously of great importance, yet asking our participants whether they are doing this might be futile, even if they were motivated to explain the true reasons underlying their decisions. In a series of classic studies, Nisbett and Wilson (1977) demonstrated that people frequently are unaware of the causes of their own behavior. For example, when asked to choose the highest-quality pantyhose between four identical pairs, participants were four times more likely to choose the pair on the right than the pair on the left. They were unaware of this "right bias", however, and "when asked directly about a possible effect of the position of the article, virtually all subjects denied it, usually with a worried glance at the interviewer suggesting that they felt either that they had misunderstood the question or were dealing with a madman" (p. 244).

Is it possible that when people restructure the world to appear moral in light of their questionable behavior, they may actually be similarly unaware they are doing so? Norton and Ariely (2008) found evidence that cheaters may believe their own lies. In a

series of studies, college students completed intelligence tests with or without access to answer keys. Not surprisingly, those students with access to the answers outperformed those without such access. Interestingly, however, they also tricked themselves into believing they were as intelligent as their fraudulent scores indicated. Even when offered monetary incentives to accurately forecast their score on a second test without an answer key, they inflated predictions of their future performance – attributing their improved performance on the first test not to glancing at the answers, but to their own amazing abilities – which caused them to lose money when their test performance regressed to their true (no answer sheet provided) IQ level.

Can This Justification be Stopped?

The fact that people seem – at least at times – unaware that they are masking their questionable behavior by justifying it complicates efforts to decrease such behavior: If people don't know when they are masking their questionable behavior, how could they know when to stop?

One possible means of reducing people's ability to engage in questionable behavior is to remove ambiguity from the situation. In our *Playboy* study, for example, we deliberately designed each magazine to be superior on one attribute: Offering a readily accessible alternative explanation for choosing the swimsuit issue increases the ambiguity of the true reason for that decision ("maybe he really *does* read it for the articles!"). Removing this kind of ambiguity has been shown to decrease people's tendency to engage in questionable behavior. In Snyder, Kleck, Strenta and Mentzer (1979), participants were asked to sit in either of two rooms to watch a film. One room

was empty; in the other, a person in a wheelchair was also waiting to watch the film. The experimenters varied whether the film was the same in both rooms (offering no excuse to avoid the disabled person) or different (offering a plausible justification for choosing to avoid the disabled person). Snyder et al. (1979) found that participants overwhelmingly chose to watch the movie alone when the two movies were different, but chose to sit with the disabled person when both movies were the same. Using the same paradigm, Bernstein, Stephenson, Snyder, and Wicklund (1983) replaced the disabled person with an attractive female, showing that nearly all men watched the film alone when the two films were the same (no excuse to sit next to the attractive woman), while nearly all men chose to watch the movie with the attractive woman when the two films were different, again ostensibly because they preferred that film over the other.

Unfortunately, however, real-life situations are usually more ambiguous than the situations we have described – and people are likely quite skilled in seeking such ambiguity when faced with difficult decisions – so while these studies demonstrate a moderator of people's ability to engage in questionable behavior, they do not necessarily offer a practicable real-world intervention. Another possibility for decreasing such behavior is to make people accountable for their decisions, requiring them to explain the reasons underlying their choices (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). Given people's demonstrated desire to seek out acceptable justifications for questionable preferences, however, accountability pressures may simply motivate people to look even harder for justifications, rather than stop them from behaving poorly. In fact, in some situations accountability can enhance bias, as with its amplifying effect on commitment to decisions (Simonson & Staw, 1992). Indeed, when Norton et al. (2004) made participants

accountable for their decisions in choosing between a Black and White high school student for admission to college, not only did requiring participants to explain themselves fail to decrease preferences based on racial bias, it made them look even more carefully through the resumes to find additional evidence in favor of their questionable decisions.

Forgoing and Forgetting Questionable Preferences

Having demonstrated a striking variety of strategies that people use to justify questionable behavior both preemptively and concurrently, we turn to outlining two additional routes to coping with difficult decisions: avoiding them altogether, and forgetting them after the fact. These additional strategies in some sense book-end the strategies outlined above; taken together, they offer a full palette of opportunities for people to justify and rationalize their behavior.

Forgoing Questionable Behavior

One obvious means of dealing with situations that might require one to engage in questionable behavior would be simply to avoid the situation altogether, obviating the need to justify that behavior. Of course, in many cases people engage in such behavior to benefit themselves, meaning that forgoing behavior – while an efficient means of avoiding guilt – also means forgoing benefits. Still, research suggests that in some cases individuals are willing to pursue this route.

Dana, Cain and Dawes (2006) demonstrated one such instance of this strategy by modifying a classic paradigm, the Dictator Game. Behavioral economists have asked millions of people to engage in this simple two-person game, in which the Dictator is

given a sum of money (say, ten dollars) and then asked to decide how much, if any, to

keep, and how much, if any, to give to an anonymous other player who will never know

with whom they were paired. Basic economic theory predicts, of course, that the Dictator

will keep all the money because this is the choice that will leave him the most well-off; in

reality, most Dictators give some of the money away, seeming to demonstrate unselfish

altruism (Fehr & Schmidt, 1999; Loewenstein, Thompson, & Bazerman, 1989).

Dana et al. (2006), however, added a creative twist to this standard game which

calls the nature of this altruism into question. In their experiment, after stating the

fraction of $10 they wished to allocate to their partner, Dictators had the option of buying

a "quiet exit" for $1 – in essence, forgoing the decision of how much to give to their

partner. Thus they could keep $9 and ensure that their partner would never know the

game had taken place. Nearly 30% of players chose this option, even though it left them

worse off than a $10/$0 allocation and – most importantly – it left the other player worse

off than a $9/$1 allocation. Opting out of this choice allowed Dictators to avoid the

responsibility for choosing an inequitable split, even as they behaved selfishly. In a

related line of research, Ehrich and Irwin (2005) showed that consumers forgo obtaining

information on the ethicality of products – demonstrating "willful ignorance" – in order

to enjoy their possibly unethical products. Disturbingly, they found that willful ignorance

manifested most strongly among those people who had claimed to care most about the

ethical issue at hand.

One final example of forgoing potentially questionable behavior comes from an

investigation of political correctness. Whites are generally reluctant to use race – or even

mention race – when deciding between or describing Blacks (Norton, Sommers,

Apfelbaum, Pura & Ariely, 2006); a paradigm developed by Norton, Vandello, and Biga (2008) leveraged this hesitancy to demonstrate another instance of avoiding choice. When they asked White participants to express preferences between members of different races based solely on their pictures – for example, which person was more likely to be class valedictorian or to have committed a violent crime – Whites were quite willing to choose between two White individuals, but less likely to express a preference between a White and Black person. Whites were even willing to forgo money to appear politically correct, refusing to choose between members of different races even when a correct answer was worth $1.00. Though Whites were willing to assume some costs to appear colorblind, however, they overcame their reluctance to choose when given sufficient monetary incentive – $5.00 was enough to convince them that the benefits of forgoing choice were no longer worth more than the cost of forgoing money.

Forgetting Questionable Behavior

Finally, we turn to one final method for reducing guilt or regret over our decisions: Simply forgetting we ever made those decisions in the first place. Some research shows that this may be a relatively common method for coping with decisions, particularly difficult ones. Chance and Norton (2008) tested people's memory for difficult decisions in a variety of familiar and exotic choice domains (including vacation destinations, consumer products, colored geometric shapes, and ways to die). Participants first chose between pairs of options and rated the difficulty of each choice; later, they completed a surprise memory quiz. People were less likely to remember their difficult decisions than their easy ones, although they had spent more time deliberating on them.

In fact, they were less likely to remember having seen those options at all – despite having looked at the difficult pairs longer when making their decision! These results contradict the general finding that duration of exposure to a stimulus improves recall (Hamid, 1973; Janiszewski, 1993; Seamon, Marsh, & Brody, 1984).

In addition, forgetting our questionable decisions may not only alleviate guilt or minimize regret, but also help us trick ourselves into believing we got just what we wanted. In a clever sleight-of-hand experiment, Johansson, Hall, Sikstrom and Olsson (2005) demonstrated that people can give perfectly lucid reasons for having *chosen* options that they actually rejected mere seconds ago. Participants first chose which of two female faces they found more attractive. The experimenter would then show one of the faces again and ask, "Why did you pick this one?" In most cases, the presented face would be the one that respondents had, in fact, selected, but sometimes it would be the rejected face. Respondents not only failed to notice the switch, but provided logical reasons why they had "chosen" the face they had in fact rejected.

Taken together, these results suggest that when people do not get what they want, they may fool themselves into believing they wanted what they got. People appear to forget their original decisions when those decisions were difficult, allowing them to later be happy with options they may have rejected earlier. This sequence of events may also explain, for example, why voters over-report having voted for election winners (Atkeson, 1999).

Conclusion

We have discussed a number of ways in which people cope with questionable behavior, from forgoing to rationalizing to justifying to forgetting it altogether, a remarkable – and yet far from exhaustive – range of strategies. Because people do not want to be perceived as – or feel like – unethical or immoral individuals, they devise logical justifications and rationalizations, as the Benjamin Franklin quote with which we opened aptly reflects: "I read *Playboy* for the articles." "I'm not selfish, I just prefer not to play the Dictator game." "I'll pick the fat-free yogurt tomorrow."

We should note that, although we have focused on the negative aspects of rationalization and justification, these strategies are not without their benefits. First, from a strictly utilitarian point of view, it enables an individual to engage in self-serving behavior without incurring psychological costs. Second, preserving a sense of one's morality despite evidence to the contrary allows individuals not just to see themselves as good, but as better and more moral than others (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004; Codol, 1975; Epley & Dunning, 2000). Individuals who deceive themselves in these ways may be happier than others – normal psychology is characterized by people seeing themselves as "above-average," while depression is linked to realism (Dunning & Storey, 1991). Thus rationalization and justification can involve a tradeoff between the truth – people admitting the real reasons for their questionable behavior – and their well-being – denying those reasons leads them to be happier. We would suggest that while the benefits may outweigh the costs for an individual, those costs are likely assumed by that person's peers: We would likely not want to be the partner, roommate, or subordinate of a person comfortable sacrificing truth for personal happiness.

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Table 1. Preferences for Swimsuit Issues, and Justifications for those Preferences

	% Selecting Magazine with More Articles	% Citing More Articles as More Important	% Selecting Magazine that Covers More Sports	% Citing More Sports as More Important
Swimsuit Issue Has More Articles	92	83	8	17
Swimsuit Issue Covers More Sports	46	36	54	64