The “What rationalization feels like” game:

Choose a partner. Then:

Step 1: Try rationalizing. (3-5 minutes)

- Utter some rationalizations on purpose, to notice how it feels. For example – explain to your partner how of course your dissertation is going well, despite whatever your advisor thinks, because his standards are completely unfair, and he didn’t realize that chapter 2 is anomalously hard and doesn’t count...
- You can use some of the topics below, or make up your own situations to rationalize about.
- Try to actually get into the spirit of it – say these rationalizations as though you were actually feeling that way, and try, as you utter them, to actually feel that way.
- *While you do it, notice how rationalization feels, in as much detail as possible.*

Possible topics:

- How’s your dissertation going?  
  - (You could do selective search to explain why it’s going badly, or why it’s going well)
- If you live with roommates: explain how you do more than your share of the housework.
- Describe the last fight you got in with a friend, colleague, or romantic partner. Explain why your own actions were totally justified.
- Was G.W. Bush a bad president? (You could do selective search for either answer.)
- Is it worth it to be in [math grad school / whatever degree program you’re in]?

If you notice cases where you rationalize in real life, jot down your own situations here:

Step 2: What did it feel like? (5 minutes)

A. Jot down your impressions of what it felt like. (Goal: notice cues in finer detail, so that smaller pieces of rationalization will become easier to spot.)
B. Turn to the "What does rationalization feel like?" handout, where you'll see other peoples' cues. Circle the ones that apply to you; jot down any new cues you think of.

**Step 3: What “actually thinking” (not fooling yourself) feels like**

A. Now, try to tackle an emotionally difficult question without going into "explaining" or "rationalizing" mode – sticking instead in “actually try to figure it out” mode.
   a. Be sure to look for new thoughts, not just recite existing ones.
B. Do it aloud with a partner, or by yourself on scratch paper.
C. Take a question below, or choose one of your own – but try to find a question where it'll be hard not to rationalize, so that you can notice the contrast.

Possible topics:
- Should you be vegetarian?
- How’s your dissertation going?
- How attractive are you?
- How well do you know your mother? Is she happy?
- How unbiased in your picture of yourself?
- Was G.W. Bush a good president?
- What are your goals in life?

**Step 4: What did it feel like?**

Jot quick notes, or circle items you can identify with from the "What does rationalization / actually thinking feel like" handout.
Some types of motivated cognition:
Fake justifications           Motivated uncertainty
Selective Search               Motivated skepticism:
Combat reflexes                Flinches
Motivated stopping

What rationalization feels like (varies by person; collected from many folk):
Cues that can indicate rationalizing:

- Imagining a hypothetical audience; trying to explain yourself to that person;
- Content-less emphazizers such as ‘clearly’, obviously, ‘but I really believe’.
- Feeling tired afterward; having a heedful of static afterward;
- Your mouth responds with an immediate “no” before stopping to think or draw breath.
- It “feels false” or “feels like a salesperson”.
- “I can’t explain my reasoning to other person without a feeling of guilt that I am slightly manipulating them.”
- I feel relief that I did not have to change my point of view after thinking through something.
- I feel quick twinge of fear.
- I feel emotionally invested in a particular fact being true.
- I have an "ugh field" across part of my mental landscape -- it feels almost like literal tunnel vision, and is the exact same feeling as the "ugh field" I might get around an unpaid bill.

Add yours here:

Cues that can indicate “actually thinking; really figuring it out”:

- I feel curious -- a chasing, seeking, engaged feeling, like a cat chasing a mouse.
- I find myself thinking new thoughts, hearing new ideas (if talking to someone else), and making updates I’m interested in. The experience feels like looking around.
- I don’t know what conclusion I’ll come to.
- I spontaneously produce lines of research, not lines of argumentation.

Add yours here: