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*“I read Playboy for the articles”:  
Strategies for coping with questionable decisions*

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The paper is followed by a [discussion](#)

Humans are masters of lying and self-deception. We want others to believe us good, fair, responsible and logical, and we yearn to see ourselves this way. Therefore, when our actions might appear selfish, prejudiced or perverted, we engage a host of strategies to justify our behavior with rational excuses: "I hired my son because he's better educated." "I promoted Ashley because she's more experienced than Aisha." In this article, we review previous studies examining how people restructure situations to view their behavior in a more positive light, and we present the results of our *Playboy* study. We conclude by briefly reviewing two additional strategies for coping with such difficult situations: forgoing choices, and forgetting decisions altogether.

### What circumstances lead to justification?

Two general circumstances which may lead to justification of shameful behavior are 1) situational ambiguity, and 2) the need to explain oneself. Removing situational ambiguity has been shown to decrease people's tendency to engage in questionable behavior. In Snyder, Kleck, Strenta and Mentzer (1979), participants chose one of two rooms in which to watch a film. One of these rooms was empty; a wheelchair-bound confederate waited in the other. 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 avoiding the disabled person). 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. In a follow-up study, Bernstein, Stephenson, Snyder, and Wicklund (1983) replaced the disabled person with an beautiful woman, reversing the previous findings: nearly all men watched the film alone when the films were the same (offering them no excuse to approach the beauty), while nearly all chose to sit in the same room as the woman when the two films were different.

It has been suggested that asking people to explain their decisions will make them more accountable (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). Given people's demonstrated desire to seek out acceptable justifications for their 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) asked participants to choose whether a Black or a White high school student should be admitted to college, being required to explain their choice not only failed to reduce racial bias, it led them look even more carefully through the resumes to find additional evidence in favor of the White applicant.

### "I read *Playboy* for the articles"

We conducted an experiment to study how people explain decisions made on the basis of questionable criteria – for example, choosing to buy a magazine because it contains pictures of scantily clad women – in terms of other, more socially acceptable criteria – for example, the quality of the articles in that publication.<sup>1</sup> We introduced ambiguity by deliberately designing

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<sup>1</sup> In defining behavior as "questionable," we do not distinguish between an individual's self-judgment and his expectations of others' judgments. Even if he does not feel private shame over his desires, if he believes admitting them could lead to embarrassment, he may engage in the same psychological avoidance strategies.

each of two magazine subscriptions to be superior on one socially desirable attribute, in order to offer a readily accessible alternative explanation for preferring the subscription with a swimsuit issue, no matter what it was paired with.

We asked 23 male participants ( $M_{age} = 20.9$ ) to complete this experiment as part of a class requirement. We told them we were interested in which criteria they thought were important in choosing periodical subscriptions, and introduced two hypothetical 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 was superior on one quantitative 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). The subscriptions also differed on one qualitative attribute, with each magazine having a different type of special issue: either a Swimsuit Issue (a questionable preference) or a “Year’s Top 10 Athletes” special issue (a more socially acceptable preference). For half our participants, the Swimsuit Issue accompanied the magazine with more sports; 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 (Table 1).

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

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,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.32$ ,  $p < .03$  (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 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). This flexible strategy 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).

#### More strategies: Balancing “goods” and “bads” across time, and exploiting technicalities

Another means of rationalizing questionable behavior is using the moral “credentials” gained from good behavior in the past to justify misbehavior in the present. 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.

Khan and Dhar (2007) documented an insidious pattern of mental gymnastics in which the mere intention to engage in virtuous behavior in the future can be contorted into an excuse to make a poor choice in the present. They asked participants to choose between a virtue (fat-free yogurt) and a vice (a cookie), manipulating whether the decision was presented as one in a series of choices or in isolation. Because participants imagined they would choose the yogurt in the future, when they viewed the current choice within the context of their future choices, they were more likely to select the cookie – and to feel less guilty about it. Most importantly, the

researchers found that the optimism was self-deceptive: Two-thirds of participants predicted 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).

Another common strategy used to justify misbehavior is the technicality or loophole. In Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf and Wilson (1997), participants 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 had managed to concoct an exception that favored themselves. Louisa Egan, a friend of the authors, shed light on the process when she began running a similar experiment with children. She would close her eyes while the child flipped the coin – and hear the “clink,” “clink,” “clink” of multiple do-overs. They flipped the coin, and assigned the task accordingly... technically.

Having listed a few strategies people use to explain their way out of difficult situations, we turn to outlining two additional coping strategies: forgoing and forgetting them.

### Abstinence

One obvious means of dealing with decisions that would lead to discomfort is to forgo them when possible—even, sometimes, at a cost to oneself and others. Behavioral economists have asked thousands of people to engage in a simple two-person game, in which a 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 that the Dictator will keep all the money; in reality, most Dictators give some of the money away, appearing to demonstrate unselfish altruism (Fehr & Schmidt, 1999; Loewenstein, Thompson, & Bazerman, 1989). Dana, Cain and Dawes (2006) added a creative twist to this standard game which calls the altruistic motivation 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 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 who cared 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.

### Selective amnesia

Finally, we turn to one last method of 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. 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 the outcomes of 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 made those choices – despite having looked at the difficult pairs longer during the initial 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: "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." Although actions may appear suspicious to an observer, a troubling

possibility is that the actors themselves are blissfully unaware of doing anything wrong. Chance, Norton, Gino and Ariely (forthcoming) asked college students to complete IQ tests, giving some of them the opportunity to use an answer key to cheat. Not surprisingly, those students reported higher scores. They also seem to have deceived themselves into believing they were smarter: even when offered monetary incentives to accurately forecast their scores on a second test without an answer key, cheaters predicted they would continue to perform just as well. Naturally, their mispredictions cost them money when their test performance regressed to match their ability.

Although we have focused on the negative aspects of rationalization and justification, these strategies are not without their advantages. In addition to enjoying the benefits of self-serving behavior without incurring psychological costs, self-deceptive individuals 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 may make them happier.

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