



## Self-deception's adaptive value: Effects of positive thinking and the winner effect

Jason Kido Lopez<sup>a,\*</sup>, Matthew J. Fuxjager<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Philosophy, Siena College – 34C Morrell Science Center, 515 Loudon Rd., Loudonville, NY 12211, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Integrative Biology and Physiology, University of California, Los Angeles, 610 Charles Young Dr., Los Angeles, CA 90095, United States

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 19 July 2011

Available online 5 December 2011

#### Keywords:

Self-deception

Positive self-perception

Social behavior

Winner effect

### ABSTRACT

There is a puzzle about why self-deception, a process that obscures the truth, is so pervasive in human behavior given that tracking the truth seems important for our survival and reproduction. William von Hippel and Robert Trivers argue that, despite appearances, there is good reason to think that self-deception is an adaptation by arguing: (1) self-deception leads to a positive self-perception and (2) a positive self-perception increases an individual's fitness. D.S. Neil Van Leeuwen, however, gives persuasive arguments against both steps. In response, we will defend both propositions, thereby supporting the conclusion that self-deception indeed has adaptive value. The first premise will be bolstered by a survey of the philosophical literature and empirical work on self-deception, whereas the second will be strengthened by empirical research on a behavioral phenomenon known as the winner effect.

© 2011 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

### 1. Introduction

If tracking the truth is important for human survival and reproduction, then why is self-deception, a process that obscures the truth, so pervasive in human behavior? Some researchers, like Robert Trivers and William von Hippel, argue that despite appearances there is good reason to think that self-deception aids in interpersonal deception and therefore is an adaptation (Trivers, 2000; von Hippel & Trivers, 2011). This argument follows two lines. The first is that self-deception hides normal markers of deception from the target of the deception. In other words, if the deceiver sincerely believes the falsity through self-deception, then he or she will be more convincing to the target of the deception. The second argument is that self-deception leads to inflated self-enhancement, such that the act of deceptively portraying oneself as better than one is in reality is ultimately socially beneficial. Other philosophers, like D.S. Neil Van Leeuwen (2007a), have critiqued both of these arguments extensively.

In this paper, we will not comment on the first debate over whether self-deception helps individuals conceal markers of deceptive acts. Instead, our paper will address the latter debate about the role that self-deception plays in modulating self-perception. Our reason for this is because we believe that we have found an important connection between a behavioral phenomenon called *the winner effect* and self-deception, and that this connection not only defends von Hippel and Trivers' argument from certain criticisms posed by Van Leeuwen, but also greatly extends and enriches its evolutionary and mechanistic scope.

To support the view that self-deception is an adaptation, Trivers (2000) originally gave a two-step argument, which proposed that (1) self-deception leads to a positive self-perception and that (2) a positive self-perception increases an individual's fitness. Van Leeuwen, however, sheds some doubt on both of these steps by first stating that it is not clear that the result

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [jasonkidolopez@gmail.com](mailto:jasonkidolopez@gmail.com) (J.K. Lopez).

of self-deception is always a positive self-perception and second that there is no convincing evidence that a positive self-perception increases fitness. In response to this back-and-forth, we will defend both propositions from Van Leeuwen's critiques and thereby give reason to think that self-deception indeed has adaptive value.

von Hippel and Trivers (2011) recently published a paper that responds to some of these concerns by exploring the psychology literature and highlighting empirical associations between positive self-perception that might result from self-deception and traits that might enhance social performance. Though we ultimately agree with von Hippel and Trivers, we think that Van Leeuwen's critiques point out where important additions need to be made in order to satisfactorily argue that self-deception has adaptive value and is not just socially beneficial. In particular, Van Leeuwen demonstrates that self-deception's connection to positive self-perception needs to be explored more closely and, perhaps more importantly, we need to find a mechanism that would explain why self-deception would be evolutionarily adaptive and is more than just socially viable. A true causal, evolutionary framework is therefore lacking in this debate, and we think that biological studies exploring the winner effect satisfy this demand.

Our first section of this paper will therefore be dedicated to making a few important comments about the nature of self-deception, whereas the following sections will focus on defending the components of von Hippel and Trivers' two-step argument in turn. The first step will be bolstered by a survey of the philosophical literature and empirical work on self-deception, whereas the second will be strengthened by a presentation of research on the winner effect. By our final section, we will have defended the view that self-deception has adaptive value from Van Leeuwen's attacks and will be in a position to discuss the view's broader implications.

Finally, before we continue, we should note an important distinction that we will be using. Our argument is that self-deception's connection to the winner effect shows that self-deception can *increase fitness*, or have *adaptive value* or *adaptive benefits*. These terms mean that self-deception increases reproductive success. We will be using these terms interchangeably and they can be juxtaposed with the claim that self-deception is an *adaptation*; i.e., a result of selection.<sup>1</sup> Though our arguments allow for the possibility that self-deception is an adaptation, this is not our conclusion. Instead, we want to argue that self-deception, however it may have come to exist, has the *ability* to increase an individual's reproductive success. By the end of this work it will become clear that, though we are supporting a version of von Hippel and Trivers' argument, ours is a position that von Hippel, Trivers, and Van Leeuwen allow for.

## 2. Situating the debate

In this section, we will clarify a few important elements pertaining to the nature of self-deception. In particular, we will produce a working definition of self-deception and elaborate more on the background of disagreement between Trivers, von Hippel, and Van Leeuwen.

Providing a concise or uncontroversial definition of self-deception is difficult because there is much debate over both how to explain self-deception and how to describe its nature. In fact, the two papers we have been focusing on put forth two different definitions of self-deception. We, however, will argue that self-deception, even on Van Leeuwen's conception, has adaptive benefits. Using Van Leeuwen's definition offers two advantages: (1) it is a much broader than von Hippel and Trivers' definition, and (2) it shows that self-deception would have benefits even if self-deception is as a skeptic thinks it is. We want to show that even the most inclusive definition of self-deception can have adaptive value. We, of course, allow that either view could be the more accurate description of self-deception; we are using Van Leeuwen's definition dialectical purposes.

We, following Van Leeuwen, will lay out the definition through two examples of self-deception: the cuckold and the quarterback. The cuckold's story includes themes that are common to examples of self-deception.

[I]magine a man whose wife is cheating but who remains convinced that she's faithful. I am inclined to label this "self-deception" just in case the man in question has *compelling evidence* that she *is* cheating. She stays out all night, comes home with messed-up hair, is secretive about where she goes at night, etc. In fact, the self-deceived husband has evidence such that, if he were to have that evidence about the behavior of another man's wife, he would conclude the woman was cheating. What makes the difference? The obvious suggestion is that he has a *desire* that his wife is faithful. This desire makes the causal difference in what he comes to believe (2007a, pp. 331–332).

Van Leeuwen then compares the cuckold to the quarterback.

[C]onsider a nervous quarterback. He has strong reasons to believe his coach will be furious if he delivers a bad performance. Furthermore, he knows that this belief makes him nervous and that his resulting anxiety will cause him to perform badly. With this background he convinces himself that his coach will *not* be angry if he delivers a bad performance (for he *desires* this belief), despite *compelling evidence to the contrary*. To do this, he attends to what scanty evidence there is that the coach is a nice guy; if he succeeds in convincing himself, he's self-deceived (2007a, p. 332).

<sup>1</sup> Both animal behaviorists and evolutionary biologists employ similar use of this terminology (see Alcock, 2001; Freeman & Herron, 2004; Ricklefs & Miller, 2000).

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

**ISI**Articles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات