Rationales take on Rationalizations

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When people become overwhelmed with emotion, their everyday abilities to think and act as effectively and as constructively as they typically would become compromised. Emotional arousal changes a person's mental state. So, when people – particularly young people – become upset or angry, or are experiencing intense stressful events, they probably are not thinking about the consequences of their actions. There is immediate and intense satisfaction in punching a nose, whether it's really a physical punch, or a stinging verbal punch (a.k.a. *zingers*).

It is helpful – especially for young people – if we actually describe for them what the future real life consequences of their actions will be. Explaining the future positive or negative consequences of actions is called *providing a rationale*. A rationale is a description of how a particular action, or behavior, will benefit a person or cause him grief. A good rationale is embedded in a positive supportive interaction, is brief, points out the positive or negative consequences of an action, and describes how those consequences relate directly to an individual. A rationale is not used as coercive logic for why an individual should perform some behavior, nor should it be lecturing (e.g., "*If I can give him enough reasons for why he should do this, he will see the logic of it and have no excuse for not doing it*."). A rationale can describe proximate consequences (e.g., *"If you take a deep breath right now, you will feel more relaxed and will think differently about this."*), or more distant consequences (e.g., *"If you learn to control your temper, you will have more friends to go out with."*).

A person is more apt to consider the natural consequences of his or her actions when those consequences have been pointed out to him or her through rationales. Looking into the future is a skill everyone needs to learn, and providing rationales is one way we help people learn that skill. In addition, a person is more likely to engage in some new behavior if he can see some way that it will benefit him. A person's ability to think of rationales is an important skill in *cognitive problem solving*, or *rational thinking*, which research has shown to be an important skill if we wish to be successful in life. A person's ability to think of rationales is often referred to as *consequential thinking*.

When people are emotionally aroused, they probably are not listening to the rationales we describe because they have their own rationalizations. A rationalization can be defined as a logical and generally socially acceptable reason to justify a person's actions, but is not a valid or real reason (e.g., an aggressive person might defend his actions with a rationalization like this: *"If I don't act first, they will think I am weak and attack me more often."*). One strategy clinicians use for dealing with rationalizations is to use cognitive behavior therapy to teach people alternatives to the self-defeating statements that make up rationalizations. Therapy involves teaching people to identify, test, and modify self-defeating thoughts. The alternatives to rationalizations are the rationales described above, the most probable real life consequences of actions.

At one time rationalizations were referred to as *defense mechanisms*. The term was used because rationalizations appeared to serve the purpose of protecting or insulating a person from feelings and anxieties evoked by stressful events. But this is a circular argument, an explanatory fiction. The cause (anxiety) is inferred from the effect (rationalization), and then the inferred cause (anxiety) is used as the explanation of the effect (the rationalization). Explanatory fictions like this have been the bane of mental health developing as a true science. Rather than postulating unverifiable explanations like *defense mechanisms*, an alternative strategy would be to look for a functional relationship between the statements that make up rationalizations and the actual consequences that come of those statements. And in many cases, the statements turn out to be ways for people to escape or avoid undesired consequences.

For example, a child may have successfully used a rationalization to divert attention from his troublesome fighting to someone else's behavior, thereby escaping punishment for fighting. It's common for supervising adults to look for 'the real culprit' when a fight breaks out among children. Kids quickly learn to rationalize with, *"Well, he hit me first!"* More often than not this diverts adult attention away from a child as the adult tries to unravel who hit who first. When little ones turn into teenaged ones and then adult ones, rationalizations become more sophisticated, but produce the same types of consequences: escape or avoidance of negative events.

We can help people move beyond their self-defeating rationalizations by looking for the functions of rationalizations. Once we know the functions, we will be able to identify more useful alternative behaviors that serve the same purposes as the rationalizations. In addition, we can help people learn to solve future problem situations by teaching problem solving skills, or rational thinking skills that include identifying probable consequences of different actions.

It's about helping people turn from rationalizations to rationales.