



[Zoe Chance](#) and [Michael Norton](#) have a delightful book chapter on the very creative ways in which people justify their questionable decisions. They report an experiment in which male participants were given a choice between subscriptions to two sport magazines. One covered more sports while the other had more featured articles. More interestingly, it was also mentioned that one of the magazines had a swimsuit edition (cf. figure : it should be noted that I only browsed through covers of swimsuit editions in order to find an illustration for this post). Want to take a guess at which magazine the participants preferred?

Boys being boys, they tended to pick the one with the advertized swimsuit edition, irrespective of its other features. This would hardly make the headlines (it's the reason there are swimsuit editions in the first place). More to the point, people felt compelled to justify their choice in a way that would be more acceptable than "I want to look at hot girls in bikini"...

As a result, when asked how much they valued the features of the two magazines, they tended to say that the feature on which the magazine with the swimsuit edition was stronger was the most important feature-whichever that feature was.

The paper is well worth a read because it also provides a concise summary of the experiments documenting the many ways in which people justify their morally dubious decisions.

Even though they don't mention it, all of this research fits in very nicely with [Jon Haidt's proposal](#) that moral reasoning is mostly designed for post-hoc rationalizations and persuading other people of the rightfulness of our decisions, rather than for making morally sound decisions.

All of this research might be taken as showing that people are hypocrites only concerned with alleviating their own conscience rather than making morally good decisions. Thus, Chance and Norton conclude that "We would likely not want to be the partner, roommate, or subordinate of a person comfortable sacrificing truth for personal happiness." However, even those rather lax moral standards that we are so good at finding our way around are better than nothing. I'd much rather be friend with someone who at least realizes that some of her decisions are questionable and tries to provide justification for them than with someone who doesn't care at all. The first person may sometimes face a decision that she would find so hard to justify that she just doesn't make it. Moreover, these justifications may play an important role in smoothing relationships. Most people will never live in complete agreement with their moral standards-I doubt it would be a desirable outcome in any case-but by offering justifications for their failures, they can at least implicitly acknowledge them as such and offer other people the opportunity to question them.

[Chance, Zoe and Michael I. Norton. "I Read Playboy for the Articles: Justifying and Rationalizing Questionable Preferences." In The Interplay of Truth and Deception, edited by M. S. McGlone and M. L. Knapp. Routledge, 2008](#)

Hat tip: [The Economist](#) through [Mind Hacks](#)