True lies: Self-stabilization without self-deception ☆

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Self-deception entails apparent conceptual paradoxes and poses the dilemma between two competing needs: the need for stability of the self-concept, on the one hand, and the need to accept reality, on the other. It is argued, first, that conceptual difficulties can be avoided by distinguishing two levels of explanation. Whereas, in a personal language, "the person" deceives him- or her-self, a cognitive ("subpersonal") approach explains this self-deception by reference to the interplay of cognitive processes of which the person is not aware. Second, the tension between stability and adjustment of the self can be resolved by self-immunization, which maintains the stability of central self-conceptions by adjusting peripheral aspects and their diagnostic value for the central concepts. Processes of self-immunization were investigated in a series of studies operating on both levels of explanation. Implications for psychological explanations of personal phenomena such as self-images and self-insight are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Whatever one's self actually "is" – a structure or a process – it is a compromise between stability and change. On the one hand, we maintain a sense of being one and the same person throughout our whole lifespan, and we manage to remain the same individual with respect to many and various facets of our selves. Innumerable empirical findings – in fact, an entire discipline (i.e., personality psychology; e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1997; Funder, 2001, 2007) – support the notion that we as adults are highly stable in central dimensions of our personality, which is not only represented in but also operationalized through our self-conceptions (see Bengtson, Reedy, & Gordon, 1985).

On the other hand, we need to adapt our selves over developmental trajectories. Many of our competencies and skills, including those of which we are proud, change significantly over the lifespan, often in a way we experience as a loss (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006). For action to be regulated successfully, the self-concept probably needs not be as accurate as possible, but certainly as realistic as necessary (Greve & Wentura, 2003). We therefore have to adjust our self-conceptions accordingly. In fact, many studies have shown that we *can* – and do – adjust our selves in response to even minor situational demands (Hannover, 2000; Hannover, Pöhlmann, Springer, & Roeder, 2005).

This raises the question of how the demands of self-stabilization and self-adjustment can be reconciled. How do we manage to remain the same person, to keep our identity stable and consistent over time, while adjusting our selves to our ever-changing existence?

Ever since Anna Freud's (1936) book on the ego and its defense mechanisms, self-defense has been considered the obvious solution to this dilemma. If we do not acknowledge the changes – and, in particular, the losses – that affect us, we are

able to maintain our self-image. Many self-defense phenomena ranging from "perceptual defense" (e.g., Erdelyi, 1974) and "denial" (e.g., Breznitz, 1981; Lazarus & Golden, 1981) to self-serving attributions (e.g., Miller, 1976) have been investigated and discussed by several branches of psychology (e.g., Greenwald, 1980; Hilgard, 1949). The "psychology of the self" (e.g., Greve, 2000a; Leary & Tangney, 2003; Tesser, Felson, & Suls, 2000; Tesser, Stapel, & Wood, 2002) has yielded numerous and diverse findings indicating that self-relevant information is not simply stored or assimilated by the person, but rather actively and systematically processed, resulting in the high – and cumulatively increasing – stability of the adult self (for an overview, see Greve, 2005).

The aims of this article are threefold. First, we propose self-immunization as a self-stabilizing process that is able to resolve the tension between the need to adjust to developmental changes and losses, on the one hand, and the need to stabilize the self, on the other. In a nutshell, self-immunization means maintaining the stability of central self-concepts by adjusting the diagnostic value of peripheral aspects for those central concepts. Second, we attempt to demonstrate that self-immunization can be empirically tested, despite the fact that the defense mechanisms of self-stabilization are, in principle, largely unknown to their "user." Third, we explore whether self-immunization can resolve the apparent paradoxes of self-deception.

2. Intricacies of self-defense: the costs of ignoring realities

The idea that we are good at deceiving ourselves about the degree of our changing involves at least two problems. The first has puzzled generations of philosophers (e.g., Cassam, 1994; Martin, 1986; Mele, 1987): "Self-deception is usually no great problem for its practitioner; on the contrary, it typically relieves a person of some of the burden of painful thought. ... But self-deception is a problem for philosophical psychology" (Davidson, 1985, p. 79). At first glance, self-deception is an impossibility: If "deception" means that someone who knows a certain fact deceives someone else who does not know that fact, then self-deception seems logically impossible (Haight, 1980). Yet, because we *do* "deceive" ourselves, it *cannot* be impossible (Gur & Sackheim, 1979).

The plausible solution to the "enigma of self-deception" (Baumeister, 1993) lies in the dissolution of the unity of "the self": There is no single "ego" that acts, knows ... or lies. Rather, the self is to be conceived as a complex and dynamic system (e.g., Markus & Wurf, 1987), consisting of highly differentiated cognitive and evaluative structures ("Me"; see James, 1890; Mead, 1934) plus the processes operating on these structures ("I"). These processes serve several functions (e.g., Filipp & Klauer, 1985) that can be grouped into two general categories: the reality principle and the pleasure principle (e.g., Greve, 2005; Higgins, 1997). According to the arguments sketched above, we humans need to be sufficiently realistic in order to act effectively. At the same time, we tend (or want) to be as consistent and positively evaluated as possible. Whereas the former requirement limits our inclination to view ourselves in a gloomy light, the latter is thought to be the reason for self-deception in the first place.

Precisely this constitutes the second problem: self-deception comes at a price – it entails disregard of facts. Yet, as mentioned above, the self-concept needs to be sufficiently realistic to usefully regulate action (Dunning, Leuenberger, & Sherman, 1995; Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995): If I act on false premises, I will usually fail; if I believe I can do something that I actually cannot, it usually results in embarrassment.

How do we manage, then, to maintain a sense of self-stability? How does self-defense relate to the subjective intuitions and empirical findings that underscore the stability and continuity of the adult self? Because the stability of the self-concept must not be maintained at the price of a completely unrealistic self-image, self-stabilization cannot rely entirely on protective processes that ignore or modify threatening data (e.g., denial, repression). There must be other, more adaptive processes that ensure the stability of the self and personal identity across the lifespan, without completely disregarding reality.

3. Flexible resistance: self-immunization by peripheral adjustment

The heterogeneous and large "zoo" (Tesser, Martin, & Cornell, 1996) of self-defense processes can be ordered in terms of the radicalism of their defensiveness. Application of a somewhat Procrustean systematization identifies three general "lines of defense" (Baumeister, 1996; Greve, 2000b). The first can be called the "rejecting" line of defense. This large category is characterized by the rejection of threatening events or information; it includes mechanisms of perceptual defense, denial, and repression (e.g., Markus & Wurf, 1987). The second can be termed the "neutralizing" line of defense (e.g., Baumeister, 1995). More than three decades of social psychological research have demonstrated a considerable range of "reality negotiation" techniques (Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Snyder, Irving, Sigmon, & Holleran, 1992; Swann, 1987), including self-serving biases, processes of reappraisal, doubting the source of threatening information, and the dynamics of "rationalization" (e.g., Swann & Hill, 1982). Both lines of defense are fairly efficient in reducing the threat of self-discrepant information.

Nevertheless, all forms of reality negotiation and interpretive neutralization entail a certain degree of deceit. If I am convinced I have a good memory, but increasingly find myself returning from the shops without everything I need, and if I fail to explain this away (e.g., by denying that I had planned to buy milk or by excusing my omission by reasoning, say, that I was distracted by bumping into a friend), do I necessarily have to admit that my memory has declined? Apparently, to shop efficiently, I badly need a shopping list. Does this concession mean that I have to release the dearly held belief of having a good memory? In other words, does the concession that I forget to buy things while grocery shopping pose an unavoidable and serious threat to my self-concept?

We have argued elsewhere (Greve & Wentura, 2003) that a third line of defense may help to avoid this unwelcome consequence without running into the "paradox" and "reality costs" of self-deception. An interesting way of protecting a