Rationalizations Primarily Serve Reputation Management, Not Decision Making

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ABSTRACT

We agree with Cushman that rationalizations are the product of biological adaptations, but we disagree about their function. The data available do not show that rationalizations allow us to reason better and make better decisions. The data suggest instead that rationalizations serve reputation management goals, and that they affect our behaviors because we are held accountable by our peers.

COMMENTARY

Cushman suggests that his individualistic account of rationalization is complementary with a social account of rationalization based on reputation management. However, the two accounts make conflicting predictions, so that data about rationalizations should help tell which account better explains features of rationalizations.

If our ability to rationalize evolved by improving practical decision making, its expression (when we feel the need to rationalize) and content (how we rationalize)

should not be strongly modulated by the presence of others, and it should not (as a rule) lead to the acceptance of inaccurate beliefs (since those are unlikely to improve practical decision making). By contrast, if our ability to rationalize evolved by serving reputation management ends, its expression and content should be strongly modulated by the presence of others, and it could lead to the acceptance of inaccurate or practical maladaptive beliefs, in a tradeoff between the practical and the social value of the beliefs (see Kurzban & Aktipis, 2007; Mercier, 2012).

On the first point—when people feel the need to rationalize—we rely on results from the cognitive dissonance literature, since cognitive dissonance is a driver of the need to rationalize. Experiments have shown that the feeling of dissonance is highly modulated by social context: participants are less likely to experience dissonance and to rationalize their actions when these actions are private rather than public (e.g. Tice, 1992, see also Leary, 1995; Tedeschi & Rosenfeld, 1981). More generally, people seem more concerned with *appearing* consistent than with *being* consistent (Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971).

Second, the content of rationalizations depends more on what we think others will deem acceptable than on the likelihood of improving practical decision making, as if the rationalizations were generated by an internal 'press secretary' (Kurzban & Aktipis, 2007; see also: Haidt, 2001; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). This would explain for instance why cognitive dissonance manipulations only affect explicit beliefs (Gawronski & Strack, 2004). If the rationalizations that cognitive dissonance gives rise to aimed at improving our practical decision making, they should affect implicit and explicit beliefs, since both matter for practical decision making. By contrast, if

these rationalizations serve social goals, only explicit beliefs—the ones we can share—matter. Moreover, the influence rationalizations have on our explicit beliefs can be practically detrimental. In all the standard cognitive dissonance paradigm, dissonance reduction leads to less accurate beliefs—e.g. that a truly boring task isn't really that boring (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959).

When rationalizations affect our actions, they often do not do so in a way that is compatible with Cushman's account. Many experiments on reason-based choice (Simonson, 1989, for reviews, see: Shafir, Simonson, & Tversky, 1993; Mercier & Sperber, 2011) have shown (i) that often participants make worse decisions, from a purely practical point of view, when they engage in rationalizations, and (ii) that these decisions fit with the expectations participants have of what decision will look best. In the classic reason-based choice study (Simonson, 1989), asking participants to justify their decisions (and thus to provide rationalizations) pushed them to make suboptimal decision (as they were influenced by logically irrelevant factors). However, the participants thought these arguably less practical rational decisions were easier to justify and less likely to be criticized. In another study, Briley, Morris and Simonson (2000) have shown that asking participants in Asia and in the US to justify their decisions affected these decisions, but in opposite ways. In Hong Kong, participants who provided rationalizations were more likely to choose a compromise option, while participants in the US were less likely to do so. In each case, the deviations are in line with the society's cultural values, and thus with which rationalizations would be more likely to be accepted. In both studies, rationalizations influenced participants' decisions in a way that made it arguably less practically rational, but more socially acceptable (see also Baumeister, 1982; Baumeister & Cairns, 1992).

One of the strengths of Cushman's account is that it explains why people's behavior would be guided by past rationalizations: if rationalizations were a purely social tool, why let our future behavior be guided by them? Here, we suggest Cushman neglects one of the main reason rationalizations are socially effective: they commit the speaker who offers them. By providing rationalizations we convey the following information: (i) I share the same values as you; (ii) I made this decision because of these values; (iii) in the future I will keep following these values. If (iii) were absent, that is, if speakers didn't commit to their rationalizations, the rationalizations would be largely worthless. By being committed to what they say, senders implicitly acknowledge that if their message is found to be unreliable, they will pay reputational costs (e.g. see: Mazzarella, Reinecke, Noveck, & Mercier, 2018; Vullioud, Clément, Scott-Phillips, & Mercier, 2017).

The fact that we are committed (to some extent) to our rationalizations explains why we stick to them: if we didn't, we'd suffer social costs. Rationalizations are thus no different from any other form of commitment. For example, when we morally condemn a behavior, we commit to not engaging in this behavior ourselves, and we dislike people who engage in behaviors they have previously condemned (Jordan, Sommers, Bloom, & Rand, 2017). Indeed, our need to appear consistent has long been associated with reputation management (Leary, 1995; Sperber, 2000; Tetlock, 1992).

Last but not least, if our ability to rationalize had evolved to improve practical decision making, the human exception would be quite puzzling from an evolutionary

perspective. Being influenced by multiple "non-rational processes" (target article, p. 3) and having to make complex decisions is not exclusive to humans. Our social account of rationalization avoids this pitfall: rationalization is human-specific because the human social niche has exerted selective pressures on our ability to manage our reputation so as to compete in biological markets (Mercier & Sperber, 2017).

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