

Strategically wrong: On the relationship between generalized deception and persuasive behaviour



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Abstract

According to a growing literature in many fields of the social sciences and humanities defending the mind-modularity thesis, the brain is composed of mutually inconsistent modules that contain contradictory beliefs. What consequences could this view have on persuasive behaviour? In order to sketch an answer, first the family of concepts of what is called *generalized deception* is discussed; then, this discussion is applied to the problem of the *social influence bias* to observe both how the mind works strategically wrong and what kind of argumentative moves are used within this mental design in a controversial social context.

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1. Introduction

*I cheated myself,
Like I knew I would,
I told you I was trouble,
You know that I'm no good*
Amy Winehouse

When discussing deception, self-deception is often viewed as the right place to start. For example, the legal definition of *prevarication* refers to the committed crime of deliberately avoiding duties. What justification could a person have for neglecting his duties? A benign self-deceptive justification would certainly come to mind first. This is similar to the transgression Searle (2001) describes, following the Greek idea of *akrasia*, as the weakness of not acting according to the reasons we give ourselves, this is to say, the weakness of the will in doing something contrary to what reason directs us to do. Hasn't this happened to all of us more than once?

As will be discussed later, many authors agree that our mind operates with a structure designed for strategic self-deception. So, the weakness that Searle observes is only the tip of the iceberg of many layers that sometimes overlap. In this work I will address various layers of a conceptual family which I will put together under the notion of *generalized deception*. I will consider them in the context of the agent's intention of convincing someone, i.e. when we try to convince someone of something by means of arguments we do not really believe in, or when we know that the reason for a claim in

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an argument is not the one which motivates the action contained in the conclusion, or when we know our point of view (which we are communicating) is wrong.¹ At the base of this behaviour there is a cognitive assumption which I endorse in this work, namely that cognition is directed at action, at designing its environment (Sterelny, 2012). Thus, self-deception, deception, lies and manipulation will be explained in line with the objective of an agent who prevaricates to achieve certain individual and social aims so as to manage his social and informative environment.

I will analyze recent hypotheses regarding this prevaricative structure of the mind, such as that of Kurzban (2012), who has proposed that the mind functions strategically in a misleading way for persuasive purposes. His central idea is that the brain is composed of mutually inconsistent modules that contain contradictory beliefs.² I can believe something that an unbiased person with the same information will not believe (for example, that I am an excellent driver, despite having crashed into a wall only moments prior). As Kurzban (2012: 130) points out, “some part of the mind – some modules – are designed for functions other than being right because of certain strategic advantages”. Biases are the clearest example of this cognitive structure designed for communicating strategically false beliefs. Trivers (2011) maintains a similar view, considering that in order to lie we hide or disguise relevant information, and particularly, we disguise our intention to deceive, which is the easiest to do by means of a self-deceptive mechanism.

Which consequences could this way of understanding the mental design have for persuasive behaviour? In this article I will examine a possible effect through the analysis of the social influence bias to show that this bias makes us produce arguments that are purely deceptive in order to maintain our preferred self-presentation and to get ulterior benefits. To further elaborate these consequences, I will proceed as follows: in Section 2, I will demarcate and characterize the behavioural family of what I’ve called *generalized deception*, specifically, self-deception, deception, lies and manipulation, and I will do so by combining discursive, psycho-cognitive and evolutionary perspectives, with special attention to self-deceptive behaviour, as this will offer a certain informative framework that can be applied to other phenomena; in Section 3, I will focus on 2 examples of the social influence bias, taking the Asch experiment as the starting point to later analyze a humorous example. In the conclusions I will address some critical remarks and explore some generalizations. I should add that this work is interdisciplinary, combining concepts to complement a pragmatic analysis of the phenomenon observed.

The reason for combining the different literature and disciplines used in this work, pursues a threefold goal: (1) Distinguishing and defining conceptual members of the same paradigm, here called *generalized deception*, that can be regarded as a whole within the *axiology of manipulation* (Fig. 1); (2) Adding these distinctions and definitions to an ongoing reflection on manipulative discourse analyzed pragmatically, and particularly explaining the necessity to take into account the current advances in the research on *deceptive personality*, and (3) Exemplifying the theoretical discussion with cases of generalized deception, especially case 2 in which a deceptive personality from a TV sketch is shown, who uses self-deceptions, deceptions, lies, and manipulation to achieve a certain goal. In case 2, a pragmatic analysis is used in its broad sense: “pragmatics constitutes a general functional (i.e. cognitive, social and cultural) perspective on linguistic phenomena in relation to their usage in the form of behaviour” (Verschuere, 1999, 7), which is in line with the perspective adopted here. I defend the general idea that deceptive generalized behaviours are strategically assumed by agents to achieve their goals, while not necessarily caring about their inner contradictory beliefs – i.e. self-deceptions- or about their public deceptive choices – i.e. deceptions, lies, and manipulations. But as soon as they are pressed by the audience because of the emergence of a suspicion, such as in case 2, their linguistic behaviour becomes persuasively weak, and moves from self-deception to manipulation (see Fig. 1), exposing their deceptive personality (which is in fact what the sketch wants to show).

As said, in the conclusions some generalizations are put forward, specifically I imply here that if we follow the public behaviour of the decision-makers in governments or global businessmen involved in generalized deceptive behaviours (particularly manipulation), not only could we understand the general conditions under which these behaviours emerge, but also we could systematize the persuasive discursive strategies which are indicative of such behaviours.

¹ Although the notion of argument varies depending on the theoretical perspective assumed within argumentation studies (for a pragma-dialectician angle, see Grootendorst and van Eemeren, 2004; for a rhetorical view, see Tindale, 2015; for a combination of a pragmatic and dialectical view, see Johnson, 2000; for an epistemological perspective, see Biro and Siegel, 2011), here I will use a more straightforward definition: “An argument, in the sense of a train of reasoning, is the sequence of interlinked claims and reasons that, between them, establish the content and force of the position for which a particular speaker is arguing.” (Toulmin et al., 1979: 13).

² Here Kurzban’s notion of modularity refers to Parnas’ definition: “a mechanism for improving the flexibility and comprehensibility of the system (Parnas, 1972: 1053). It is a functionalist perspective in which the brain is seen as a container with many modules with specialized functions and encapsulated information, information which might or might not be transferred to one another. Kurzban points out: “The mind, too, is a bundle of software with programs and subroutines [. . .] Many modules are designed to acquire information about the world – language-learning systems being the most famous example – but nothing in this argument says that modular systems don’t learn, are inflexible, or only come in the colour green. (2012: 37).

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