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The what and why of self-deception

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Scholars from many disciplines have investigated self-deception, but defining self-deception and establishing its possible benefits have been a matter of heated debate — a debate impoverished by a relative lack of empirical research. Drawing on recent research, we first classify three distinct definitions of self-deception, ranging from a view that self-deception is synonymous with positive illusions to a more stringent view that self-deception requires the presence of simultaneous conflicting beliefs. We then review recent research on the possible benefits of self-deception, identifying three adaptive functions: deceiving others, social status, and psychological benefits. We suggest potential directions for future research.

Addresses

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The nature and definition of self-deception remains open to debate. Philosophers have questioned whether — and how — self-deception is possible; evolutionary theorists have conjectured that self-deception may — or must — be adaptive [1–3]. Until recently, there was little evidence for either the existence or processes of self-deception; indeed, Robert Trivers [4] (p. 15) wrote that research on self-deception is still in its infancy. In recent years, however, empirical research on self-deception has been gaining traction in social psychology and economics, providing much-needed evidence and shedding light on the psychology of self-deception [5]. We first classify competing definitions of self-deception, then review recent research supporting three distinct advantages of self-deception: improved success in deceiving others, social status, and psychological benefits.

What is self-deception?

Although definitions of self-deception abound, most can be grouped into one of three broad categories (acknowledging

that these generalizations ignore many nuanced distinctions). In the first definition — sometimes called ‘deflationary’ [2] — self-deception is simply a motivated false belief [e.g. 5,6], and is indistinguishable from positive illusions. In this view, self-deception can arise from, for example, selective attention, biased information search, or forgetting. In the second definition, self-deception is a motivated false belief that persists in spite of disconfirming evidence [e.g. 7,8]. In this view, not all positive illusions are self-deceptive, and biased information search does not qualify as self-deception since disconfirming evidence is not encountered and ignored; however, self-deception can still arise via selective attention or knowledge avoidance [9,10], where disconfirming evidence is present — but ignored or discounted.

In the final definition [e.g. 11–13], self-deception is a motivated and conscious false belief held simultaneously with a conflicting unconscious true belief. The paradox inherent in this view of self-deception — how can a person believe p and simultaneously convince himself *not* p , while still retaining the original belief? — has led some scholars to declare self-deception to be impossible [2]. Although many studies have investigated the first two definitions of self-deception, there are crucial barriers to assessing this final definition: it requires both observing the unconscious true belief and confirming that the stated or expressed belief is sincere. In the classic demonstration of this class of self-deception [11], participants’ stated denials of recognizing their own recorded voices were belied by (unconscious) skin conductance measures.

Note that in all cases, however, self-deception is presumed to arise from a motivated desire to see the self and the world in ways that favor the self. As with the many definitions of self-deception, scholars have also examined the benefits of self-deception using a wide array of perspectives. We next review recent research that suggests self-deception may be adaptive in at least three distinct ways: deceiving others, gaining social rewards, and reaping psychological benefits.

Deceiving the self to deceive others

Self-deception may have evolved as an adaptive strategy for deceiving others without being discovered [4,5]. In this context, self-deception can prevent the liar from emitting nonverbal cues of guilt, minimize the cognitive load associated with lying, and reduce retribution via pleas of ignorance. Skeptics of this theory, however, have noted that not only would a disregard for the truth solve most of these problems without the very real costs of

inaccuracy [14,15], but that most examples of self-deception do not involve deceiving other people [16].

Recent studies provide compelling evidence for a relationship between self-deception and other-deception [17^{*}]. Given that high-status individuals are both more likely to be the targets of deception and better equipped to punish deceivers they catch in the act, due to their control of resources, it was hypothesized that self-deception may be more likely to occur when lying to high-status than equal-status individuals. Participants first studied a set of words; next, when these words were presented along with new words, they declared verbally that they had not seen any of the words while privately pressing a key to indicate whether they had seen each word or not; importantly, participants were face-to-face with either a high-status ('teacher') or equal-status ('student') confederate, and were told they would lose their payment if the confederate detected their dishonesty. When the confederate left the room, participants again privately indicated which words had been part of the original group. Participants demonstrated poorer private recall when they lied to the teacher than to the student — evidence that they had temporarily forgotten the truth and self-deceived.

Social benefits of self-deceptive confidence

Confidence impacts the way others perceive and treat us. Confident people are believed more often [e.g. 18], have more influence in groups or when giving advice [19,20], and appear more knowledgeable [21]. Most germane to our review, inaccurate (and self-deceptive) overconfidence often carries social benefits: in one study, overconfidence increased peers' judgments of competence, resulting in higher social status [25]. Similarly, overconfidence correlates with others' mistakenly high expectations: following an unstructured interaction in preparation for a class, students predicted their next grades and relative ranking in the group and the grades and relative rankings of others. Self-deceptive overconfidence was positively correlated with fooling others: students who had overly high expectations for themselves inspired overly high expectations from others [22^{*}]. Note, however, that as being perceived as lying to others is costly, so being perceived as self-enhancing can also come with costs: whereas actual self-enhancers were rated by others as emotionally stable, socially attractive, and socially influential, those who observers also *perceived* to be high self-enhancers (those whom observers 'saw through') were perceived as emotionally unstable and socially unstable — though they remained socially influential [23^{*}]. These results align with the 'optimal margin of illusion' perspective [24]. Self-deception can come with social benefits, but those benefits are not guaranteed.

Psychological benefits of self-deception

Finally, recent research suggests that people may derive direct utility from self-deceptive beliefs — viewing

themselves, others, the state of the world, or their future prospects in preferred and self-serving ways [25–27]. As just one example, not only do optimists work harder to achieve their expected results, they gain direct utility from optimism [28^{*}].

Moreover, self-deception induced in the moment can also have psychological benefits. In one set of studies [29], some participants had an opportunity to cheat on a test by looking at an answer key. They then systematically over-predicted their performance on future tests: rather than attributing their prior achievement to the presence of the answers, they convinced themselves they would do well even without the answer key. When paid for both accuracy and performance, they earned less money as a result of their self-deceptive optimism when they could not meet their own high expectations. In another investigation, participants who self-deceived about their performance on a judgment task in order to bolster false hope of winning bonus money were also quicker to make those self-deceptive judgments than other judgments — suggesting a hasty cover-up of their suspicion about the truth [30].

Relatedly, self-deceptive individuals understate the degree to which motivation affects their behavior, to reinforce their motivated beliefs that their actions are diagnostic of a desired but unobservable trait. These studies build on a classic experiment [31] in which individuals held their hands in cold water longer when endurance was purported to indicate good health — participants persisted longer on a task (enduring a painful finger prick or searching for hidden pictures) when told persistence augured well (good skin in the future or self-control in other domains such as eating) [32^{*}]. Furthermore, persistence corresponded with lower reported effort. This effort denial allowed participants to benefit from the belief that their persistence was due to their underlying desirable type rather than to their high motivation.

Conclusion & future directions

We have offered a classification of current views of self-deception and summarized research demonstrating three distinct benefits of deceiving the self. Still, despite the recent increase in research exploring the topic, more research is needed to understand two crucial aspects: when self-deception occurs, and how to stop it.

First, it is not yet known whether self-deception occurs during the encoding or the retrieval process — although there is some suggestive evidence for both [33]. Consider the 'cheating on tests' paradigm [31], in which participants who performed well on a test by glancing at the answers at the bottom believed that their performance was due to their ability rather than the answers. Did this self-deception happen as they viewed the answers, whereby as soon as they glanced at an answer they

simultaneously attributed getting the question right to their ability? Or does the awareness of having used the answers linger — for seconds, or even milliseconds — and only then is wiped away? Functional MRI could be used build on new work [34*], further illuminating the processes of self-deception versus other-deception.

Second, research documenting interventions to help prevent self-deception are clearly needed. Ambiguity has been shown to be necessary for self-deception [35], but there are likely other factors in addition to clarity of evidence that may prevent self-deception. One promising avenue is to explore the decay rate of self-deception when exposed to the truth. In one investigation [36], people who had cheated on a test (and deceived themselves into thinking they did well due to their ability) took a series of additional tests without access to the answers; self-deception lingered beyond the next test, but, faced with repeated poor performance, people eventually stopped believing they were better than they actually were.

The ‘what’ of self-deception — what distinguishes self-deception from other phenomena? — and the ‘why’ of self-deception — what adaptive functions can it serve? — have been of interest to scholars from a variety of disciplines. The recent proliferation of research has begun to shed new light, but social scientists must be careful not to deceive ourselves into thinking that the psychology is fully understood.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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