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Self-deception: An Introduction¹

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Abstract

Self-deception has been studied by philosophers and psychologists for some time. Frenkel-Brunswik (1939) published the first psychology paper. In Triandis (2009, p. ix) there are references to 24 papers by philosophers and psychologists that examined this concept. All humans have self-deceptions, some more frequently than others. That is, they see the world the way they would like to be rather than the way it is. As I thought about the concept over the years I believe that the most important point for understanding self-deception is to examine what percentage of the information that humans use when *constructing* (Taylor, 1998b) the way they see the world comes from inside their body or from outside their body. If most of it comes from inside their body there is a high probability that they have a self-deception. The information from inside the body consists of emotions (e.g., hopes), needs (e.g., hunger pangs), desires (e.g., imagined attractive objects), cognitive systems (e.g., prejudices, stereotypes, in-group preferences), memories (e.g., we are descendents of heroes), theories, ideologies, and elements of subjective culture acquired during socialization. The information from the outside the body is reality, and captures aspects of the ecology. Geography, climate, the actions of others, occupations, and events in the environment, are all relevant. For example, when a wild animal is attacking we focus on outside information. But when making judgments about philosophy, economics, religion, education, politics, terrorism, aesthetics and the like we often use inside information to shape our perceptions. The Buddha had the insight that we use information from both outside the body (reality, truth) and inside our body (emotions, ideology) when he said "Where self is, truth is not; where truth is, self is not." (Spencer-Rogers, Williams, & Pang, 2010). In this paper I will start with some examples of self-deception. Then I will discuss some of the characteristics of self-deception—it is often linked to cognitive simplicity, megalomania, and if we have no self-deceptions we might be depressed, but if we have large self-deceptions we might be mentally ill. Then I will discuss how self-deception is implicated in many of the controversial issues of our times. I will end with some suggestions for further research linking culture and self-deception.

Key Words: Self-deception, cognition, megalomania, depression, culture.

Auto-engaño: Una introducción

Resumen

El auto-engaño ha sido estudiado por filósofos y psicólogos durante algún tiempo. Frenkel-Brunswik (1939) publicó el primer trabajo de corte psicológico. En Triandis (2009, p. ix) se pueden encontrar referencias de 24 trabajos de filósofos y psicólogos que han examinado este concepto. Todos los humanos tienen auto-engaños, algunos más frecuentemente que otros. Esto es, ven el mundo de la manera en que les gustaría que fuera y no tanto de la manera en que es. Tal como he pensado acerca del concepto a través de los años, creo que el punto más importante para el entendimiento del auto-engaño, es examinar qué porcentaje de la información que los humanos utilizan cuando *construyen* (Taylor, 1988b) y la manera en que ven el mundo, proviene de dentro o fuera de su cuerpo. Si el mayor porcentaje viene de dentro, existe una alta probabilidad de que se trate de auto-engaño. La información de dentro del cuerpo consiste en emociones (p.e. deseos), necesidades (p.e. dolores por hambre), deseos (p.e. objetos atractivos imaginarios), sistemas cognoscitivos (p.e. prejuicios, estereotipos, preferencias de endo-grupo), memorias (p.e. descendemos de héroes), teorías, ideologías, y elementos de cultura subjetiva adquiridos durante la socialización. La información fuera del cuerpo es la realidad, y captura aspectos ecológicos. Geografía, clima acciones de los otros, ocupaciones y eventos del medio ambiente, todos son relevantes. Por ejemplo, cuando un animal ataca nos enfocamos en la información de fuera; pero cuando se hacen juicios sobre filosofía, economía, religión, educación, política, terrorismo, estética y cosas que nos gustan, utilizamos información de dentro para moldear nuestras percepciones. En este trabajo empezaré con algunos ejemplos de auto-engaño; después discutiré algunas de las características del auto-engaño –que está frecuentemente ligado a la simplicidad cognoscitiva, megalomanía, y que si no tenemos auto-engaño es probable que estemos deprimidos, pero si tenemos demasiados auto-engaños podríamos estar mentalmente no sanos; continuaré discutiendo cómo el auto-engaño está implicado en muchos de los puntos controversiales de nuestros tiempos; y terminaré con algunas sugerencias para futuras investigaciones vinculando la cultura y el auto-engaño.

Palabras clave: Autoengaño, cognición, megalomanía, depresión, cultura

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Examples of Self-Deception

In two villages in Bolivia the locals worship and pray to Che Guevara! The fact that Che was a Marxist atheist does not bother them. He helped the poor, so he was a good person, and since they *need* such a person to pray to they converted him to a local saint. His picture is in many homes, people pray to him, and one of the locals, assured the BBC reporter that Che answers prayers. He said: "I do not ask for any goods; I ask that my grand-children make good grades, and they do get good grades in school. Che answers my prayers." In short, if one needs a powerful entity one creates it.

Mohammed Atta, the leader of the gang that committed the September 11, 2001 attacks, had a "Manual for a Raid" in his luggage. According to the manual the raid was perceived as "doing God's work." In my opinion, Atta was after glory: the destruction of the superpower. He could not admit even to himself that he was after glory so he dressed his motive in religion, i.e., religion was used as a cloak to hide the actual goal. In short, the idea that he was doing God's work was a satisfying fantasy.

In the 10th century Christians also had such fantasies. Those who died fighting Islam were believed to be "going to Christ." Supposedly when they died in that situation it guaranteed going to paradise (NPS TV Program on Islam in Spain.)

Qirko (2013) discusses many forms of altruism such as vows of celibacy, suicide bombings, combat suicide that are examples of self-deception. They are found in organizations, such as the Catholic Church or al-Qaeda, that replicate natural kin contexts (such as parent-child or sibling relationships), they use uniforms, emblems, hair styles, speech patterns, mannerisms, linguistic and symbolic kin references to create an ingroup where self-sacrifice is expected. In many such cases self-sacrifice, such as suicide bombing, is due to self-deception.

Bin Laden writing to Mullah Omar (the leader of the Taliban) sees the United Nations as an alien culture that has "a new religion that is worshipped to the exclusion of God." "The UN imposes all sorts of penalties on all those who contradict its religion. It issues documents and statements that openly contradict Islamic belief, such as the Universal Declaration for Human Rights, considering that all religions are equal, and that the destruction of the statues constitutes a crime." (Cullison, 2004, p. 64) (He referred to the giant statues of the Buddha that the Taliban blew up in Afghanistan). In short, bin Laden uses the fantasy that his particular interpretation of Islam is the word of God, and anything that does not agree with it must be rejected.

The Bush Administration advocated a change of the Geneva Convention to give more freedom to interrogators. The implication is that if the interrogators have more freedom they will be more effective. That was also a self-deception. There is psychological research establishing that innocents confess (Kassin, 2007). Interrogations that border on torture are ineffective, produce the information the interrogators want to receive rather than useful, reliable information, and give the country that adopts such methods a bad name. The administrators sample information consistent with their desires (we will get good information) and ignored information that is inconsistent with their desires (the information is invalid).

The greatest challenge to our civilization comes from global warming. But those who do not wish to have their lifestyle changed have the self-deception that the evidence is insufficient that there is any human-made modification of the environment. Almost a thousand refereed scientific papers point to the human-made changes of the environment (Gore, 2006). But the mass media, as is required by their professional ethics, have to present both sides of the argument. Thus, they interview some uninformed politician who says that there is nothing to the argument that there is a human-made modification of the environment. The public can then focus on the message that fits its *needs*. Since the public would rather not change life style it pays more attention to the uninformed politician than to the scientific evidence. This maybe the greatest self-deception in the world!

Even intellectual giants, such as Nobel Prize winners, are susceptible to self-deception. For example, in 1914 the *Manifesto of 93 German Intellectuals* stated “It is not true that Germany trespassed neutral Belgium...It is not true that the life and property of a single Belgian citizen was injured by our soldiers...It is not true that our troops treated Louvain brutally...” In fact historians report that Germany *did* trespass, some Belgians *were* killed, and the library of the University of Louvain *was* burned, so that there is now a plaque there thanking the Rockefeller Foundation, and several universities for the help received after the war to reconstitute the library. The signers of the declaration were the top intellectual in the world, at that time. They included Max Planck, who developed quantum theory which is considered as important as Einstein’s theory of relativity, Wilhelm Roentgen, who discovered the X-Rays, and Wilhelm Wundt, who established the first psychological laboratory in the world, in 1880. In retrospect, one can ask: How could these intellectual giants, sitting in their universities, know what German soldiers did? Obviously they had no evidence from outside their body. They just projected their hopes, desires, and needs, in short the information inside the body. They even stated in the manifesto that Germany was the land of Goethe, Beethoven, and Kant and could not possibly have done what it was accused to having done.

When the French revolution started, on July 14, 1789 with the storming of the Bastille, Louis XVI wrote in his diary only one word: “Rien.” In other words, nothing happened! Had he avoided this self-deception he might have saved his neck from the guillotine.

Philip II (1527-1598) of Spain, was a champion self-deceiver. The Encyclopedia Britannica (1957, Vol. 17, p 722) says of him: “No experience of the failure of his policy could shake his belief in its essential excellence.”

Characteristics of Self-Deceptions

Self-deception is often linked to cognitive simplicity. As I looked at the more than 100 examples in Triandis (2009) I found that most of them were cognitively simple. It seems reasonable to assume that cultural simplicity is related to cognitive simplicity—though we need research to make sure that this is so. There is evidence that simple cultures are tighter and tend toward collectivism, though there are a few simple cultures that are highly individualistic. This suggests the hypothesis that simple, tight, and collectivist cultures may provide more examples of self-deception than complex, loose and individualist cultures. However, there is

a problem. Collectivism is linked to paying attention to others more than is the case with individualism. Paying attention to others is focusing outside the body. Hence, further research is needed to see if cultural simplicity or collectivism have links to the frequency of self-deception.

Religiosity is empirically linked to collectivism (Triandis & Singelis, 1998) and is high in Islam and low in Scandinavia and I suspect we can find evidence of more cognitively simple self-deceptions in Islam than in Scandinavia. The non-acceptance of Darwin's theory of evolution can provide a clue of the frequency of self-deception. Non-acceptance is about 20% in Scandinavia, 30% in Central Europe, 45% in the United States, 60% in Turkey, and 92% in Egypt (*Economist*, Oct. 17, 2009). But this hypothesis needs rigorous testing.

In any case, self-deception and cognitive simplicity are often found together. For example, who created the world? The discussion from astrophysics, exobiology, paleontology, evolutionary theory, and so on is too complex. Sagan (1980) used more than 100 pages, and Hawking & Mlodinow (2010) used a whole book to explain how we moved from the big bang to *Homo sapiens*. It is so much simpler to say: God. God is a wonderful cognitively simple self-deception. It fits our hopes, needs and desires to have a powerful entity help us win our battles. In most cultures deities do exactly that, whether the battles are agricultural, industrial, or military. As anthropologist Robert Redfield put it, in the Introduction to Malinowski (1954): "Religion is not only people explaining and projecting their dreams; it is not only a sort of spiritual electric—mana-- it is not solely to be recognized in social communication---no, religion and magic are ways men must have, being men, to make the world acceptable, manageable, and right." (p. viii) More recent work in anthropology (Atran, 2007) also concludes that the human mind is so constructed that it is natural to look for the causes of events. In short, humans tend very strongly to look for the cause of random events. Religion is the natural outcome of the architecture of our minds.

However, in Triandis (2009) I review evidence that people who are religious are healthier and their mental health is better than the health of people who are irreligious. These links have been investigated, and researchers have found some important clues. For example, people who are helpful to other people are happier than people who are not helpful. In one experiment, students were randomly assigned to two groups. In one group the professor instructed them to do nice things for two weeks, such as shopping for groceries for a person who is sick. In the other group they did not receive this instruction. After two weeks their subjective well-being was measured and the experimental group had statistically higher subjective well-being than the control group (Lyubomirski, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). Furthermore, those who behave according to the rituals and traditions of their culture are often healthier and happier than people who do not behave that way. Many religions advocate helping others. Hence, we can expect religious persons to be happier, and happiness improves the probability of good health.

People who have self-deceptions often have megalomania. For instance, bin Laden thought that the whole world will become Islamic and he will be the Caliph. In mental hospitals psychologists found several individuals who believed that they were Christ, God, or that they owned the hospital (Rokeach, 1964)

There is evidence that no self-deception is related to depression, but too much self-deception suggests mental illness. Extreme accuracy in perceiving the world is found among people who suffer from depression (Alloy & Abramson, 1979). They are “wiser but sadder” than others. Extreme self-deceptions (e.g., believing that one is God) are inconsistent with good mental health, but some self-deception is good for mental health (Kitchens, 2003). There is ample evidence that *a bit* of self-deception, at the individual level, is desirable. Some data indicate that positive illusions permit cancer patients to live better and longer (Taylor, 1998a). In recent studies patients with AIDS who thought that they could beat the disease lived 9 months longer than patients who were not so optimistic. In short, both no and extreme self-deceptions are inconsistent with good mental health.

Baumeister (1989, 1991), after reviewing such findings, suggested that optimal psychological functioning requires some self-deception, but too much or too little self-deception is associated with poor mental health. I talked to Shelley Taylor about this and she told me that empirically she did not find evidence consistent with Baumeister’s suggestion. Thus, this topic again requires further research.

Self-Deception is implicated in Many Contemporary Controversial Issues

Global warming.

There are politicians who have the self-deception that there is no such thing. Gore (2006) has provided ample evidence that it is a real problem. But their political ideology says there is no such thing.

Also, it may be that mankind’s most extreme self-deception is that we can stop global warming (Jenkins, 2008). Jenkins says that to hold carbon dioxide constant we need to eliminate the equivalent of 11,000 coal burning plants. But the planet, at this time, has only 800!

How can we continue increasing our Gross Domestic Product and keep the carbon dioxide constant? China is building about 350 new coal burning electricity generating plants per year. How can they continue growing their economy without additional power?

Jenkins claims that to avoid catastrophic damage to the planet we must not go beyond 450 parts per million in greenhouse gases, and today we are at 384 and growing. To avoid the catastrophe that will result from global warming we need several drastic changes, *at the same time*:

- Shifting the fuel efficiency of 2 million cars from 30 miles per gallon to 60 miles per gallon.
- Doubling the energy efficiency of appliances and buildings (use of insulation etc.)
- Sequestering the carbon in *all* power plants
- Increasing the use of alternative fuels
- Building 2 million wind turbines
- Doubling the number of nuclear electricity generating plants. However, given the disasters we had with such plants (e.g., Fukushima, Japan) many countries are getting out of the nuclear energy business.

In short, there are serious doubts about Jenkins' recommendation, because, for instance, the increased use of alternative fuels raises the price of foods, and plunges more millions into hunger. My only mantra is the "nothing in excess principle." Let us not think that any of these solutions will be a panacea, but moderate amounts of these solutions may be viable. In any case we must become more aware of our self-deceptions concerning the environment and probably accept the reality that we cannot stop global warming.

Overconsumption

We have developed an economic system that requires overconsumption. In the US we spend more on advertising than on education, which increases consumption. Yet, consumption is inconsistent with preserving the environment and avoiding the overuse of resources. In the West most people think that they have an excellent economic system. The reality is that we human are destroying the environment. The richer we are, the more technologically sophisticated we are the more we destroy the environment. That is the reality outside our body. Inside our body we celebrates this system. That is our self-deception.

Abortion

Discussions about abortion focus on minor issues, such as at what age does the fetus become viable. Yet the big picture is much more complex. The cognitively simple see abortion in theological terms, forgetting that the world is overpopulated, resources are limited, overpopulation is modifying the environment, and there is excellent research showing that the mothers of unwanted babies are likely to be cold and rejecting, and such childrearing is related to delinquency, even criminality (Rohner, 1986). Rohner (2004, p. 830) summarized the attributes of children who have been rejected by their mothers as follows: they are high in "(a) hostility, aggression, passive aggression, or have problems with the management of hostility and aggression; (b) dependence or defensive independence, depending on the form, frequency, duration and intensity of perceived rejection.; (c) impaired self-esteem.; (d) impaired self-adequacy; (e) emotional unresponsiveness; (f) emotional instability, (g) negative worldview."

There is an overwhelming amount of empirical evidence (Levitt & Dubner, 2005) showing that the more abortion the less crime. David et al (1988) found overwhelming evidence in the Czech Republic that abortion reduces criminality in the society. Thus, those who wish to save the fetus may end by using capital punishment, which makes their position inconsistent. They sample information from inside their body (their feelings about the fetus) and ignore information from outside the body (delinquency, criminality) hence they have a cognitively simple self-deception.

Homosexuality

Opposition to homosexuality is a cognitively simple self-deception. Homosexuality occurs in all cultures and among the higher apes (Ford & Beech, 1951). The objection to homosexuality can be traced to the time, 2500 years ago,

when humans as a species, might not have survived if they did not have many children. But now the world is overpopulated. When I was young it had less than 2 Billion people, and now it has 7 Billion. It will soon have 9 billion. In my own life the population almost quadrupled; I experienced changes in crowding, the overuse of resources, even water, and too much garbage and pollution generated by overpopulation. Homosexuals do us a favor: They do not have children. In short, objectively we should tolerate homosexuality; but the ideology often rejects it.

Religion

There are both external and internal religions. The external accept the existence of supernatural entities. The internal, such as original Buddhism, are concerned with internal events, such as reaching enlightenment. The external are classic cases of self-deception. Humans wish to have a God who will protect and guide them, and will control uncertainty, so they invent gods that suit their needs. It is obvious that most humans wish to have an enormous power help them succeed in their hunting, fishing, farming, or wars. Anthropological evidence shows that the gods of each tribe are consistent with the needs of the tribe. When the tribe needs rain, they do a rain dance. If the tribe needs wind, they sacrifice something valuable (e.g., Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter in the *Iliad*). When they need a good crop, they pray and sometimes they get a good one, and that confirms the efficacy of that action. If they do not get one, they explain it by saying that they did not pray correctly, or they failed to pronounce the correct incantations

Campbell (1988) argues that “geography has done a great deal to shape cultures and religions. The god of the desert is not the god of the plains...or the god of the rain forest. ...when you are in the desert with one sky and one world, then you might have one deity, but in the jungle where there is no horizon and you never see more than a few yards away from you, you do not have that idea anymore” (p. 101). Thus, it is no coincidence that monotheism (i.e., the religions of the Book) was generated in the desert, and polytheism (e.g., see India) was generated in places where the horizon was cut up.

In short, religion reflects ecology. It is the result of our need to assign causes to events because we humans have difficulty dealing with randomness (Mlodinow, 2008). We do not analyze correctly and objectively events that occur outside our body; instead we create entities (such as gods) inside our body that explain why events have taken place.

While external religions are self-deception, internal religions avoid self-deceptions. The Buddha wanted to see the world realistically, without self-deception. He was very much aware of self-deception. He argued that “we almost never see things the way they are in themselves, but our vision is colored by whether we want them or not, how we can get them, or how they can bring us profit” (Armstrong, 2001, p. 74) He developed the skill to see things as they really are. The Buddha wanted to be “enlightened,” that is, to see the world with the utmost accuracy, and without the desires that distorted his vision. Nirvana is reached when the fires of desire were extinguished, at which point one can be truly free, since nothing can stress the individual.

He saw that everything is in constant change, thus with impeccable logic, he argued that there is no point being too attached to anything (person, opinion, object, even life itself!), because everything will change.

The “self” is constantly changing. Opinions that are “right” today may be “wrong” tomorrow. The Buddha dismissed many questions asked by his followers as “useless speculations” (Rahula, 1959). For example, whether life exists after death is a useless speculation. The Buddha favored the extinction of illusions and had a truly “scientific” attitude toward understanding the world, which allowed him to be tolerant of most beliefs. He believed that most people fool themselves when they see the world. He even used stronger language by saying that they are mentally ill (Rahula, 1959, p. 67). He had astonishingly accurate views consistent with the views of modern psychology. Buddhist prayer is not like the prayer of deist religions. It is simply paying homage to the memory of the Master who showed the way (p. 81). He was also a strong believer in the “nothing in excess” view. The Buddha also stressed the advantages of reaching *nirvana*, which includes low stress and reduces the probability of heart attacks (Marmot & Syme, 1976).

However, note that this version of Buddhism is not present in most contemporary Buddhist societies, because as the words of the Master were transmitted from mouth to mouth they were distorted and acquired some of the prejudices (e.g., celestial beings) that existed in the cultures of those who transmitted the words of the Master. Bartlett (1932) examined this phenomenon experimentally. He had participants repeat an American Indian story. As the story went from mouth to mouth it became shorter and conformed to the cultural beliefs (typical ways of thinking, prejudices) of those who transmitted it.

In sum external religions assume the existence of non-existing entities but are consistent with our needs hopes and desires. That is, they are self-deceptions. Internal religions are not necessarily self-deceptions, unless they have incorporated cultural self-deceptions.

Future Research

If my argument that self-deception is implicated in all the major issues of our time is valid, much more research on this topic is required. The results of such research will reveal interesting phenomena. For example, in collectivist cultures the self-deceptions are likely to be about the ingroup (e.g., my ingroup is glorious) and in individualist cultures the self-deceptions are likely to be about individuals (e. g., I am wonderful).

Triandis (2011) has suggested some possible directions of future research on self-deception.

Evaluating Cultures without Self-Deceptions

After examining criteria that are likely to be universal, because most people in most cultures use them, I suggested (in Triandis, 2009) that we consider:

1. Does the culture provide its population with a lifestyle that is healthy (both physically and mentally)?
2. Do people live for a long time?

3. Are they happy?

4. Do the people behave in an environmentally responsible way?

As I look around I see no cultures that meet all four criteria. The US, for instance, is doing only moderately well on these criteria. On health it is 37th. France was considered best by the World Health Organization. One can evaluate a culture by using objective indices, such as heart attack and cancer rates per 100,000, depression rates, and the like. The US has excellent health systems for the wealthy who live on the average to 85, but does not provide good health care, at this time, for the poor, who live to 76.

On subjective well-being (happiness) the US is 13th in the world (Tov & Diener, 2007, p. 693); Denmark is number 1.

On longevity it is 42nd in the world (Andorra is No. 1).

The US is the most polluting culture after China.

Governments will do well to use these criteria when they compute national statistics. Instead of income per capita, it would be more useful to publish health statistics, happiness rates, longevity, and the frequency of actions that improve the environment.

Conclusion

Self-deception is an important topic for research, and has many ways to clarify major issues and to guide in the evaluation of how well the various cultures of the world do. I hope this paper will arouse the interest in researching it more extensively.

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