

Self-deception: An Introduction¹

Harry C. Triandis²
University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana

Abstract

Self-deception has been studied by philosophers and psychologists for some time. Frenkel-Brunswik (1939) published the first psychology paper. In Triandis (2009, p. ix) there are references to 24 papers by philosophers and psychologists that examined this concept. All humans have self-deceptions, some more frequently than others. That is, they see the world the way they would like to be rather than the way it is. As I thought about the concept over the years I believe that the most important point for understanding self-deception is to examine what percentage of the information that humans use when *constructing* (Taylor, 1998b) the way they see the world comes from inside their body or from outside their body. If most of it comes from inside their body there is a high probability that they have a self-deception. The information from inside the body consists of emotions (e.g., hopes), needs (e.g., hunger pangs), desires (e.g., imagined attractive objects), cognitive systems (e.g., prejudices, stereotypes, in-group preferences), memories (e.g., we are descendents of heroes), theories, ideologies, and elements of subjective culture acquired during socialization. The information from the outside the body is reality, and captures aspects of the ecology. Geography, climate, the actions of others, occupations, and events in the environment, are all relevant. For example, when a wild animal is attacking we focus on outside information. But when making judgments about philosophy, economics, religion, education, politics, terrorism, aesthetics and the like we often use inside information to shape our perceptions. The Buddha had the insight that we use information from both outside the body (reality, truth) and inside our body (emotions, ideology) when he said "Where self is, truth is not; where truth is, self is not." (Spencer-Rogers, Williams, & Pang, 2010). In this paper I will start with some examples of self-deception. Then I will discuss some of the characteristics of self-deception—it is often linked to cognitive simplicity, megalomania, and if we have no self-deceptions we might be depressed, but if we have large self-deceptions we might be mentally ill. Then I will discuss how self-deception is implicated in many of the controversial issues of our times. I will end with some suggestions for further research linking culture and self-deception.

Key Words: Self-deception, cognition, megalomania, depression, culture.

Auto-engaño: Una introducción

Resumen

El auto-engaño ha sido estudiado por filósofos y psicólogos durante algún tiempo. Frenkel-Brunswik (1939) publicó el primer trabajo de corte psicológico. En Triandis (2009, p. ix) se pueden encontrar referencias de 24 trabajos de filósofos y psicólogos que han examinado este concepto. Todos los humanos tienen auto-engaños, algunos más frecuentemente que otros. Esto es, ven el mundo de la manera en que les gustaría que fuera y no tanto de la manera en que es. Tal como he pensado acerca del concepto a través de los años, creo que el punto más importante para el entendimiento del auto-engaño, es examinar qué porcentaje de la información que los humanos utilizan cuando *construyen* (Taylor, 1988b) y la manera en que ven el mundo, proviene de dentro o fuera de su cuerpo. Si el mayor porcentaje viene de dentro, existe una alta probabilidad de que se trate de auto-engaño. La información de dentro del cuerpo consiste en emociones (p.e. deseos), necesidades (p.e. dolores por hambre), deseos (p.e. objetos atractivos imaginarios), sistemas cognoscitivos (p.e. prejuicios, estereotipos, preferencias de endo-grupo), memorias (p.e. descendemos de héroes), teorías, ideologías, y elementos de cultura subjetiva adquiridos durante la socialización. La información fuera del cuerpo es la realidad, y captura aspectos ecológicos. Geografía, clima acciones de los otros, ocupaciones y eventos del medio ambiente, todos son relevantes. Por ejemplo, cuando un animal ataca nos enfocamos en la información de fuera; pero cuando se hacen juicios sobre filosofía, economía, religión, educación, política, terrorismo, estética y cosas que nos gustan, utilizamos información de dentro para moldear nuestras percepciones. En este trabajo empezaré con algunos ejemplos de auto-engaño; después discutiré algunas de las características del auto-engaño –que está frecuentemente ligado a la simplicidad cognoscitiva, megalomanía, y que si no tenemos auto-engaño es probable que estemos deprimidos, pero si tenemos demasiados auto-engaños podríamos estar mentalmente no sanos; continuaré discutiendo cómo el auto-engaño está implicado en muchos de los puntos controversiales de nuestros tiempos; y terminaré con algunas sugerencias para futuras investigaciones vinculando la cultura y el auto-engaño.

Palabras clave: Autoengaño, cognición, megalomanía, depresión, cultura

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² Correspondencia: 607 Daniel St. Champaign, IL 61820, Telephone: 217 344 6722, Email: Triandis@Illinois.edu

Examples of Self-Deception

In two villages in Bolivia the locals worship and pray to Che Guevara! The fact that Che was a Marxist atheist does not bother them. He helped the poor, so he was a good person, and since they *need* such a person to pray to they converted him to a local saint. His picture is in many homes, people pray to him, and one of the locals, assured the BBC reporter that Che answers prayers. He said: "I do not ask for any goods; I ask that my grand-children make good grades, and they do get good grades in school. Che answers my prayers." In short, if one needs a powerful entity one creates it.

Mohammed Atta, the leader of the gang that committed the September 11, 2001 attacks, had a "Manual for a Raid" in his luggage. According to the manual the raid was perceived as "doing God's work." In my opinion, Atta was after glory: the destruction of the superpower. He could not admit even to himself that he was after glory so he dressed his motive in religion, i.e., religion was used as a cloak to hide the actual goal. In short, the idea that he was doing God's work was a satisfying fantasy.

In the 10th century Christians also had such fantasies. Those who died fighting Islam were believed to be "going to Christ." Supposedly when they died in that situation it guaranteed going to paradise (NPS TV Program on Islam in Spain.)

Qirko (2013) discusses many forms of altruism such as vows of celibacy, suicide bombings, combat suicide that are examples of self-deception. They are found in organizations, such as the Catholic Church or al-Qaeda, that replicate natural kin contexts (such as parent-child or sibling relationships), they use uniforms, emblems, hair styles, speech patterns, mannerisms, linguistic and symbolic kin references to create an ingroup where self-sacrifice is expected. In many such cases self-sacrifice, such as suicide bombing, is due to self-deception.

Bin Laden writing to Mullah Omar (the leader of the Taliban) sees the United Nations as an alien culture that has "a new religion that is worshipped to the exclusion of God." "The UN imposes all sorts of penalties on all those who contradict its religion. It issues documents and statements that openly contradict Islamic belief, such as the Universal Declaration for Human Rights, considering that all religions are equal, and that the destruction of the statues constitutes a crime." (Cullison, 2004, p. 64) (He referred to the giant statues of the Buddha that the Taliban blew up in Afghanistan). In short, bin Laden uses the fantasy that his particular interpretation of Islam is the word of God, and anything that does not agree with it must be rejected.

The Bush Administration advocated a change of the Geneva Convention to give more freedom to interrogators. The implication is that if the interrogators have more freedom they will be more effective. That was also a self-deception. There is psychological research establishing that innocents confess (Kassin, 2007). Interrogations that border on torture are ineffective, produce the information the interrogators want to receive rather than useful, reliable information, and give the country that adopts such methods a bad name. The administrators sample information consistent with their desires (we will get good information) and ignored information that is inconsistent with their desires (the information is invalid).

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