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# Social strategies in self-deception

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ABSTRACT

How do people deceive themselves? I argue that although self-deception tends to be conceptualized as something that happens 'within an individual', it can also be a process that is distributed across the social context of a self-deceiver. In this paper I will, first, conceptually distinguish different strategies of such 'social self-deception'. Second, I will incorporate these into the two main conceptualizations of self-deception: intentionalism and deflationism. Finally, I will show how the proposed re-conceptualization of self-deception can be beneficial to conceptual, moral and empirical research.



## 1. Introduction

Most self-deception-researchers would agree with the claim that self-deception occurs in a social context. Yet, self-deception research has hitherto neglected many of the social aspects of self-deception (cf. Dupuy, 1997; Sherman, 2009; Solomon, 2009; Heine, 2011; Gorelik & Shackelford, 2011; Deweese-Boyd, 2012). To illustrate, Mele (2001), one of the most influential theories on self-deception, focuses on cognitive and perceptual biases (e.g. misinterpretation, selective attention and selective evidence-gathering) to explain how people deceive themselves. Although it is often acknowledged that self-deception has an important social component (see e.g. Mele, 2001, pp. 20–21), this is seldom elaborated upon.

There are some exceptions to this general rule of neglect, most notably Ruddick (1988. See also Harré, 1988; Rorty, 1994; Dupuy, 1997; Solomon, 2009). However, this literature tends to be non-exhaustive, not always well elaborated, at times conceptually ambiguous and not connected to empirical research. Furthermore, work on the role of the social context of self-deception tends to be overlooked by many other (empirical) self-deception researchers. The current paper seeks to address these problems. It will draw on many of the authors mentioned above and try to synthesize and revitalize many of their ideas. But it will also go beyond the currently existing literature by systematizing the notion of social self-deception, connecting it to existing philosophical theorizing and discussing consequences for empirical research.

The claim that I want to defend is that in many instances the process of self-deception is distributed across the social context of a self-deceiver. Other people may be the means to our self-deceptive ends. That is, we may mislead other people, withhold information or straightforwardly deceive them, and all of these actions may be part of our self-deceptive endeavors. Many researchers would agree that what other people do, say, don't do or don't say is information that a self-deceiver can treat in a motivationally biased way. What has hitherto been neglected however, is the fact that we are able to influence what other people do, say, don't do and don't say. By determining what others do, say, don't do or don't say, we set up the possibility to deceive ourselves.

The aim of this paper is to distinguish different strategies of social self-deception and to show how such distinctions could be beneficial to research in philosophy, ethics and empirical science. To achieve this aim, I will first, in Section 2, develop a conceptual framework in which different social strategies that self-deceivers might employ are distinguished and illustrated by means of some (everyday) examples. Importantly, the current paper is concerned with *means* of self-deception, not with defending a specific view on what self-deception consists of. In Section 3, I will elaborate on how social self-deception can be incorporated into the two main conceptualizations of self-deception: intentionalist and deflationist views. In Section 4 I will argue that the proposed re-conceptualization can contribute to conceptual, empirical and moral research. In particular, I will explore the relevance of a social

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conceptualization of self-deception for research on social media.

## 2. The conceptual landscape of social self-deception

In this Section 1 will distinguish between solitary and social self-deception and characterize social self-deception by means of conceptual analysis and by means of examples. In addition, I will show that there is a class of self-deceptions that should be considered *pseudo*-social.

### 2.1. Solitary and social strategies of self-deception

There has been ample debate about what self-deception is. For present purposes, self-deception can be roughly described as a phenomenon that involves (i) a process that originates in (ii) a motivation or intention (see Section 3), which leads to (iii) a self-deceived end state (which can be the formation of a novel belief or the maintenance of an existing belief or other attitude). The claim that self-deception is social pertains to the *process* leading up to a self-deceptive end state. If we picture this process as a chain of events which results in a self-deceived end state, then my claim will be that whereas in solitary self-deception these events take place 'within the person', in social self-deceptions these events involve other people.[1]

Therefore, social self-deceptions are of particular interest to those who are concerned with the question of *how* we deceive ourselves. Social self-deception should thus be conceived of as a *strategy* that can be employed by a self-deceiver. Importantly, the rest of the self-deceptive process may coincide with solitary self-deception: social self-deception is not a completely distinct strategy to deceive oneself. Rather, it involves *broadening the scope of potential mechanisms* to deceive yourself by using other people (who are absent or non-instrumental in solitary self-deception). In fact, as will be shown in the examples below, instances of social self-deception typically involve solitary self-deception as well: the view that we *either* deceive ourselves solely by means of others *or* in absolute solitude does not do justice to the complexity of the self-deceptive projects people pursue.

The hallmark of social self-deception is that other people are instrumental to our self-deceptive process. By other people I mean, in a practical and broad sense, their behavior, which includes verbal statements, facial expressions, body language but also the lack of behavior. Simply put, what people do, say, don't do or don't say is information that a self-deceiver can treat in an irrational way. Importantly, we are able to influence what people do, say, don't do and don't say, thereby setting up the possibility to deceive ourselves more easily. In the rest of the paper, I will refer to people in plural, but social self-deceptions can also involve only one other individual.

The instrumentality of these other people refers to their crucial role in bringing about the end state of a self-deceptive belief. Another person can be said to be instrumental to one's self-deceptive process if one would not have achieved a specific self-deceptive end state were it not for that person's behavior. This is not so say that one would not have achieved a state of self-deception at all, rather one would have needed to employ other strategies to achieve that state.

In the remainder of this Section 1 will introduce three conceptual distinctions which enable us to distinguish eight strategies of social self-deception (see Table 1 at the end of this section for an overview). The main division within these strategies is between 'situating' and 'persuasive' forms of social self-deception. Two additional distinctions that will be used to conceptually distinguish kinds of social self-deception are positive versus negative and intentional versus unintentional. Note that in what follows, an action is considered to be *intentional* when it is carried out with the *intention to self-deceive* (as we will discuss in Section 3.1, some theorists consider this intention to self-deceive a necessary condition for classifying a case of self-deception). When an action is labeled as *unintentional* this therefore does not mean that the action is performed without any intentionality whatsoever, only that it is not performed with the intention to self-deceive.

### 2.2. Situating social self-deception

The first subset of social self-deceptions consists of 'situating' strategies. Situating social self-deception can be described as follows:

I surround myself with individuals who are likeminded with regard to *p*. Their behavior is then used to reinforce or constitute my self-deceived belief with regard to *p*.

What makes this strategy self-deceptive is that I am selective in my evidence-gathering: I situate myself in a particular context and use only those surrounding me as a source of information. Moreover, what makes this self-deception *social* is that I am responsible (at least to some extent, see Section 4.3) for surrounding myself with individuals who are likeminded, thereby making unwanted information less available. These likeminded people are crucial for my self-deceptive process in the sense that without them, I would not have been able to reinforce or constitute my belief with regard to *p*.

Situating social self-deceptions can be subdivided further. On the one hand, one can look at the specific strategy that is used. In the positive variant of situating social self-deceptions, people surround themselves with likeminded people, whereas in the negative variant, it is not so much that likeminded people are approached but people who are not likeminded are avoided (the result being similar: having likeminded people in our direct surroundings).[2] On the other hand, we can look at whether or not we perform these *acts of situating social self-deception* with the specific intention to deceive ourselves. In the intentional form, I surround myself with likeminded people *with the intention of deceiving myself*. In the unintentional form, in contrast, I surround myself with likeminded people because, for example, they share my interests, attitudes or background. Then, simply because the opportunity arises, I use their behavior with regard to *p* to reinforce my self-deceived belief *p*. To illustrate, here is an example which I think could take both forms (intentional and unintentional):

Sarah is the head of the philosophy department. She has done extensive research on the work of Hegel and, perhaps due to mere exposure, maintains that Hegel is the best philosopher to have ever roamed the earth. This belief is important to her because it justifies all of those years she spent trying to understand Hegel – years she could have spent doing other research. Being the head of the department, she only hires new staff members who share her view that Hegel's philosophy is unsurpassed.[3]

[1] Social self-deceptions are thus a category distinct from solitary self-deceptions. There are other non-solitary categories, such as linguistic self-deceptions in which the events that are required for someone to reach a self-deceptive end state involve (the cultural and semantic aspects of) language. Non-solitary self-deception involves setting the world up to be such, that deceiving ourselves becomes relatively easy. The current paper will focus solely on *social* self-deceptions.

[2] Baumeister and Cairns (1992) indicate that the mere presence of other people may interfere with our self-deception. Social self-deception consists of strategies to make sure that other people do not pose such a threat.

[3] All examples used in the current paper are fictional.