

Seeing the Whole Leopard: Why Self-Deception Demands a Panoramic View

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Abstract: Self-deception is a paradoxical phenomenon in which individuals simultaneously hold contradictory beliefs, often unconsciously suppressing one to maintain a coherent self-image or social identity. This paper examines self-deception through a panoramic lens, using Brexit as a case study of collective self-deception (CSD). By exploring theoretical foundations, psychological mechanisms, and sociopolitical contexts, the study reveals how self-deception operates both individually and collectively. Findings highlight that self-deception functions as both an evolutionary strategy for social survival and a psychological shield against existential anxiety, while also leading to significant economic, political, and social costs. Ultimately, the analysis underscores the necessity of adopting a holistic approach to understanding self-deception to avoid fragmented and misleading interpretations.

Keywords: Self-Deception; Collective Self-Deception; Brexit; Evolutionary psychology; Cognitive bias; Identity

1. Introduction

Self-deception has long intrigued philosophers and psychologists, as it embodies the paradox of simultaneously believing and disbelieving. While partial analyses offer limited insights, this study argues for a panoramic perspective. Drawing upon Brexit as a case of collective self-deception, the paper investigates how misbeliefs were formed, maintained, and justified, as well as their broader consequences. Unlike individual acts of self-deception, which may be adaptive in managing personal anxieties, collective self-deception becomes particularly consequential when translated into large-scale political decisions. Brexit, with its complex interplay of nationalism, identity politics, and economic misinformation, offers a vivid example of how private mechanisms of self-deception become publicly amplified,

reshaping an entire nation's trajectory.

2. The Nature of Self-Deception: The Paradox of Believing and Unbelieving

2.1 Defining Self-Deception

The philosophical puzzle of self-deception lies in its apparent contradiction: how can an individual simultaneously know and not know the same fact? Sartre (1943/1992) described this as *bad faith*, in which individuals deny truths they nonetheless recognize at some level. Gur and Sackheim (1979) established a psychological model requiring contradictory beliefs, unconscious suppression, and motivational bias. Greenwald (1988) further emphasized that self-deception is not a single act but a process, unfolding through selective attention, biased recall, and motivated interpretation. Contemporary neuroscience supports this, showing that emotional brain systems can override rational processing when self-identity is threatened (Kunda, 1990; Pessoa, 2008).

Thus, self-deception is not simple ignorance but an active, motivated distortion of reality—a “strategic ignorance” designed to reconcile conflicting desires.

2.2 Brexit as a Case of Self-Deception

Brexit illustrates how private misbeliefs scale up into collective self-deception. The referendum campaign was saturated with emotionally charged claims: that leaving the EU would “take back control,” save “£350 million a week for the NHS,” and stop immigrants from “taking British jobs.” These narratives persisted despite counter-evidence from economists, businesses, and government reports. After the vote, consequences contradicted promises: labor shortages in agriculture, supply chain disruptions, and loss of EU trade benefits (BBC, 2016; Mazzoni et al., 2021). Yet, many Brexit supporters rationalized these outcomes as temporary sacrifices for sovereignty. This selective reinterpretation exemplifies how

contradictory beliefs coexist—recognizing harm while reaffirming the decision’s “rightness.”

3. Mechanisms of Self-Deception

3.1 Cognitive Bias and Confirmation Bias

Cognitive biases sustain self-deception by filtering information. Confirmation bias, in particular, encourages individuals to accept supportive evidence and dismiss disconfirming data (Ditto & Lopez, 1992). During Brexit, selective exposure to partisan media created echo chambers where misleading claims circulated unchallenged. Social media amplified falsehoods such as Turkey’s “imminent accession” to the EU, which played on fears of mass immigration. Murphy et al. (2021) found that voters often formed false memories of campaign stories aligned with their identities, demonstrating how self-deception becomes embedded in collective consciousness.

3.2 Evolutionary Psychology: Deception to Better Deceive Others

Trivers (1985, 2000, 2009) argued that self-deception evolved as a strategy for deceiving others more convincingly. By internalizing falsehoods, individuals radiate authenticity, making their deception less detectable. Von Hippel and Trivers (2011) extended this view, showing that self-deception increases social cohesion by aligning personal belief with group narratives. In Brexit, political leaders may have convinced themselves of claims about economic freedom or sovereignty, enabling them to deliver persuasive speeches. This blurred boundary between belief and manipulation allowed self-deception to spread from elite discourse into mass mobilization.

3.3 Motivated Reasoning and Emotional Shielding

According to Haidt’s (2001) Social Intuitionist Model, reasoning often justifies pre-existing intuitions rather than discovering truth. When uncertainty triggers anxiety, self-deception reframes decisions as moral imperatives, shielding individuals from dissonance. For many voters, Brexit was less about economics than about a moral defense of democracy or cultural identity. By interpreting their decision as an ethical stand, they could maintain self-respect despite mounting economic losses.

3.4 Collective Illusions and Identity Stability

Collective self-deception thrives when identity and belonging are at stake. Nietzsche’s *will to power* (1968) and Sartre’s *bad faith* help explain how nostalgic myths—of British imperial strength or self-sufficiency—shaped the Brexit narrative. Byline Times (2019) reported that these myths functioned as collective illusions, providing stability in a rapidly globalizing world. Aligning with these illusions allowed individuals to evade personal responsibility, externalizing failures onto the EU or immigrants rather than confronting systemic challenges at home.

4. Consequences of Self-Deception

4.1 Positive Effects

Although often framed negatively, self-deception has adaptive benefits. Taylor and Brown (1988) showed that positive illusions correlate with higher well-being, while Robinson and Ryff (1999) linked self-deception to emotional regulation. Paulhus and Suedfeld (1988) found that individuals high in self-deceptive tendencies displayed greater resilience under stress. In collective contexts, self-deception can foster solidarity by sustaining shared myths, motivating cooperation even when reality seems discouraging. For example, framing Brexit as a patriotic duty created a sense of national unity, at least temporarily, which may have softened anxieties about global uncertainty.

4.2 Negative Effects

Yet the costs of self-deception often outweigh its benefits, particularly at the collective level. On the individual scale, Werhun et al. (1999) found that self-deception undermines self-knowledge and problem-solving, while at the societal scale Brexit’s self-deceptive foundations produced substantial harms. The loss of EU single-market access led to reduced competitiveness, declining exports, and investment uncertainty, while anti-immigration rhetoric drove away EU workers, crippling key sectors such as agriculture, healthcare, and logistics. At the political level, Brexit deepened polarization, eroded trust in institutions, and triggered recurring leadership crises, while socially it fragmented communities along generational, educational, and regional lines, heightening hostility toward perceived “others.” Thus, while self-deception temporarily preserved identity and moral coherence, its long-term effects

destabilized the very society it sought to protect.

5. Conclusion

Self-deception is a double-edged phenomenon—at once adaptive and destructive. From an evolutionary standpoint, it allows individuals to deceive others more convincingly. Psychologically, it shields against anxiety and preserves identity coherence. Yet Brexit demonstrates that when self-deception scales to the collective level, it can generate profound social, political, and economic consequences.

A panoramic approach, rather than fragmented perspectives, is essential. Philosophical, psychological, and sociological dimensions must be considered together to grasp the full complexity of self-deception. Fragmented views—whether focusing only on cognitive bias or only on political manipulation—risk overlooking the intricate interplay between individual minds and collective myths.

Looking forward, societies must cultivate critical literacy to counteract collective self-deception. Media transparency, civic education, and deliberative democratic practices could mitigate its influence. At the individual level, fostering reflective habits—acknowledging biases, questioning comforting narratives—can weaken the unconscious grip of motivated illusions. Ultimately, seeing the “whole leopard” requires widening our lens, resisting the temptation to cling to partial truths. Only then can societies navigate uncertainty without succumbing to the self-deceptions that promise coherence but deliver crisis.

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