Lesson 3a. Self-Deception

Key ideas:

(1) Self-deception may be a way in which we can embrace any of the forms of ignorance or false information.

(2) Self-deception is a way in which we can maintain our beliefs while ignoring or avoiding contravening evidence. Von Hippel and Robert Trivers describe five varieties of self-deception: (a) biased information search; (b) biased interpretation; (c) misremembering; (d) rationalization; and (e) convincing oneself that a lie is true.

(3) Self-deception is a socializing and socialized strategy. We convince ourselves of our false beliefs as we convince others, and vice versa. This reciprocity is social self-deception.

(4) There are two cases each of social self-deception each of which has two aspects, positive and negative: (a) situating (i) positive – by seeking like-minded people and (ii) negative – by avoiding people who disagree; and (b) persuasive (i) positive -- by trying to convince people to become like-minded or (ii) negative – by withholding information that would deter a person from becoming like-minded.

(5) Collective self-deception elevates social self-deception into group behavior.

The difference between disinformation and other forms of false information or ignorance is the intent to deceive. However, deception often involves self-deception. Sartre set self-deception, which he also called bad faith, as a key to understanding how people live inauthentically: holding or living a contradiction at one and the same time or believing what you do not believe, such as believing that your vote does not matter, while recognizing the slim margin by which Trump won the electoral college. In bad faith, people may deceive themselves into thinking that they do not have the freedom to make choices for fear of the potential consequences, i.e., that they would have to be responsible for themselves. We might file forms of "willful ignorance" under this category, knowing something but consciously or unconsciously ignoring it, e.g., choosing to believe that the Confederate flag or statues of Confederate leaders are not symbols of racism.

Self-deception is an important way in which we embrace false information, whether misinformation, disinformation, missing information, incomplete information, or even true information used in paltering, though it seems rampant in disinformation. There are two types: motivated and unmotivated. In motivated self-deception, we push a form of self-deception for conscious political, social, ethical or personal gain (e.g., proposing that all Muslims believe in Sharia Law and support jihad). Stephen Colbert's notion of "truthiness" is probably the best contemporary expression of motivated self-deception. Wikipedia described it as a "belief or assertion that a particular statement is true based on the intuition or perceptions of some individual or individuals, without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or actual facts" (Truthiness, 2019). We practice truthiness when there is some belief we want to be true despite clear evidence to the contrary. Truthiness is common among Trump supporters who cannot find any fault in or ignore Trump's lies or behavior. But it can be found in liberals who want to believe that all corporations are corrupt and have no interest in consumers or consumer behavior, except as profit margins. Unmotivated self-deception involves succumbing to one's biases, motivated to the degree that it accords with one's a priori bias; in other words, we seek information that confirms our a priori beliefs, which is precisely known as confirmation bias. Many people are inclined to information avoidance as one technique of confirmation bias, that is, avoid any

information or sources that contradict what one wants to believe, e.g., that Trump is a great leader or that MSNBC is a flawless critic of the Trump administration.

Von Hippel and Trivers (2011) describe five varieties of self-deception: They are (1) biased information search, (2) biased interpretation, (3) misremembering, (4) rationalization, and (5) convincing oneself that a lie is true. With respect to the first variety, the information seeker avoids information by limiting his/her exposure, holding onto a partial truth, rather than confronting the whole truth. When Trump supporters hear a negative report about Trump, such as that he paid money to women with whom he had affairs before the election, they restrict their listening to Fox News or to blogs, social media, or friends who support the same views.

Biased interpretation occurs when attitudes stay the same in the face of new, contradictory facts. Von Hippel and Trivers (2011) cite the case of two groups of people with strong, differing attitudes toward capital punishment. They were each presented with some evidence that suggested capital punishment was a deterrent of crime and with evidence that it was not. Both groups remained polarized in their opinion (p. 9). There are many such issues for Trump supporters and Trump critics: the success of the talks with North Korea about denuclearization; the renegotiated free trade agreement (USMCA – formerly NAFTA) with Mexico and Canada; the success of his tariffs on foreign-made products, such as steel and aluminum; and the benefits of the new tax law. Each set of persons focus on the evidence that backs their original opinion.

The third self-deceptive strategy Von Hippel and Trivers (2011) describe is misremembering. This can happen when one gets new information that is inconsistent with one's preferences. (p. 9). An obvious example is all the Trump supporters who voted for and appreciated the presidency of Barack Obama. Under the tutelage of Trump, his supporters and media venues, they have become despisers of him and his programs, despite his legislation that was beneficial to them, e.g., Obamacare.   They want healthcare but no longer Obamacare.

Rationalization occurs, according to Von Hippel and Trivers (2011), when one "avoid[s] telling oneself the whole truth by reconstructing or rationalizing the motives behind the original behavior to make it socially more acceptable" (p. 9). One can imagine a Trump supporter who asserts, referring to non-white Congresswomen, that "to go back to your country" is not a racist comment. One can also imagine a liberal spouting ideological purity when a candidate does not live up to their expected behavior in a green new deal.

Finally, convincing oneself that a lie is true. Perhaps the most famous example was when Trump, at a rally on July 24, 2018, proclaimed that "Just remember: what you're seeing and what you're reading is not what's happening" (Holmes, 2018). The irony is that this is precisely what Trump supporters should be thinking about the things Trump says. But it should not be that surprising that as the title and content of a psychological study assert, "Self-deceived individuals are better at deceiving others" (Lamba & Notyananda, 2014). Trump appears to be a good example of a self-deceived individual, as he claims to be the one person who can fix monumental national and international problems. Another good example is that of Rudy Giuliani, Trump's lawyer who asserted that "truth isn't truth" (Morin & Cohen, 2018) on the television program, "Meet the Press," when explaining why Trump should not have testified before special counsel Robert Mueller for fear of perjury if he were caught in a lie.

Self-deception is not only a learned behavior but a socialized and socializing one as well. Roy Dings (2017), in a paper on "Social strategies in self-deception," claims that self-deception can be "a process that 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. Dings defines self-deception in the following manner: as "(i) a process that originates in (ii) a motivation or intention …, 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)" (p. 17).   In social self-deception, other people are a means to the self-deceptive process. Other people include, Dings writes, "in a practical and broad sense, their behavior, which includes verbal statements, facial expressions, body language but also the lack of behavior" (Dings, 2017, p. 17).   While self-deception does not require others to participate, it can be stronger when someone else enables it. Dings describes two cases, each of which have two aspects positive and negative: situating (a) positive – by seeking like-minded people (e.g., going to a partisan political party rally) and (b) negative – by avoiding non-like-minded people (e.g., as a liberal changing channels from Fox News); and persuasive (a) positive -- by trying to convince people to be like-minded (e.g., entering into political arguments that support one's political views) or (b) negative – such as by withholding information that would deter a person from becoming like-minded (e.g., describing Trump as an excellent steward of the economy even though many of the policies that drove growth largely stemmed from his predecessor). The latter two seem to highlight common strategies of news organizations like Fox News: convincing Trump's supporters of the president's inflated success rate or not mentioning that white nationalists have been found guilty of racist crimes or failing to mention the evidence for Trump's impeachment. The easily accessible Internet and its many social media sites make such strategies easy to undertake: to find people who share the same disinformation, misinformation, conspiracy theories, etc., linking from one reinforcing site to another and avoiding sites that provide evidence that conflicts with one's a priori bias or political viewpoint.

Collective self-deception extends social self-deception into group behavior. Deweese-Boyd (2017) defines collective self-deception "as the holding of a false belief in the face of evidence to the contrary by a group of people as a result of shared desires, emotions, or intentions (depending upon the account of self-deception) favoring that belief" (Section 7.1). In this case, a group of individuals share levels of resentment about the status quo and share "the same belief for similar reasons and by similar means." One can imagine a group of Trump supporters who share a belief in the success of his presidency by watching the same media outlets (e.g., Fox News), which in turn are reinforced by their peers, evangelical leaders, and like-minded associates.

What distinguishes collective self-deception from solitary self-deception is its social context; namely, that it occurs within a group that shares both the attitudes bringing about the false belief and the false belief itself. Compared to solitary self-deception, self-deception in a collective or group is both easier to foster and more difficult to escape, being abetted by the self-deceptive efforts of others within the group that reinforce norms for the group (Deweese-Boyd, 2017).   This is how Trump's supporters reinforce each other's collective beliefs.

Exercise suggestions will call on participants to consider the following questions:

   (1) Can you think of ways in which you may be deceiving yourself?

(2) Can you think of ways you may be involved in behaviors or beliefs that can be described as social self-deception, either in your experience or on the web?

(3) Have you ever been involved in behaviors or beliefs that can be described as collective self-deception, either in your experience or on the web?

(4) Can it be argued that the white evangelical view that Trump was appointed by God in the manner of King Cyrus is a form of collective self-deception?