
Understanding Self-deception And Its Relation To Cognitive Dissonance

Contentions in the psychological literature abound when it comes to intrapsychic phenomena, and self-deception is no exception. Self-deception is understandably difficult to measure, since it is difficult to discern whether a person is subconsciously aware of the truth or not. It is even further to distinguish from other mental-distortions, particularly cognitive dissonance. This essay gives an overview of several theories that define self-deception which can inform the connection between self-deception and cognitive dissonance. Ultimately, this paper will conclude that self-deception is a process that arises from cognitive dissonance and contains an additional motivation beyond the reduction of psychological discomfort.

To start, let's examine a theory which posits that self-deception evolved as a psychological defense mechanism against an unpleasant world. This theory, constructed by Hippel and Trivers (2011), proposes that self-deception provided an evolutionary advantage by allowing an individual to deceive others by minimizing the cues that would give away their deception. Deception of others can have huge benefits for the deceiver, while placing the deceived in a position where the cost of falsely accusing someone would be high. Thus, by mitigating or eliminating cues that would reveal a conscious deception, those engaging in self-deception are at an evolutionary advantage. Furthermore, self-deception allows a person to reduce the cognitive load of deception because he/she doesn't need to hold both the known truth and the deception in his/her mind. Hippel and Trivers identify several methods of information-processing bias that could have helped develop this advantage and contribute to self-deception.

Hippel and Trivers investigate four information-processing biases: biased information search, biases interpretation, misremembering, and rationalization. People can avoid encountering a truth that is inconsistent with their goals (an example of such a goal would be retaining one's existing beliefs) by halting a search before they reach this information, by seeking out only information that is consistent with their goal, or by attending only to the information that they wish to see. These are all examples of confirmation bias and contribute to self deception through a biased information search. It is also possible to have a biased interpretation of data even when information for two opposing sides is presented by engaging in selective skepticism of the data that does not coincide with the original belief. The third information-processing bias, misremembering, can occur through a self-enhancing recall bias, meaning that it is easier to remember positive actions that the self performed than negative actions. This could contribute to the evolutionary advantage of self-deception in a general sense; a person is at a social advantage if they can convince others that they are better than they actually are, and it is easier

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to convince others of such if one is convinced that they actually are better. Likewise, rationalizing the motives behind a behavior could also provide an advantage by creating the narrative that a person's bad behavior was unintentional or otherwise stemming from a reasonable motive, thus the person retains a positive light in the social eye. Hippel and Trivers include in their discussion of the evolutionary development of self-deception that while it probably originally developed as an advantage in deception of others, the positive feeling it elicits towards the self could have led to self-deception being used outside situations in which others are being deceived as well.

This secondary form of self-deception that is beneficial only to oneself and not socially advantageous is incredibly similar to what cognitive dissonance describes. While Hippel and Trivers do not mention cognitive dissonance explicitly, they characterize a form of self-deception that is easily related back to Festinger's original theory (1957). Cognitive dissonance theory explains how people attempt to reduce the psychological discomfort of an unjustified behavior by changing an attitude. Self-deception can arise from this reduction in cognitively dissonant thoughts by the motivation to retain a belief about oneself, such as the belief that one is rational or consistent. This motivation could lead one to reassess not just one's attitudes, but also engage in self-deception about one's actual behavior or original motivations.

Khalil (2017) directly disagrees with Hippel and Trivers characterization of self-deception and attempts to systematically distinguish self-deception from any other self-distortion, including cognitive dissonance. Khalil critiques the evolutionary explanation that Hippel and Trivers posit by refuting the notion that self-deception is ultimately beneficial; he cites two main ways in which self-deception does not appear to lead to an advantageous result. Firstly, Khalil cites studies that have shown that others are better able to assess when a person is being self-deceptive than the person initiating the deception, which potentially undermines the advantage self-deception has in deceiving others as well. Secondly, self-deception often leads to self-harmful behavior through convincing the self that the behavior is actually beneficial. Khalil insists this goes against an evolutionarily advantageous understanding of self-deception. While he does not offer an explanation as to the origin of self-deception, Khalil does provide an elaborate definition of self-deception. He defines self-deception in the following way: "For an agent to commit self-deception, the agent must be, first, ex ante cognizant, at a deep level, that a decision is suboptimal. Second, the agent must invent a 'fact' or ad hoc reconstruction of facts to make the decision look as if it is optimal." That is to say, a person self-deceives when they know beforehand that a decision is not going to be in their best interests and then construct a fact or revise existing facts to make the decision appear to be better than it actually is. This definition of self-deception logically goes against the evolutionary advantage theory by including only those deceptions that result in a suboptimal decision being made. Khalil further explains what he thinks should be defined as "self-deception" by differentiating it from cognitive dissonance.

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The main distinction offered in Khalil's paper between cognitive dissonance and self-deception is the necessity of ex post justification, Ex post justification, or justification based on actual results rather than predictions, is necessary for self-deception but not for cognitive dissonance. Khalil states that "cognitive dissonance reduction is understood as 'bridging' the painful gap between material utility and ethical utility". The painful gap is that emotional discomfort associated with cognitive dissonance. Self-deception is a distortion of the facts surrounding the actual results in order to make a decision appear better than it actually is, while cognitive dissonance instigates a change in attitude to reduce psychological pain. However, Khalil still leaves open the possibility that self-deception can arise from cognitive dissonance. Since self-deception by Khalil's definition is clearly irrational and he rejects the notion that it had any evolutionary benefit, he is left to explain how rational people engage in irrational decisions through self-deception.

Khalil uses the fear or resistance to future self-blame as an explanation for people engaging in self-deception. People would blame themselves and think more negatively of themselves if they admitted that they made a decision that was not beneficial. If a person is willing to admit that they chose a suboptimal option, then self-deception is unnecessary; however, few are willing to admit this. Therefore, they engage in self-deception to avoid this self-blame and instead construct a narrative in which the option they chose is actually optimal.

Finally, Scott-Kakures (2009) provides an alternate lens through which to view self-deception. He reports that self-deception is used to help settle a question that arises out of cognitive dissonance. He writes, "A self-deceiver often, for example, displays remarkable credulity and resistance in her effort to settle a question of the form 'p or not-p?' Evidence that strikes us as pathetically nonprobative is frequently regarded by the self-deceiver as a sufficient basis upon which to settle her question." Scott-Kakures characterizes self-deception as a problem in our cognitive abilities to settle questions due to a motive disrupting the process of hypothesis testing. Scott-Kakures believes that this motive is often one arising from cognitive dissonance theory, namely the motives to view oneself as consistent and to reduce the psychological pain initiated by inconsistent behavior. Of all the theories discussed, Scott-Kakures theory most explicitly links self-deception and cognitive dissonance.

These three different approaches to defining self-deception understand the well-known phenomena uniquely and are sometimes in conflict. However, one fact that remains consistent throughout these theories is that self-deception can arise from cognitive dissonance and is, in fact, closely linked to it. However, these theories also agree that self-deception is a step above the mere reduction of cognitive dissonance and includes some extra motive, whether that is to remain consistent in behavior or to settle a question. These distinctions will hopefully be further parsed by continued research into theories of self-deception.

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