

Mind Hacks

Neuroscience and psychology news and views.

I only read it for the articles



The *Economist* has a delightful [article](#) on how we self-justify our dubious behaviour after the event using spurious reasons. It turns out we often deceive ourselves into believing that our hastily constructed justifications are genuinely what motivated us.

The article riffs on a recent [study](#) by marketing researchers [Zoë Chance](#) and [Michael Norton](#), who asked male students to choose between two specially created sports magazines.

One had more articles, but the other featured more sports. When a participant was asked to rate a magazine, one of two magazines happened to be a special swimsuit issue, featuring beautiful women in bikinis.

When the swimsuit issue was the magazine with more articles, the guys said they valued having more articles to read and chose that one. When the bikini babes appeared in the publication with more sports, they said wider coverage was more important and chose that issue.

This, as it turns out, is a common pattern in studies of this kind, and crucially, participants are usually completely unaware that they are post-justifying their choices.

This may not seem surprising: the joke about reading Playboy for the articles is so old Ms Chance and Mr Norton borrowed it for the title of their working paper. But it is the latest in a series of experiments exploring how people behave in ways they think might be frowned upon, and then explain how their motives are actually squeaky clean. Managers, for example, have been found to favour male applicants at

hypothetical job interviews by claiming that they were searching for a candidate with either greater education or greater experience, depending on the attribute with which the man could trump the woman. In another experiment, people chose to watch a movie in a room already occupied by a person in a wheelchair when an adjoining room was showing the same film, but decamped when the movie in the next room was different (thus being able to claim that they were not avoiding the disabled person but just choosing a different film to watch). As Ms Chance puts it: “People will do what they want to do, and then find reasons to support it.”

Further compounding the problem, Ms Chance and Mr Norton’s subjects, like the subjects of the similar experiments, showed little sign of being aware that they were merely using a socially acceptable justification to look at women in swimsuits. Mr Norton reports that when he informs participants that they were acting for different reasons than they claimed, they often react with disbelief.

I recommend reading the original study. It’s very accessibly written, and if you read nothing else, skip to page 9 (page 10 of the [pdf](#) file) and read the section entitled ‘Are People Aware That They are Justifying?’.

One of the key insights from psychology and one of the most practically applicable findings (particularly in clinical work) is that people’s explanations for why they do something are not necessarily a reliable guide to what influences their behaviour.

This also goes for ourselves and there are probably many areas in our life where we justify our actions, good or bad, with comfortable, plausible, fantasies.

[Link](#) to Economist piece ‘The conceit of deceit’.

[Link](#) to study text.

One thought on “I only read it for the articles”



Poor Lurker

November 26, 2012 at 11:37 pm

While this is an interesting and, actually, well-researched area of psychology, this paper unfortunately contains a lot of moral assumptions to fit the researcher's biases. There is nothing necessarily immoral about an action being justified, though it is by its own nature most likely a subconscious reaction, Norton seems to assume that certain basic points of human nature are immoral or “questionable.”

And sentences like this, “Mr Norton reports that when he informs participants that they were acting for different reasons than they claimed, they often react with disbelief.” show an apparent lack of understanding of basic statistics. Even with astounding results showing that about half the population swayed their choices with the swimsuits, this means between 10% and 40% (based on the trial) chose it for other legitimate reasons — and we have no way of knowing which people. In that sentence Mr. Norton is basically admitting to playing Dimestore Freud with his sample.

This is an interesting topic and I'd like to learn more about how rationalization plays subtle roles in our lives, but we have to be careful when making judgements about people's motives.

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