A new perspective on self-deception for applied purposes

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A B S T R A C T

The concept of self-deception attracts the attention of many fields of knowledge, however very few attempts have been made to compare and contrast these positions for applied purposes. This paper provides theoretical analysis of the literature on self-deception from a pragmatic perspective that informs personal development work on recognizing and minimizing self-deception and helping practices such as counselling and coaching. Five distinct strands of thought on self-deception are identified and discussed with their implications for personal development work revealing significant diversity in the views on self-deception. The paper suggests that what is missing in current theories of self-deception is consideration of self in self-deceivers. In conjunction with theories of adult development this paper suggests a new developmental perspective on self-deception that highlights individual differences according to developmental stages providing a unique contribution to current debates about the concept and potential approaches for influencing selfdeception. From the pragmatic perspective the paper also proposes a synthesis of the discussed theoretical perspectives in the form of a conceptual model that demonstrates the complexity and multidimensionality of self-deception.

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The concept of self-deception has a long history in psychology and philosophy and continues to inspire new perspectives and explanations of the paradox that it entails. The idea that the mind can conceal information from itself is puzzling and disturbing, producing different conceptions of self-deception and different views on the consequences of it. For Pinker (2008), for example, documenting the human propensity to self-deception and similar phenomena is one of the greatest achievements in psychology because they are "the source of much of the complexity, and tragedy, of human life" (Pinker, 2008, p. 184). Others support the studies of self-deception but argue that a degree of it is always present and may even be beneficial not only for individuals but for the survival of species (e.g. Rorty, 1994; Von Hippel & Trivers, 2011). There are also those who simply reject the idea of the existence of this phenomenon (e.g. Gergen, 1985). The implications of such positions for everyday living, wellbeing and human development may differ significantly. However, few attempts have been made to compare these positions and explore them for applied purposes (Fingarette, 2000).

It is interesting that in the history of human thought self-deception was initially explored with a view to finding a way to overcome it. In the existential philosophy of Sartre (1956) self-deception was discussed as 'bad faith'. It was seen as a refusal to reflect and to take responsibility for the engagements with the world which were apparent, but the person would not recognize them as his/her own. The intention to live authentically, Sartre argued, could help to defeat 'bad faith' through disciplined self-analysis. In the legacy of Freud (1923/1962), the concepts of unconscious defense mechanisms, although associated mainly with pathology, also had to be uncovered in psychoanalysis for the benefit of the client who was engaged in self-deception as a strategy of dealing with anxiety. However, more recent literature, although expanding the array of explanations of self-deception, has seemingly lost interest in this pragmatic aim: to understand this phenomenon in order to minimize it or live with it.

What becomes fairly transparent in comparing significantly different current conceptualizations of self-deception is that the differences and similarities between them are associated with different positions on the self, which in some cases are clearly stated and in others are implicit. Although the variety of these positions is not surprising given the spectrum of perspectives on the self, each of their proponents are able to provide supporting evidence from various research studies, however limited. This might mean that much of the empirical data may be interpreted according to the position taken, or that many perspectives on self-deception can have valid points. In this case, the value of such diversity could be utilized from a pragmatic perspective.

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The paper will begin with an examination of the concept of self-deception and the paradoxes it entails in order to establish the nature of the problem that it aims to address. The second part of the paper will discuss a range of distinct perspectives on self-deception in terms of their explicit or potential implications for individuals who do not wish to deceive themselves and for professionals who assist individuals in their quest for development and/or wellbeing. Although a significant diversity in viewing self-deception will be highlighted the aim will not be to solve the conundrum that self-deception presents but to point out how it has arisen in broad terms.

In the third part of the paper it will be argued that all of the presented traditions are missing an important perspective – the self of the self-deceiver. With the focus on the self an additional theoretical position on self-deception is proposed. I will argue that this developmental perspective on self-deception provides a unique approach to unresolved conceptual issues and leads to important implications for practice. The pragmatic stance of the paper allows for integration of the discussed positions of self-deception into a meta-model that reflects the complexity of this phenomenon and the value inherent in the rich diversity of the existing perspectives.

1. Understanding self-deception

Much of the debate in the literature is about defining the necessary and sufficient conditions for self-deception and differentiating self-deception from other concepts, such as wishful thinking, self-serving bias, cognitive dissonance or defense mechanisms of the ego (e.g. Fingarette, 2000; Rorty, 1994; Mele, 2001). It is recognized, for example, that self-deception is not the same as biased information processing or errors in logic, which are sometimes presented as self-deception.

1) The first condition that suggests self-deception is present is holding a belief that contradicts the information/knowledge that the individual possesses at the same time (Demos, 1960). However, this is not a sufficient condition: we filter information for many different reasons and can hold inconsistent beliefs without noticing this. This could be simply ignorance rather than self-deception. 2) To be considered as self-deception many authors claim that this belief should be persistent and 3) that the person should be motivated to keep it (Fingarette, 2000; Gur & Sackheim, 1979). 4) In addition the individual should be active: "acting in ways that keep one uninformed about unwanted information" (Bandura, 2011, p.16). Moreover, Lewis (1996) observes that in the literature "the deception is always manifest in what is articulated, while unacknowledged (*not-p*) is that which is veritable and pure" (pp. 51–52) – the view that led him to defend a different explanation of self-deception.

It is important to notice that traditional explanations of self-deception are modeled on intentional other-deception (e.g. Davidson, 1985) – a premise that led to useful questions, but also to paradoxes that had to be addressed. Mele (2001) described these paradoxes as static and dynamic puzzles. The static puzzle is about how the self can be both aware and not aware of *p* at the same time. The dynamic puzzle is about intentionality: if self-deception is intentional and strategic how can it fail in undermining itself? The agent's knowledge of what they are up to should get in the way. But if it is not intentional how do they succeed? One of the typical approaches in the literature to address these paradoxes is temporal or psychological *partitioning* that separates two opposing beliefs in terms of the time of experiencing or via a divided model of self/consciousness (Clegg & Moissinac, 2005).

The partitioning approach to self-deception addresses the static paradox by dividing the agent into two or more sub-agents. Each of them can hold incompatible beliefs. The dynamic paradox is resolved by postulating that the deceived sub-agent cannot access the deceiving sub-agent's activities (Marraffa, 2012). Freud (1930/2002), for example, was not only the first partitionist, but someone who significantly influenced the persistent view on self-deception and self, which is based on the dominant role of consciousness in human engagement with the world. However, it is only now in the philosophical literature that a shift can be noticed from seeing self-deception as a temporary impairment of normal belief-forming processes (a position associated with more prominent role of introspective consciousness) to the more naturalistic and accepting view of self-deception as a natural inclination of the human mind, a property inherent to belief-formation mechanisms (Bayne & Fernandez, 2009; Marraffa, 2012; Rorty, 1994). This shift was clearly fueled by findings in neuroscience that advocate that the working of the brain and mind are more modular and unconscious (e.g. Gazzaniga, 1992; Martindale, 1980).

Modularity suggests that the mind consists of a large number of functionally specialized goal-oriented programs that can be isolated from one another. It provides an explanation of cases in which two mutually inconsistent representations coexist within the same mind. With this modular view, the co-existence of mutually inconsistent representations presents no difficulties as a result of informational encapsulation (Barrett, 2005; Fodor, 1983; Kurzban, 2011; Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). As Pinker (1997) said, "the truth is useful, so it should be registered somewhere in the mind, walled off from the parts that interact with other people" (p. 421). This means that in a modular self, self-deception is strategic. Both conscious and non-conscious goals, once taking a center stage, "exert temporary downstream effects upon the individual's information processing and behaviors in ways that facilitate successful pursuit of that goal" (Huang & Bargh, 2011, p. 27; Kenrick & White, 2011; Martindale, 1980). These modular systems are not deceiving each other – they are simply operating with a certain degree of autonomy. Some authors speculate that self-deception may be a natural consequence of the autonomous goal operation that characterized our pre-conscious past (Huang & Bargh, 2011; Kurzban, 2011).

The idea of partitioning is arguably supported by empirical studies that suggest that by acting independently subsystems can produce outcomes that may be considered deceptive. For example, it was shown that when the goal (need) is active, people perceive goal-factual stimuli as bigger, closer and more likable (Balcetis & Dunning, 2010; Bruner & Goodman, 1947; Ferguson, 2008; Veltkamp, Aarts, & Custers, 2008). It could be postulated then that when the need is satisfied activation stops inhibiting mental representations involved in pursuit of the goal and memory brings back the images that support other goals. The person experiences this as the realization of what was 'known' long before but for a while was 'covered' by self-deception.

When self-deception is associated with nuances of information processing, various attempts are made to describe mechanisms of its occurrence. Von Hippel and Trivers (2011) make a case for classification of mechanisms of self-deception as employed at different stages of information processing. For example, at the stage of information gathering self-deception is manifested in selected attention, e.g. biased information search (amount of search, selective searching and selective attention) and typical biased interpretation. For example, we take credit for successes but deny blame for failures (Zuckerman, Koestner, & Alton, 1984), accept praise uncritically but receive criticism skeptically, looking for a reason to dismiss it (Kunda, 1990). At the middle stage of information processing self-deception is sustained by obfuscating the truth and misremembering. For example, Conway and Ross (1984) demonstrated that after taking a study skills class, people misremembered