



The association between self-deception and moral self-concept as functions of self-consciousness

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ABSTRACT

Regulated by self-consciousness, self-deception is a part of the self-system that suppresses negative aspects of the self and maintains a positive moral self-concept. We tested this evolutionary hypothesis on 166 college students by measuring self-deception using both a questionnaire and a series of hypothetical helping scenarios. The results showed a positive correlation between self-deception and moral self-concept, which was moderated by private self-consciousness. Among participants with high, but not low, self-consciousness, high moral self-concept individuals were more willing to help when potential self-benefits were present than low moral self-concept individuals, whereas there was no difference between the two groups concerning helping without self-benefit. These results support the evolutionary view that self-deception serves to maintain optimal moral self-concept, especially for individuals with high self-consciousness.

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1. Introduction

Humans are social animals who pursue selfish interests in a cooperative context in which public interests are also observed. There are subsequent conflicts between pursuing self-interests and protecting public interests. Solving and balancing these conflicts has resulted in specific adaptations to group living. On the one hand, various group-oriented socialization processes help to shape the development of moral self-concept among group members that serves to maintain the cooperative group context by curbing selfish interests and promoting public interests. Individuals of high moral self-concept thus behave more altruistically. On the other hand, altruism operates among other adaptive forces, such as deception and self-deception, which allow one to claim or believe to be acting altruistically while actually acting selfishly (Cosmides & Tooby, 2005; Cummins, 1999; von Hippel & Trivers, 2011; Trivers, 1976). In deception, self-interests replace public interests in the conscious mind; in self-deception, self-interests are pushed to the unconscious and the individual is only aware of public interests (Alexander, 1987). The factor regulating deception and self-deception may be self-consciousness, which is the extent to which individuals are inclined and able to examine their inner thoughts and feelings (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). Low moral self-concept individuals may openly deceive others by maintaining

self-interests in the conscious mind, while high moral self-concept individuals may self-deceive by pushing self-interests to the unconscious. Self-consciousness may serve to regulate these two self-serving strategies. The purpose of the present study is to examine the relations among moral self-concept, self-consciousness, and self-deception in an effort to better understand self-deception within an evolutionary framework.

Unlike philosophers who are concerned about the existence, realization, and intentionality of self-deception (e.g., Davidson, 1985; Demos, 1960; Fingarette, 1969; Mele, 1997), or mainstream psychologists who focus on the mechanism and functionality of self-deception (e.g., Greenwald, 1988; Sackeim, 1983; Paulhus & John, 1998), evolutionary psychologists are interested in how self-deception has evolved as a fitness-enhancing strategy. The evolutionary view holds that self-deception has evolved in an uncongenial world as a result of an “arms race” between deception and deception detection (Trivers, 2000). In human group living, conflicts of interest are present most of the time (Alexander, 1987), and deception has become a ubiquitous strategy to manipulate group members in order to maximize self-interest and exploit public interests (Mitchell, 1986; Trivers, 1985). Detection of deception evolves to guard against personal exploitation and public encroachment. In response, self-deception evolves to escape detection. During deception, maintaining both true and false information in the consciousness while presenting only falsehoods to others results in extra cognitive load for the deceiver (von Hippel & Trivers, 2011). Conscious awareness about the truth may result in the deceiver unintentionally exposing clues about the truth. A self-deceiver keeps only false information in the consciousness

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and leaves no clues about the truth, which is kept in the unconscious, and thus avoids detection completely (Trivers, 2000).

Whereas self-deception was originally construed mainly as an interpersonal strategy to facilitate deception of others (Trivers, 1976, 1985), it also is an intrapersonal variable that, as part of the self-system, entails chronic misrepresentation of the self without immediate or explicit reference to others (Kurzban & Aktipis, 2007; Surbey, 2011; von Hippel & Trivers, 2011). In such a self-directed and deceptive state of mind, a person may selectively access certain information about, and deny other information to, the self in ways that convince both the self and others of aggrandized self-presentations (Greenwald, 1988; Paulhus & Reid, 1991). Intrapersonal self-deception therefore continues to serve the interpersonal goal of deceiving others (von Hippel & Trivers, 2011). Consistent with the interpersonal origin of self-deception, preferential access to, and misrepresentation of, different aspects of the self are fashioned by active interpersonal interactions within a group context that informs the individual of his/her fitness conditions, including cooperation needs and opportunities. Often referred to as self-enhancement in morality or altruism (Paulhus & John, 1998), intrapersonal self-deception is self-serving because it facilitates and maintains cooperative relationships with other group members (Surbey, 2004; Surbey & McNally, 1997). Individuals are more inclined to be altruistic if they are unaware of the selfish intentions of themselves and others (Nesse & Lloyd, 1992; Surbey, 2011). By the same logic, congenial altruism suppresses selfishness and engenders altruism in others, which actuates and perpetuates reciprocal altruism and cooperative group living (Alexander, 1987).

As part of the self-system that emphasizes prioritizing, representing, and misrepresenting different aspects of the self (Markus & Wurf, 1987), intrapersonal self-deception contributes to the development and maintenance of self-concept (Greenwald, 1980; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1997), specifically the moral or altruistic aspects of self-concept relevant to social interactions and group living. Being altruistic and unselfish, and seeing others behaving likewise, is a core feature of socialization in most societies (Keller, Edelstein, Krettenauer, Fu-xi, & Ge, 2005). This socialization, in turn, shapes and reinforces individuals' self-concept, specifically the moral self-concept. Intrapersonal self-deception is thus vital to self-concept because it enables or facilitates the internalization of group or altruistic values that help form an individual's moral self-concept. Thus, there is a functional association between moral self-concept and self-deception; regarding oneself highly in terms of morality and altruism necessitates that negative and selfish aspects of the self are inaccessible, and this is achieved through self-deception. In this respect, self-deception is necessary for, and instrumental to, the development and maintenance of moral self-concept. In other words, people attaining or maintaining high moral ground may be more self-deceptive and, thus, more successful in suppressing selfish thoughts, whereas people of low moral self-concept view themselves in less-than-optimal moral light because they are not inclined to deceive themselves about their selfish thoughts.

Whether or not self-deception is used to maintain high moral ground may depend on one's ability to attend to inner thoughts and feelings, including the morally undesirable aspects of the self. Such self-consciousness, especially private self-consciousness, may serve to regulate self-deception. Highly self-conscious individuals are more aware of their inner self (Fenigstein et al., 1975), including blemishes in their moral self-conception. To maintain the same level of moral self-concept, these individuals will require more intrapersonal self-deception to suppress moral imperfections. In contrast, the moral self-concept of those low in self-consciousness may depend less on self-deception because they are less aware of their inner selves, including selfish thoughts and moral impurities. Thus, increasing self-consciousness may increase the strength of the correlation between moral self-concept and self-deception.

To test the hypothesis that self-deception facilitates the maintenance of moral self-concept by suppressing negative aspects of the self, the present study examined the associations among self-deception (SDE), moral self-concept (MSC), and self-consciousness (SC). We hypothesized a positive correlation between moral self-concept and self-deception. We also expected MSC–SDE association to be stronger among high, rather than low, self-conscious individuals. In addition to examining questionnaire measures, we also included another measure of self-deception by having subjects respond to different helping scenarios from which we derived two helping intention variables – altruistic helping intention without self-benefit and self-deceived helping intention with potential self-benefit. We hypothesized that among high SC individuals, those high in MSC would score higher on self-deceived helping intention than those low on MSC, whereas among low SC individuals, there would be no difference between high and low MSC groups.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

One hundred sixty-six undergraduate students (76 males, *mean age* = 20.54, *SD* = 2.44) from a college in southern China participated in the study. They filled out questionnaires for monetary reward. The questionnaires included measures of self-deception, impression management, moral self-concept, and self-consciousness as well as four scenarios that recorded helping intention.

2.2. Measurements

2.2.1. Self-deception

The Self-Deception Enhancement (SDE) subscale from the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Response (BIDR; Paulhus, 1991) was used to measure self-deception. The 20-item SDE measures sincere beliefs in desirable self-descriptions (Paulhus, 1991). Sample items include “I am fully in control of my own fate,” and “I never regret my decision.” Rated on a 7-point scale (1 for *not true at all*, 7 for *completely true*), higher scores indicate self-deceptive tendency to see oneself in a positive light. The internal consistency reliability estimate was $\alpha = .66$ in the present study.

2.2.2. Impression management

Impression management was measured by the 20-item Impression management (IM) subscale of the BIDR (Paulhus, 1991). In contrast to the SDE that measures positive views of one's beliefs, the IM measures the social favorability of one's public image. Sample items include “I always declare everything at customs,” and “I have never dropped litter on the street.” The rating scale and scoring for the IM were the same as those for the SDE. In this study, the internal consistency reliability estimate was $\alpha = .75$. Because IM and SDE are highly correlated, we included both measures to better gauge self-deception.

2.2.3. Self-consciousness

SC was measured by the 9-item private self-consciousness subscale of the Self-Consciousness Scale (Scheier & Carver, 1985). The SC measures one's awareness of personal and covert aspects of the self. Sample items include “I am always trying to figure myself out,” and “I am aware of my inner thoughts.” The SC is rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (“not at all like me”) to 3 (“a lot like me”) with higher scores indicating more self-consciousness. The internal consistency reliability estimate for SC was $\alpha = .67$.

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