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Journal of Research in Personality 37 (2003) 205–223

JOURNAL OF  
RESEARCH IN  
PERSONALITY

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## Self-deception and failure to modulate responses despite accruing evidence of error

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### Abstract

Two studies assessed performance on a gambling-type card playing task (Newman, Patterson, & Kosson, 1987) by males defined as high or low in self-deception. Monetary success in this task depends upon the ability to modulate reward-seeking responses, by attending to information indicative of task-failure. In Study 1, 28 13-year-old boys categorized as high in self-deception using Eysenck's Junior Lie Scale (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975), played more cards and won significantly less money than 143 categorized as low in self-deception. Study 2 replicated these findings in a sample of 42 male Harvard undergraduates defined as high or low in self-deception using Eysenck's Lie scale (Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985) and the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1991). Also, a higher proportion of high self-deceivers played until the end of the task in both samples, thereby losing all their money, despite the fact that 19 of the last 20 cards were losing. These findings support a model of self-deception as ignoring evidence of error and reinforce the argument that self-deception may be maladaptive.

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*Keywords:* Self-deception; Social desirability; Response modulation; Learning; Perseveration

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## **1. Introduction**

The construct of self-deception has a long history in psychology. The notion that the mind contains more information than is consciously realized was of central importance at the dawn of personality psychology, in the work of Janet, Freud, and Jung. The assertion that some of this information may be voluntarily hidden from consciousness has, from that time, been a closely linked corollary in personality theory. Despite a century of speculation and argument, however, the nature of the processes by which self-deception might take place is still subject to debate (for a review, see Mele, 1997). The last 15 years, furthermore, have seen an ongoing debate over whether self-deception is problematic and maladaptive, as traditional accounts have generally maintained (Colvin & Block, 1994), or whether it is beneficial, even necessary, for normal psychological functioning (Taylor & Brown, 1988). In what follows, we attempt to offer insight into these issues using a new model of self-deception (Peterson, 1999; Peterson, Driver-Linn, & DeYoung, 2002) and a behavioral measure of maladaptive perseveration.

Peterson (1999) and Peterson et al. (2002) have described self-deception as failure to utilize evidence indicating that current expectations or beliefs are in error. Human behavior is largely goal-directed, and unexpected or undesired disruption of progress toward a goal indicates an error or insufficiency in one's currently operative plans and beliefs and provokes an affective response (Carver & Scheier, 1982; Gray, 1982, 1987; Miller, Galanter, & Pribram, 1960; Oatley & Johnson-Laird, 1987; Panksepp, 1999; Peterson, 1999). Like Damasio's (1994) "somatic marker," this affective response serves initially to delimit and direct voluntary attention. When initial attention indicates that nothing additionally unpredictable or otherwise threatening is immediately likely to occur, evidence of error also elicits curiosity and exploration—cognitive, behavioral, or both (Blanchard & Blanchard, 1989; Dollard & Miller, 1950; Gray, 1982, 1987; Peterson, 1999). Exploration ideally transforms undifferentiated evidence of error into detailed, explicit, pragmatically useful information. Such information allows for recalibration of beliefs and transformation of plans and goals, so that the environment is once again rendered predictable and productive. Self-deception, in this model, consists of ignoring affectively-marked evidence of error, rather than exploring its implications. In consequence, self-deceivers cling rigidly to their current conceptions, and their behavioral and cognitive responses become increasingly maladaptive, as plans and beliefs are not questioned and adjusted to correspond more closely to the real situation.

Traditional models of self-deception, like Sackeim and Gur's (1978, 1979), require that self-deceivers must hold two contradictory beliefs, while remaining unaware that one of them is held. This capacity has been deemed paradoxical, or even impossible, on logical, philosophical, and psychological grounds (e.g., Mele, 1997). Alternative theories, therefore, presume that the central mechanism of self-deception is the ignoring of evidence conflicting with current beliefs (Greenwald, 1988; Mele, 1997). The major difficulty with such alternative models has been their assumption that the ignored evidence is a self-evident, objective feature of the situation in question. Sackeim and Gur (1978) argued convincingly that possession of conflicting ev-

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