

Self-Deception Revisited: A Literature Review on Its Social and Structural Dimensions

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Abstract. Self-deception is traditionally conceptualized as an individual-level cognitive error, where an individual holds a belief contrary to available evidence. The current study argues for a more nuanced understanding, positioning self-deception as a socially embedded and psychologically motivated phenomenon, profoundly shaped by identity, emotion, and social power. Drawing on integrated philosophical and psychological literature, this study review theoretical foundations showing that self-deception operates through pre-conscious cognitive mechanisms (e.g., motivated reasoning, cognitive dissonance reduction) rather than solely deliberate choice. Critically, we emphasize that the form and function of self-deception are mediated by socio-structural contexts. Cultural norms (e.g., individualism vs. collectivism) and socioeconomic factors (e.g., social class) systematically predict self-deceptive tendencies, such as meritocratic beliefs among the advantaged or failure internalization among the disadvantaged. These patterns reveal how self-deception often reinforces collective illusions and perpetuates inequality. To mitigate these effects, multi-level interventions are proposed, including cognitive strategies like bias training to foster critical thinking, and structural reforms like transparency policies to disrupt collective false beliefs. In summary, this review underscores the growing urgency of investigating the ethical dimensions of self-deception, specifically examining the conditions under which and the extent to which such psychological protection remains justifiable in an era marked by algorithmic manipulation and ideological polarization.

Keywords: Self-deception, Cultural and Social Perspective, Interventions.

1. Introduction

Contemporary systems often incentivize the adoption of comforting illusions over the acceptance of uncomfortable truths. For instance, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may internalize their position through narratives of personal inadequacy—a tendency that aligns with findings showing that low perceived social status fosters greater self-deception, particularly in individuals with low self-control, whereas high perceived status can buffer against such tendencies [1].

Self-deception is more accurately understood not simply as an individual cognitive failure, but as a phenomenon deeply embedded in social contexts—shaped by dynamics of identity, emotion, and power. Although classical psychological frameworks characterize self-deception as holding beliefs despite contrary evidence, contemporary neuroscience-informed research highlights its dependence on ambiguity in attribution and metacognitive distortions: self-deception tends to emerge in contexts that enable effortless justifications, recruiting frontal neural processes that facilitate biased self-evaluation [2]. Moreover, group-level processes corroborate its inherently social nature: tightly knit social collectives can sustain shared false beliefs by reinforcing them through group identification mechanisms, effectively insulating members from counterevidence—what philosophers’ term “collective self-deception,” whereby social contexts both enable and entrench self-deception [3]. These insights affirm that the manifestations and functions of self-deception are profoundly influenced by sociostructural conditions, and that any meaningful analysis must attend to identity, social status, and collective dynamics.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Philosophical paradoxes

Deception, as a fundamental aspect of human interaction, is essentially an intentional and purposive act wherein an agent, while being fully cognizant of the objective truth, consciously and deliberately disseminates information that is designed to mislead, with the explicit goal of instilling a false belief or misconception in the intended target. This intricate process is fundamentally characterized by a crucial and inherent asymmetry between the parties involved - not only in terms of their access to accurate information but also in their underlying intentions and objectives, as the deceiver actively endeavors to construct and maintain a specific cognitive framework within the receiver's mind that stands in direct opposition to the deceiver's own factual knowledge and understanding.

Drawing upon Alfred R. Mele's comprehensive theoretical framework regarding self-deception, this psychological phenomenon frequently stems from the profound impact that personal desires and emotional inclinations can exert on the formation and maintenance of beliefs. Such influence often manifests in a systematic pattern where individuals unconsciously, yet consistently, direct their attention toward and preferentially process information that confirms or supports their pre-existing desires, while simultaneously disregarding, minimizing, or rationalizing away any evidence or facts that might contradict or challenge these desired beliefs. This selective information processing ultimately gives rise to beliefs that are significantly skewed by motivational factors rather than objective reality. Mele particularly underscores that this entire mechanism of self-deception generally does not emerge from a deliberate, conscious decision to deceive oneself, but rather evolves from deep-seated cognitive tendencies, automatic processing biases, and habitual patterns of thought that operate below the level of conscious awareness. These inherent psychological processes collectively form what can be considered a fundamentally non-intentional or non-deliberate mental operation [4].

To encapsulate this complex phenomenon, the seemingly contradictory and paradoxical characteristics of intentional self-deception - where one is simultaneously both the perpetrator and victim of deception - have prompted numerous philosophers and cognitive scientists to conceptualize self-deception primarily as a non-intentional process [5], one that arises spontaneously from the interplay between our motivational states and cognitive architecture rather than from any purposeful plan to mislead ourselves.

2.2. Psychological angle

Philosophical paradoxes profoundly illuminate the intricate nature of self-deception as a conceptual phenomenon, exposing the fundamental contradictions and logical inconsistencies inherent in this complex psychological process. Meanwhile, contemporary psychological research offers crucial empirical insights and methodological tools that enable us to systematically investigate and comprehend the specific cognitive processes and motivational drivers that underlie and facilitate self-deceptive behaviors. Through rigorous experimental studies and clinical observations, psychological science provides concrete evidence and theoretical frameworks that help decode the mechanisms through which individuals simultaneously hold contradictory beliefs while maintaining psychological coherence, thus bridging the gap between abstract philosophical speculation and tangible psychological reality.

The cognitive load associated with maintaining this dichotomy—between known truth and presented falsehood—often manifests in observable behavioral cues and predictable neural activation patterns, particularly in brain regions responsible for executive control and conflict monitoring. Recent neuroimaging evidence reveals that deception recruits executive-control and conflict-monitoring regions—such as the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) and anterior cingulate cortex (ACC)—particularly under low-reward conditions where cognitive control is elevated [6]. The phenomenon of self-deception arises when an individual comes to embrace a belief that fundamentally conflicts with available evidence—creating a psychological paradox wherein

contradictory knowledge states appear to coexist. Modern cognitive neuroscience frameworks suggest that these mechanisms operate primarily through subconscious, affectively driven protective systems rather than deliberate choice, with neural circuits preferentially encoding information that aligns with preexisting self-conceptions while systematically attenuating contradictory data through complex motivated reasoning processes that serve to preserve psychological equilibrium [7-8].

Furthermore, psychological research also provides crucial and in-depth understanding of the complex mechanisms underlying self-deception, particularly when individuals encounter information that challenges their self-perception or core belief systems. The seminal cognitive dissonance theory, first proposed by Festinger, explains that holding conflicting cognitions creates an aversive state of psychological tension, which people are driven to reduce—frequently through subconscious processes—by modifying their attitudes, beliefs, or interpretations to achieve internal consistency [9-10]. Recent empirical investigations have further refined this understanding, with one notable study demonstrating an intriguing dissociation: cognitive vagueness shows a positive correlation with unconscious self-deception processes, while exhibiting a negative relationship with conscious, deliberate forms of self-deception [11]. In the domain of moral psychology, the well-documented moral licensing phenomenon (sometimes termed "self-licensing") illustrates how earlier virtuous behavior can unconsciously justify later prejudiced actions. Neurocognitive research suggests this tendency may particularly diminish self-corrective behaviors when individuals perceive potential threats to their social standing or reputation [12]. Parallel to this, the concept of motivated reasoning elucidates people's systematic tendency to process information in ways that support preferred conclusions or safeguard their identity, rather than pursuing objective truth. This cognitive bias manifests through selective attention to confirming evidence and asymmetric evaluation of arguments in emotionally charged or socially significant situations [13-14]. When combined with confirmation bias—the propensity to seek and overweight supporting evidence while ignoring contradictory information—motivated reasoning offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals maintain belief systems that protect their self-image while discounting dissonant facts [15]. Importantly, these psychological processes typically operate below conscious awareness, revealing how the mind automatically and systematically distorts perception, memory retention, and logical inference to maintain a stable, emotionally sustainable self-narrative. Together, these research findings present self-deception not as a simple cognitive error or occasional lapse in judgment, but rather as an adaptive, motivationally driven psychological strategy deeply rooted in social cognition and self-preservation needs. This sophisticated perspective highlights self-deception as a dynamic, multifaceted defense mechanism that serves both intrapsychic and interpersonal functions in human cognition and behavior.

3. Cultural and Social Perspective

Self-deception operates not only as a psychological mechanism but also as a socially reinforced narrative, shaped by an individual's position within broader cultural and institutional systems. A common manifestation occurs in socioeconomic contexts, where individuals may adopt narratives that either exaggerate personal agency or rationalize systemic constraints. For instance, recent experimental research shows that individuals assigned to higher-income roles are more likely to attribute success to effort, whereas those in lower-income roles attribute outcomes to luck or circumstance—demonstrating how self-deceptive meritocratic beliefs emerge in response to structural inequality [16].

Educational systems also cultivate self-deceptive patterns. Students from competitive academic environments may engage in self-handicapping strategies, convincing themselves that outcomes reflect innate ability while downplaying institutional or parental pressures; such self-deceptive coping helps preserve self-esteem but also obscures structural influences on achievement [17]. Similarly, workplace cultures that valorize overwork can encourage employees to reinterpret burnout as dedication, reinforcing illusions of resilience rather than recognizing systemic stressors [18]. These

examples illustrate how self-deception is often a collective phenomenon, sustained by cultural norms that reward certain illusions while penalizing uncomfortable truths.

Emerging empirical work continues to highlight how self-deception is shaped by cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Recent cross-cultural studies reveal that individuals in individualistic cultures are more prone to self-enhancement, inflating assessments of their own performance, while those in collectivist cultures show greater self-critical reflection, aligning with norms of relational harmony and self-improvement [19]. Socioeconomic factors also systematically predict self-deceptive tendencies. For example, a comprehensive review finds that individuals of higher subjective social class are more likely to endorse meritocratic beliefs, minimizing the role of structural luck in life outcomes, whereas those experiencing socioeconomic adversity often internalize failure, attributing setbacks to personal inadequacy rather than external barriers—a pattern linked to sustained inequality [20].

Such findings underscore that self-deception is not merely a cognitive flaw but a context-dependent strategy. It can preserve psychological well-being (e.g., maintaining hope in adversity) or perpetuate harmful illusions (e.g., ignoring systemic inequities). The ethical tension lies in distinguishing adaptive coping from willful blindness.

4. Interventions to Mitigate Self-Deception

While self-deception may serve certain adaptive functions in the short term by protecting individuals from uncomfortable truths or maintaining psychological well-being, its broader role in perpetuating systemic inequality and facilitating poor decision-making at both individual and societal levels necessitates the implementation of proactive countermeasures. A growing body of empirical research from psychology and behavioral economics highlights at least two particularly effective strategies for mitigating these negative consequences. These approaches have demonstrated measurable success in helping individuals recognize and overcome self-deceptive tendencies that might otherwise lead to distorted judgments and reinforce existing social disparities.

4.1. Cognitive Interventions

Training individuals to recognize cognitive biases (e.g., confirmation bias, motivated reasoning) can diminish self-deceptive tendencies. For instance, recent studies indicate that people actively consider source expertise and credibility even when exposed to competing partisan cues, which can help partially mitigate partisan biases [21]. Similarly, instruction in cognitive humility—recognizing the limits of one's knowledge—increases openness to belief-discrepant information.

4.2. Structural Reforms

Systemic institutional changes can counteract collective self-deception. Transparency mandates, such as public disclosure of demographic pay disparities, have been shown to increase awareness of privilege and systemic inequality among advantaged groups [22]. Likewise, resource redistribution policies (e.g., targeted opportunity programs) help expose structural barriers and debunk meritocratic narratives [23].

5. Conclusion

This examination of self-deception has argued that it is neither a purely individual failure nor a neutral cognitive quirk, but a psychologically motivated and socially embedded phenomenon. While it often serves as a defense against discomfort, guilt, or existential threat, it can also reinforce systems of inequality and obstruct moral clarity. At the same time, philosophical and empirical perspectives suggest that a strictly negative appraisal may be reductive: under certain circumstances, self-deception can contribute to mental well-being, sustain agency, and shield the self from truths that would otherwise be overwhelming.

Self-deception emerges as a dynamic phenomenon—shaped by cognitive architecture, social hierarchies, and historical context. Although it may offer short-term psychological relief, its long-term costs, such as reinforcing inequities or distorting judgment, call for proactive mitigation. The interventions outlined throughout this discussion—including cognitive training and structural reforms—provide a pathway for balancing personal well-being with collective truth-seeking. This task grows increasingly vital in an age of algorithmic polarization and curated identities.

At its core, self-deception represents more than a mere denial of facts; it is a deeply human strategy for negotiating the tension between what is true and what can be endured. To understand self-deception is not only to reveal how minds protect themselves, but also to confront an ethical dilemma: when, if ever, is such self-protection justified? In a world increasingly influenced by psychological manipulation, algorithmic echo chambers, and ideological division, understanding how we deceive ourselves—and at what cost—stands as one of the most pressing questions of our time.

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