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### **“Strategically wrong”: bias and argumentation**

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# Strategically Wrong: Bias and Argumentation by Means of Generalized Deception

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**Abstract:** The brain is composed of mutually inconsistent modules that contain contradictory beliefs. What consequences could this view have on argumentation? In order to sketch an answer, first the family of concepts of what is called *generalized deception* is discussed; then, this discussion is applied to the problem of the *social influence bias* to observe both how the mind works strategically wrong and what kind of arguments are used within this mental design in a social argumentative context.

**Keywords:** bias, deception, lies, persuasion, self-deception

## 1. Introduction

*I cheated myself,  
Like I knew I would,  
I told you I was trouble,  
You know that I'm no good  
Amy Winehouse*

Self-deception. Perhaps that is where it all starts. For example, the legal, technical definition of *prevarication*, a concept which is part of the semantic family of self-deception, refers to the committed crime of deliberately avoiding duties. What justification could a person have for neglecting his duties? A benign self-deceptive justification would certainly come to mind first. This is similar to the transgression that Searle (2001) describes, following the Greek idea of *akrasia*, as the weakness of not acting according to reasons that we give ourselves, this is to say, the weakness of the will doing something contrary to what reason directs us to do. Hasn't this happened to all of us at least once?

As will be discussed later, many authors agree that our mind operates with a structure designed for strategic self-deception. So, the weakness that Searle observes is only the tip of the iceberg of many layers that sometimes overlap. In this work I will address various layers of a conceptual family which I will put together under the notion of *generalized deception*. I will consider them in the context of the agent's intention while in the act of convincing or persuading someone, i.e., when we try to convince someone of something by means of arguments we do not really believe in, or when we know that the argument is false, or when we know our point of view (which we are communicating) is wrong. At the base of this behaviour there is a cognitive assumption which I endorse in this work, namely that cognition is directed at action, at designing its environment (Sterelny, 2012). Thus, self-deception, deception, lies and manipulation will be explained in line with the objective of an agent who prevaricates to achieve certain individual and social aims so as to manage his social and informative environment.

I will analyze recent hypotheses regarding this prevaricative structure of the mind, such as that of Kurzban (2012), who has proposed that it functions strategically in an evocative way for persuasive purposes. The central idea of this author is that the brain is composed of mutually inconsistent modules that contain contradictory beliefs. I can believe something that an unbiased person with the same information will not believe (for example, that I am an excellent driver, despite having crashed into a wall only moments prior). As Kurzban (2012) points out, “some part of the mind—some modules—are designed for functions other than being right because of certain strategic advantages” (p. 130). Biases are the clearest example of this designed cognitive structure for communicating strategically false beliefs. Trivers (2011) maintains a similar view, considering that in order to lie we hide or disguise relevant information, and particularly, we disguise our intention to deceive, which is the easiest to do by means of a self-deceptive mechanism.

Which consequences could this way of understanding the mental design have for argumentative activity? In this article I will examine a possible effect through the analysis of the social influence bias to show that this makes us produce arguments that are purely deceptive in order to maintain our preferred self-presentation. To further elaborate these consequences, I will proceed in the following way: in section 2, I will demarcate and characterize the behavioural family of what I’ve called *generalized deception*, specifically, self-deception, deception, lies and manipulation, and I will do so by combining analytic, psycho-cognitive and evolutionary perspectives, with special attention to self-deceptive behaviour, as this will offer a certain informative framework that can be applied to other phenomena; in section 3, I will focus on 2 examples of the social influence bias, taking the Asch experiment as the starting point to later analyze a humorous example. My conclusions appear to be pessimistic. It is clear to me that covering various phenomena in a single paper carries the risk of being incomplete, but I will do my utmost to resolve this problem. I hope that this is not a self-deceptive idea.

## **2. Generalized deception**

### **2.1. Self-deception: the advantage of designing ourselves with what is not true**

*Self-deception is one of the most pernicious mental behaviours*; this has always been believed by people, like Williams (2002), who do not really know how our mind works; a mind that works as it does only after a long and continuous evolutionary journey in search of its cognitive optimization.

As part of the literature shows (Kurzban, 2012; Trivers, 2011; von Hippel & Trivers, 2011), self-deception might have evolved to facilitate interactional deception, that is, to allow individuals to ignore the evidence of conscious deception that could reveal the intent to deceive. All forms of deceiving others (such as lying, ignoring the truth, equivocating the truth, casting doubt on the truth) are, in turn, forms of self-deception. What could be the advantages of having this possibility of mental and discursive behaviour, which clearly produces beliefs that are, at the least, inconsistent? The cited authors coincide in there being two additional reasons to behave self-deceptively, apart from hiding conscious deception: 1) reducing the normal cognitive cost associated with deception; and 2) it could minimize the punishment if the deception is discovered. An appropriate example given by von Hippel and Trivers (2011) is this: A man arrives home late because he got caught up in a conversation with a female colleague, and he is confronted by his wife who wants to know why he came home late. If he responds by saying that

his boss asked him to work overtime, he'd be lying to her; if he tells her that he was talking with a female colleague, he'd be honest. However, if he changes the topic—perhaps by commenting that the dinner smells good—and distracting his wife from the question at hand, it wouldn't then be clear whether he is lying or simply didn't answer. There is no definitive way of knowing whether he was deceiving his wife without knowing his intention for changing the topic or without knowing more about the relationship between him, his wife and his colleague.

There exist distinct types of self-deception depending on the process involved. One is produced by the strategic search for biased or tendentious information; another produced by biased or tendentious interpretative processes; and another one by the biased or tendentious memory process. What determines these types of self-deception is that people favour desired information over undesired information in order to accommodate their objectives or motivations. This view clearly defers from the standard position about self-deception, which maintains that the self-deceptive agent sustains two representations of reality, where the truth preferably is stored in the unconscious and falsehood in the conscious mind.

It follows from this that not all biases in information processing are self-deceptions, otherwise psychology of reasoning would be without an object of study since bias only reflects cognitive shortcuts, errors and differential weighing between prior and new information. It should then be insisted that self-deception proceeds when individuals favour desirable information over the undesirable in a way that reflects their purposes: if strengthening the self-image renders the individual more predisposed to look for negative information about himself, then we have evidence that previously avoiding negative information about himself has been motivated and as a result self-deception proceeds.

Self-deception, from an evolutionary point of view, is an answer to deception. The fact is that individuals fall short of the truth to obtain resources, which otherwise wouldn't be provided for them. Approximately half of the time of their lives, people deceive to obtain benefits for themselves (de Paulo & Kashy, 1998). Facing this not very auspicious scenario, self-deceptive behaviour then would have co-evolved with deception, since the selective pressure must have favoured the deceived agent to develop ways of detecting deception, and in turn the deceiver adding new ways of concealing, which is what self-deception does. The deceiver self-deceives to elude realization and detection. Von Hippel and Trivers (2011) sustain that self-deception offers an important tool in the co-evolutive fight to allow the person who is deceiving the opportunity to deceive without a cognitive burden, without conscious repression, without the growing nervousness and the other idiosyncratic indicators with which deception is perpetrated. When we deceive ourselves, we better deceive others.

Trivers (2011) points out that self-deception could be at the service of social progress. The benefit of self-deception goes far beyond *convincing* others of specific lies, for self-deception could help us to accumulate more social benefits by means of self-valuation (*self-inflation* or *self-enhancement*). Such as has been reported some time ago (Penrod & Cutler, 1995; Zarnoth & Snieke, 1997), trust determines social influence: If people are trusted, it is likely that their advice will be followed. The more people strengthen their self-image and improve their self-confidence, the greater the possibility of influencing others and being elected to execute important social roles. For this reason, self-valuation should be omnipresent in people and people should believe their own self-enhanced stories.

Self-deception emerges when we do a biased search for information, whether it be a lengthy or in-depth search, a selective search, or while practising selective attention. The first case is about avoiding further information that is incompatible with the desires or purposes of the

agent. It seems to be then that people don't tell themselves the whole truth, but rather a partial and preferable truth (Ditto y López, 1992); with respect to the selective search, one could say that although you do not know what is around the corner, some corners seem to offer more desirable information than others. Armitage, Harris, Hepton and Napper (2008) demonstrate that smokers were more prone to accepting anti-smoking brochures, if they had already self-affirmed reflections on their smoking habit; selective attention is related to codifying or paying attention selectively to some aspects of the available information that we prefer to be the truth in contexts where information is perceptually accesible and does not require to be discovered.

Evidently, a favourite form of self-deception is to interpret the world in a tendentious way, or in a biased way, by avoiding critical information that is incompatible with our initial position, etc. Without a doubt, the cognitive mechanism of forgetting what threatens our preferences helps; in fact, we can pay attention to undesirable information and even accept it in order to set a momentary state of affairs, but this does not guarantee that we are able, or want to, recuperate it later. In the same way, rationalization is one of the elemental strategies to self-deceive, and emerges when we avoid telling the truth about the real motives behind our behaviour in order to make it more socially acceptable, even when we remember accurately the wrongdoings of that behaviour. Less dignified, is the case of convincing oneself that the lie is true: this is the classic form of self-deception. This form of self-deception is often difficult to verify, since it is complicated to know if the person believes the lie that she is telling others, because the situation that motivates lying to oneself at the same time motivates lying to the others.<sup>1</sup>

Why do we self-deceive so much? So as to deceive without too much remorse. This creates some room for optimism. The person who applies an optimistic self-deception, according to von Hippel and Trivers (2011), seems to create a prophecy that by its very nature tends to be fulfilled, which is similar to the confidence in an eventual success leading optimists to persevere in the face of difficulties. As a result of these processes, optimists get more financial and social benefits than less optimistic individuals (Carver & Sneider, 2002; Solberg Nes & Segerstrom, 2006). It is also thought that self-deception is a useful tool in negotiating the social world; or it is a defensive strategy adopted by individuals who have difficulty in facing the threats of the world. Whatever the answer may be, there are high costs to pay, for example, the loss of honest information: it is suggested that some individuals have difficulty distinguishing the source of their memories from their actual memories, and are more susceptible to using false memories.

If to promote myself I have to use psychological propaganda, I would spare no means. This is one of the hypotheses which Kurzban (2012) offers, and in my opinion, it is one of the boldest elaborations to answer why we self-deceive, although, as we will see, Kurzban reserves the notion of self-deception for a more specific behaviour that conveniently administers self-representations which don't coincide with facts. If I want to, for example, make others believe that I have control over everything that happens to me (despite the fact that I am inundated relentlessly by events), I won't hesitate to communicate that that is the case. This, according to Kurzban, clearly shows what he calls to be strategically wrong. Kurzban's hypothesis (2012) is that if the thesis of the modularity of the mind is correct, then there exists no such thing as *me myself*, unitary and real, but rather a mental structure composed of a series of modules

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<sup>1</sup> There is, certainly, a series of deceptions caused by neurological damage (Trivers, 2011), such as that produced by corpus callosum agenesis, which happens when the corpus callosum is separated and leaves the two hemispheres unable to communicate directly; or that produced by anosognosia, which involves the denial of a pathology (Ramachandran, 2009).

coordinatively functioning without fear of inconsistency and contradiction (p. 98ff.). For the author, inconsistency and contradiction are, in fact, productive and advantageous achievements. Self-deception, the author reminds us, holds a paradox, since we know that something can deceive another thing, but in self-deception, does one's mind deceive one's mind?

It is a fact that there are contexts that invite self-deception, when, for example, we have to make some self-evaluation on matters without consensus: Is a good professor the one who knows how to communicate relevant information about a topic or the one who is quoted by her peers? Professors tend to evaluate themselves above average (I do it perfectly!), whatever the reason they give. What is strategically wrong about a professor who thinks in this way? This wrong behaviour is used to advance a better representation of myself than I think is the case, better because it gives me an advantage in the social world (communicating that I am an above average good professor). To be strategically wrong is socially advantageous for its persuasive potential: if all believe such a representation, then you will be *placed better*. Kurzban (2012) emphasizes that to be *placed better* means, from the point of view of an evolutionary perspective, that the mental design system must be explained and evaluated by virtue of their effects: being wrong strategically in some contexts sometimes produces good benefits (p. 101).

In 1989, the psychologist Shelley Taylor (1989) published a book in which she unfolded the conclusions of years of experimental studies on positive illusions. Positive illusions show that: 1) People think they have more favourable characteristics than they actually have, 2) that they have more control over what will happen to them than what they are actually able to control, and 3) that they are more optimistic about the future than facts can justify. The point, nevertheless, is not to think of self-deception in terms of positive benefits for our mental health, but simply in terms of the strategic benefits of being wrong. The sad dimension of this picture, if anyone wants to see it that way, is that self-deception has a robust recursive structure: we think that we are better than the average because (we think that) we are not biased in thinking that we are better than the average.

The specific feature of self-deception for Kurzban (2012), nevertheless, is the simultaneous generation in the brain of at least two representations of mutually contradictory beliefs. Loyal to a naturalist position, Kurzban avoids using the notion of "mind" to reduce the temptation of assimilating the idea of a unitary "self" contained in the mind. This position differs from the positive illusions angle, since in the latter there is generally only one, obviously unjustified, positive belief about a situation. The thesis is that if we have a unitary model of the mind, then believing two contradictory things is problematic. The message is not to accept that two mutually contradictory beliefs kept in the mind is unproblematic because it has social benefits, but to distinguish it as a type of design with a persuasive purpose, which tries to achieve a certain consequence in the surrounding world of the agent. Viewing the mind from a modular perspective, the idea is that some of the modules are occupied by true representations or beliefs, and others by false ones. It is a matter of context and goals of the agent which one imposes on the other. If the agent believes that it is a good strategy to maintain mutually contradicting beliefs and to constantly communicate the one which is most convenient for him (i.e., that he is a really good professor!), in the long run, this will cause him damage. Honesty, at the end of the day, is the best strategy.

## 2.2. Deception

Thus we self-deceive, we lie to ourselves, but Kurzban (2012) helps us to understand that this occurs inside the multi-modular brain, in which the modules are coordinated to produce an effect in the world that facilitates us with some kind of social success.

How does the mechanism of self-deception differ from the mechanism of deception? Apart from deception obviously referring to another person, or to a group, deception violates an almost universal moral command of avoiding doing to others what we wouldn't wish to be done to us... unless, of course, we like to be cheated and being lied to.

Deception is often seen as a prototype of damage. Yet there are deceptions which after an initially mild damage, could produce further good; this would be the parallel case of the benevolent lie. However, deception has some characteristics which make it, from an analytic point of view, completely distinct to other phenomena. When a professional football player on the attack moves his waist in a certain direction, the defence automatically follows him, but then the attacker takes the opposite direction, it could be said that, technically, he has deceived the defence. The deception occurs when it is induced or implied to be believed false. In deception, what is false is not said, and sadly for the deceived agent, the responsibilities of the consequences are transferred to the victim. So, the deceiver, certainly has the burden of the responsibility of concealing the actual state of affairs, but he who accepts the implication shows a lack of epistemic vigilance (Sperber et al., 2010). About this last feature of deception, D'Agostini (2014) correctly wonders in what sense deception is less severe, from a moral point of view, than directly saying something false, that is—lying.

Catholicism (through Saint Augustine in particular) holds the doctrine that a false statement is worse than a false implication, and that the commitment to *the spoken word* is not extended to its consequences. The first reason is weak, and the second comes from a bad pragmatic analysis. Moving full responsibility to the victim, in fact, turns the deceiver into someone committing double harm: she implies what is false, and does so knowingly; on the other hand, if it were certain that the speaker does not commit to the consequences of what she said, then many speech acts could not exist, such as promises.

Deception, nonetheless, has clear adaptive advantages, and it is found in all kinds of species, in particular in those that move in highly socialized environments. As Cheney and Seyfarth (1990) predicted, in those species deception evolved when misleading cues became more subtle and less repeated, the only way in which deception could have become a stable evolutionary strategy. Trivers (2011), along a similar vein, sustains that deception sharpens mental capacity: “We can then say that deception generates evolutionary intelligence in both rival parts, although more probably in the part that observes” (p. 37). Camouflaging, surprising, deceiving, appearing to be deceived, are behaviours of an evolutive game that has produced the trivial virtue of these behaviours, and more often than not, unconscious, automatic or unintentional. But precisely this apparent unconsciousness pushes toward self-deception, that is, as has been previously stated, self-deception is the evolutive achievement of reducing the cognitive burden of undertaking the deception.

Deception differs from lying because it can be carried out with or without linguistic material, while lying occurs only through a linguistic act. Deception, when it is linguistic, operates with assumptions, thereby activating a deductive protocol (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) or an inferential mental model (Johnson-Laird, 2008) that is insincere—or does not coincide with reality—and, for this reason, drives the deceived agent to make mistakes, probably causing her

some kind of damage. The deceiver could act, perhaps, without bad intentions and the deceived agent perhaps could act without completely noticing the slyness. In deception there is always an invitation for doubt.

Some literature, from the analysis of discourse, makes stark distinctions, cataloguing deception as a synonym for manipulation (Oswald, 2014). As will become apparent, this is an evident analytical error; other authors within discourse analysis, indicate that deception has manipulation among its possibilities (Blass, 2005; Galasinski, 2000), but deception is sometimes a sufficient condition for manipulation, but not a necessary condition.

To finish this section, it is important first to recall an essential fact in order to understand the ontogeny of deception; and secondly, to note that the discursive production of deception doesn't necessarily go hand in hand with the intention of deception. With regard to the first, as Rochat (2014) emphasizes well, the ability to deceive—or rather the production of non-verbal deception signs—starts in childhood around 21 months of age, long before the development of explicit mind theory and the understanding of false beliefs, when we recognize ourselves as individuals and begin consciously to share with the other. To be able to do this we need to have the ability to perform a convenient self-presentation in front of others. This coincides with the time to play with assumptions, imaginary worlds and beings of all kinds (Rochat, 2014, p. 221). Regarding the intention of deception and the discursive production thereof, it is interesting to wonder which frame we apply when this happens, to wonder whether the agent uses deception to have fun, to inform (or misinform), or to solve a problem, just to mention a few possible frames. For example, in the context of solving a problem, McCornack et al. (2014) suggest the following:

Applying opportunistic problem-solving models to deception suggests intriguing possibilities related to the reasoning processes underlying deceptive discourse production (McCornack, 1997)... As Hovy (1990) elaborates, “We usually begin to speak before we have planned out a full utterance, and then proceed while performing certain planning tasks” (p. 166). Consider what this means for deception. The prevailing model of deceptive discourse production presumes a top-down, linear-sequential, stepwise process: people decide a priori to lie, cognitively construct a deceptive message, and then present this message as verbal and nonverbal behavior. In contrast, an opportunistic problem-solving model of deception suggests that we often begin speaking before any intent to deceive exists, and before such discourse actually becomes deceptive. While we are speaking (and streaming activated, relevant, truthful information from memory to speech production), we often opt “on the fly” to delete relevant information or include false information that then renders our discourse—mid-utterance—functionally deceptive. Why? Because, while we are speaking, we continue to calculate initial-state/end-state discrepancies. And as new truthful information is activated in memory and marked as relevant for disclosure, if this information widens (rather than narrows) these discrepancies, we'll respond by deleting or distorting it. (p. 355)

The position of these authors is challenging, and I will come back to this later. For now, it is worth noting that they explicitly sustain that often we begin to talk even before the intention of deception exists, and that in the course of the discursive production we start to plan, according to



the information we recover from memory, deleting or distorting it, forming a functionally deceptive discourse along the way.

### 2.3. Lies

Lying is the vilest prevaricative act. We emphasize this without scruples, despite the fact that we lie more than once a day, according to classic studies on the subject (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Hample, 1980), and we do it for different reasons (Levine et al., 2010).

I will follow the definition of the lie proposed by D'Agostini (2014): lying is a performed linguistic act with the purpose of making others believe as true what is known to be false (p. 65). D'Agostini (2014) adds that we should be careful not to confuse lying with the mistake of someone saying something false without knowing the truth, a confusion that could occur if we follow the logicians' indications of the truth. For the latter, untruth is the truth of the denial, hence: if "the cat is on the chair" is not true, then it is true that "the cat is not on the chair". This is different from "all scholars have written a good book", which is an obvious untruth, despite the fact that I only know scholars who have written good books, all said in good faith. On the other hand, the truth could be transmitted by saying only untruths. This last case happens to the inveterate mythomaniac, who, when he has the intention of telling the truth for once, knows that since people know him and his reputation as a liar, says false things to be sure that they will believe the contrary, which is the truth.

It seems to be that the linguistic act of lying becomes a lie when the agent's intention of lying is involved. This, in turn, implies three aspects: 1. That an agent believes something contrary to what is said, 2. That the agent has a certain set of beliefs, and 3. That the agent consciously inflicts some kind of damage on others. With regard to the first two aspects, a useful concept to understand the problem is the notion of the *epistemic standard*. This notion allows us to appreciate that the liar moves in a zone of vague beliefs. Hence, the liar does not need to totally believe in the opposite of what has been said, nor is it necessary that the receiver completely believes what is sustained. The liar may only be looking for a determined action of the listener caused by the linguistic stimulation (independent of whether her epistemic state has changed). With respect to the awareness of damage potentially provoked, it is necessary that the agent knows for certain that what is said has bad consequences, which empirically is an uncertain fact.

With regard to the pious lie (the favoured justification of religious believers of all faiths), which tends to be thought of as a separate case, the given definition of a lie applies without a doubt, since it converges the properties indicated, and the lack of transparency is clear, including when the objective is altruistic. It is highly likely that this type of lying is more forgivable than others, because the damage is temporary and the positive outcome might endure.

What links self-deception to deception and lies is the cognitive effort to obtain more behavioural resources to achieve certain goals when transparent, truthful, honest and benevolent behaviour is not enough. This has been a communal co-evolutionary achievement between the deceiver and the deceived. As Levine et al. (2010) sustain, we deceive to maintain a certain reputation, to manage social relations, get advantages from a social exchange (particularly when we know that the exchange will be only once), to avoid conflicts, and often to control situations (p. 272).

#### 2.4. Manipulation: towards an axiology of manipulative discourse

The word manipulation has a bad reputation. Not even when joking could it be said that manipulation is at play during a given interaction. Including from an academic point of view (discourse analysis), manipulations are revealed when they go against nationalist or cultural feelings of the author of the analysis (Lihua, 2012). As can be imagined, often the analyses are centred on political phenomena, precisely because their actors tend to be accused of manipulations and where, worthy of further study, discourse analysts tend to see the perfect corpus.<sup>2</sup> Other authors take for granted the definition of manipulation (Littlefield, 2013) and operate by default, practically without offering any further explanation.

However, as Maillat and Oswald (2009, 2011; Oswald, 2014)<sup>3</sup> have emphasized, critical-discourse analysis does not have a definition that accounts for all the aspects involved in a manipulative exchange, and fails because it offers only essentialist distinctions. For these authors, manipulation can be defined as a cognitive phenomenon in which a speaker diverts access to critical information within the context of selection, while it could increase the accessibility to information suitable for the speaker's goal to make her message accepted by the listener. According to a cognitive-pragmatist vision, these authors do not need to refer to features such as the manipulative intention of the agent, since what matters is the way in which the information processing functions (including cognitive biases, dual mind system, heuristic processes, etc.). Sincerity, which critical discourse analysts embrace, is of little importance to them because there are true yet manipulative statements, such as for example "the captain hasn't arrived drunk today". But at this point, Maillat and Oswald (2009; 2011) are confused, because the statement is ironic, and irony has its own pragmatic game rules; furthermore, they consider the existence of virtuous manipulations, like the case of Santa Claus or similar ones. When they say that the intention or interest of the speaker does not have analytical importance, they have an incomplete approach to the problem, because manipulation should also be analyzed from the point of view of the effects and from the point of view of the personality of the speaker (more on this later). These authors see that manipulation takes advantage of, and exploits, a cognitive dynamic: it is about restrictive communication that plays with the selection of contextual assumptions, that rests on the same contextual selection procedures as the "normal" statement cases. It seems to be, from this point of view, that now manipulation could enjoy a better reputation.

But manipulation is what it is (whoever deals with it gains little) because it contains features of the family we have called *generalized deception*: self-deception (as in the case of supposedly altruistic manipulation), deceptions (concealment, implication of false belief) and lies (saying the contrary of what one thinks); and uses all of them to exploit potential errors where the structural mental design could fail. The core of manipulative behaviour is, without doubt, the intention of the manipulator, because she is the one who wants to influence the action of an audience for her own benefit, directly or indirectly.

On this matter, I coincide with D'Agostini's (2014) perspective, when she sustains that "manipulation ... operates by means of a series of semi-truths or alleged truths which are said, [true] able to influence the beliefs of others, to push them to think and act in a manner contrary to their interests, or harmful to themselves and others, and would never be adopted outside of the system of manipulation" (p. 97). What is shared by deception and manipulation is that the

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<sup>2</sup> Note, for example, Chilton (2005), van Dijk (1994; 2005; 2006), or the analysis of Blass (2005).

<sup>3</sup> The original work on cognitive manipulation pragmatically viewed is probably Saussure (2005).

consequences or responsibilities of the interaction are on the victim's side (I am the one who accepts the implication in a deception, and I am also the one who acts erroneously in the manipulation). Whereas when I lie I am not free to believe; one is the victim of direct insincerity. It is clear then that the liar-manipulator is simply, on an axiological scale, the darkest member of the family of generalized deception. Manipulation, as if it weren't enough, holds another characteristic which makes it particularly damaging: its consequences are continuous, the manipulated agent may live permanently in this situation, unless things become completely transparent, in which case the manipulator can still deny any responsibility or participation.<sup>4</sup>

Are we only talking about the manipulator exploiting the possibilities of an error of a mind strategically prone to bias (Kurzban, 2012)? Or also about a certain type of psychology—intentionally—designed for manipulation? The discourse analyst, with a picture of the phenomenon half-revealed, would tend to opt for the first alternative; an effort to understand all the cognitive dimensions of the problem should also lean towards the content of the second question. There is a growing bibliography which suggests, after various experimental studies, the existence of a type of Machiavellian manipulative profile (Austin, Farrelly, Black, & Moore, 2007; Bagozzi et al., 2013; Lyons, Caldwell, & Schultz, 2010).

In Bereczkei's works (2015; Bereczkei & Birkas, 2014) one of the most light-shedding proposals on the matter can be found. In their approximation, experimental data from Trust Games and Public Good Games are combined with information from cerebral analyses (fMRI), and with quantitative and qualitative psychological studies. Although the ideas of this approximation are still under further investigation, it has been determined that people who take advantage of others through manipulation are capable of flexibly adapting to an ever-changing social environment, they have superior cognitive capacities relative to an efficient response to the service of their interest facing the behaviour of others, and they demonstrate specific brain activations linked to the processes of decision making. Manipulators are different from psychopaths, for example, in that the latter show a rigid short-range behaviour. Machiavellism is a strategy of social behaviour to manipulate others for personal benefits (Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996). In general, these behavioural and psychological profiles have as their core characteristic the fact that they see human interactions as deceptive and have a cynical view of human nature (seeing others as weak and unreliable) and undermine moral conventionality (Hawley, 2006). They can distance themselves from moral principles, particularly in situations that offer material rewards for breaking rules. As Bereczkei (2015) summarizes, these people are highly emotionally unstable, contrary to what old literature considered them to be: cold-blooded and calculating. But the manipulator is rather eminently flexible and constantly evaluates the social situation and those involved (p. 24). It has been concluded (Bereczkei & Czibor, 2014), after Public Good Games experiments, that they are more sensitive to situational factors and widely take into account the behaviour of their fellows, and based on those evaluations the possible success of the exploitation of others.

Taking into account the results of multiple investigations with the dual mind theory (Evans & Stanovich, 2013), Bereczkei (2015) and his colleagues propose that Machiavellians have specialized in planning cognitive domains that contain both types of thinking (automatic and reflexive). They specifically state that they have a high capacity for permanent monitoring of the other (although they are weak in mindreading), processing

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<sup>4</sup> D'Agostini (2014) also analyzes the paradigmatic political manipulation tactic: *spin doctoring*, which is the distortion of facts by means of actual facts; the most extreme case is meta-manipulation, which consists of a manipulation to destroy a manipulation, i.e., it is the pretended unmasking of alleged lies ('complot') (p. 105).

characteristics and traits of people to adjust their behaviour accordingly. Berezkei (2015) suggests a heuristic rule to interpret this trait of manipulators: “Start with a relatively low investment, keep watching what the others are doing, and do not exceed the others’ contributions over the transaction” (p. 27). Similarly, they are guided by objectives or tasks, rather than an orientation towards agreement with people. The author summarizes this as follows:

They are not concerned about other people beyond their own self-interest. Instead, they steadily proceed on their own route and bother neither with their partner’s nor their own feelings. It is not surprising that one of their main personality characteristics is a high level of persistence that is unique to individuals who are ambitious, strive for higher accomplishments, and tend to intensify their efforts in response to anticipated reward (Berezkei & Czibor, 2014). The related cognitive algorithm says: ‘Choose the strategy that is supposed to be efficient and keep it against the disturbing and obstructive environmental effects’. I think, this rule would not be used by psychopaths who are mainly characterized by immediate gratification, impulsivity, and short-term thinking, instead of task orientation and long-term thinking (Jones & Paulhus, 2010)...The majority of experts in the field agree that one of the Machiavellians’ most characteristic features is reward seeking (Birkás, Csathó, Gács, & Berezkei, 2015; Jones & Paulhus, 2009; Wilson et al., 1996)... In certain circumstances they could achieve their goal by acquiring an immediate reward, but in other conditions they use indirect tactics, and get rewarded via a long-run operation, (e.g. via pretend altruism). Especially difficult situations may be for them a high-risk social environment where the others’ behavior is unpredictable and, therefore, the acquisition of reward is uncertain. In this case, an appropriate cognitive rule would be the following: ‘Strive for getting the reward at any moment when the benefit outweighs the risk associated with its acquisition’. (Berezkei, 2015, p. 28)

The most painfully striking characteristic of the Machiavellian manipulators is their inhibition in regard to cooperative impulses. The heuristic that Berezkei (2015) incorporates here is: Don’t follow the immediate and pre-emptive impulses that could hinder the acquirement of greater benefit. They tend to neglect their impulses in situations of justice (or equality of conditions), and maintain their self-oriented impulses in unfair situations. Armed with this mental equipment, the Machiavellian manipulator elects the victim who involves the least cost and lowest risk to ensure the greatest profit.

Where does this psychological profile originate from? The answer, although still general, confirms a daily experience:

A more recent study, using a retrospective parental care questionnaire, revealed that low maternal care led to the development of Machiavellianism via the fearful attachment as a possible mediating factor (Jonason, Lyons, & Bethell, 2014). It is not surprising, then, that the young Machiavellians were characterized by distrust, dishonesty, and cynicism. They also lacked empathy and a faith in human benevolence (McIllwain, 2003; Slaughter, 2011; Sutton & Keogh, 2000 )... Similarly, in an environment where mutual distrust and communication problems prevail, they will learn to permanently monitor others in order to adjust their

behavior to the demands of the family environment. They may also develop a capability of searching for rewards in the hope of getting resources in a poor and unpredictable environment during childhood, and inhibiting their immediate social-emotional responses to avoid costly and unbeneficial interpersonal relationships. (Berezkei, 2015, p. 29)

As highlighted above, what Sperber et al. (2010) call epistemic vigilance (to check more carefully, for example, the content that has been received in virtue of a certain mistrust of the source emitting the message) should be continuously activated in the context of general doubt, for the purpose of auscultating Machiavellian manipulators because they are by default, as the quote shows, systematically monitoring in order to take advantage of the opportunity and the potential victim.

Considering the preceding discussion, I propose the following definition of manipulation: the linguistic ongoing act that intentionally uses at some point in the interaction a certain type of self-deception, deception and/or lie, to covertly achieve a goal that represents a loss for the immediate recipient or for a subsequent recipient. Manipulation, as a linguistic act, finishes when it is discovered, but this does not assure, obviously, that the consequences stop being produced. An example of this is the use of malicious rumours (Sunstein, 2014).

The following schematic representation tries to systematize an axiology of manipulation that contains the basic elements of its manifestation:

**Fig. 1. Manipulation Axiology**

Scenarios	Role and Result <b>S</b> (Speaker)	Role and Result <b>R<sub>1</sub></b> (Recipient)	Role and Result <b>R<sub>n</sub></b> (Recipient)	Prototypical Case
<b>A</b> <i>Scenario classic self-manipulation</i>	+	-	-	<b>S</b> damages <b>R<sub>1</sub></b> and <b>R<sub>n</sub></b> for her own benefit.  <i>Prototypical Case:</i> A politician hides facts, deceives or lies in discourse X to get <b>R<sub>1</sub></b> 's vote, damaging <b>R<sub>n</sub></b> as well (who is not a direct recipient of the speech).
<b>B</b> <i>Scenario of altruistic manipulation with sacrifice</i>	+	-	+	<b>S</b> damages <b>R<sub>1</sub></b> , deceiving her or lying to her, for a posterior good for <b>R<sub>n</sub></b> .  <i>Example:</i> Justification for a war, a revolution. <b>S</b> demands a sacrifice from <b>R<sub>1</sub></b> to benefit the community <b>R<sub>n</sub></b> .
<b>C</b> <i>Scenario of manipulative complicity</i>	+	+	-	<b>S</b> hides information and her ulterior objective from <b>R<sub>1</sub></b> , without inflicting damage on her but damaging <b>R<sub>n</sub></b> .  <i>Example:</i> The manipulative rumour put forward by <b>S</b> that does not damage <b>R<sub>1</sub></b> directly but damages the community ( <b>R<sub>n</sub></b> ).  The example of the bank run in which <b>R<sub>1</sub></b> takes out and protects her savings is not damaging but it is for the

				economy as a whole ( $R_n$ ) because it produces distrust in the investors.
<i>D</i> <i>Scenario of altruistic manipulation</i>	+ (-)	+	+	<b>S</b> self-deceives and deceives by concealing information and her ulterior objective from $R_1$ for $R_1$ 's, supposed, benefit and, in a subsidiary way, the whole community ( $R_n$ ) benefits.  <i>Example: Santa Claus (Traditions in general?)</i>

Scenario A (prototypical manipulation with most damage), until D (altruistic manipulation); S: speaker;  $R_1$ : direct or immediate recipient;  $R_n$ : indirect or ulterior recipient; + and -, benefit and damage respectively.

In all the scenarios, **S** manipulates the discourse to manipulate the recipient, using self-deception, deception or lies. This manipulative axiology is certainly not exempt from problems. One of the problems appears in scenario **A**, because it is difficult to know and evaluate more or less objectively the final or total effects of the manipulation in  $R_n$ , since time could change the understanding of the facts and what was said in order to decide whether the actions and hidden goals of **S** inflict damage. In scenario **D**, self-deception is typically observed because it is not a justification of the alleged benefits for  $R_1$  and  $R_n$  to commit a deception. **S** self-deceives, believing that the results liberate her from expressing a lie or falsehood.

### 3. Social influence bias: Between benefits and damages

The contemporary concept of the *social influence bias* has *conformity* and *social pressure* as background concepts. We should keep this in mind, even at an intuitive level, because conformity and social pressure are the basic forces underlying this bias. According to a broad definition, bias is a pattern of behaviour that shows some distortion when processing information from the outside world, and one of its consequences is that it makes us emit inaccurate or tendentious judgements. As for social, this bias is attributional, that is, it affects our collective interaction.<sup>5</sup> Theoretically, cognitive and attributional biases should be in line with the tendency to self-deceive, deceive, lie and manipulate, because all these behaviours provide us with benefits when managing our emotional state, our opinions about the world and others, and interactions, in the most low-cost way from the point of view of cognitive energy, and in the fastest way from the point of view of social interactions. In the two examples below the concepts previously discussed can be observed in play.

#### 3.1. Asch's experiment: Self-Deception well justified?

The simple and extraordinary experiment that Solomon Asch carried out in 1951 is classic within the psychology of reasoning. It brings together eight people who concur in performing a task of perception. Seven of them are aware that everything is fake, that is, the experiment does not measure perceptual ability, but the behaviour of one single subject (a young male student) in terms of whether it is possible to form an opinion contrary to the majority. A sheet of paper is shown to the group with four lines different in size, the line separate from the other three is the

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<sup>5</sup> Here is not the place to detail the discussion of the concepts of limited rationality, ecological rationality, social rationality and the dual mind theory, to understand the conceptual disagreements between descriptive and normative social understanding of perceptual errors and decision-making bias. For an updated summary of part of this discussion, see for example Evans (2009; 2010; 2011), Frankish (2009), Gigerenzer (2008; 2010).

reference line. The experiment subjects must compare the lines and say which of the three is identical in size to the reference line. To give an *impression of truth*, in the first two rounds the seven *confederates* give the right answer, but in the third round they start to fail consistently, and there the subject under experiment begins to respond in accordance with them.<sup>6</sup> According to Asch's reported results (1951; 1955; 1956), there were a considerable amount of subjects that conformed to what the group said, 36.8%.

What is important for this work is the type of response given by the subjects in the experiment once they were interviewed, after it was confessed that they had been the victim of manipulation, and expressed their opinions about *their* behaviour once the fake experimental context was disclosed. In the interviews, in accordance with Asch (1951), it was evident that some always trusted their correct answer contrary to the majority, but still held that "*I do not deny that at times I had the feeling: 'to go with it, I'll go along with the rest'*" (p. 182); while the subject who followed the group said that "*I suspected about the middle—but tried to push it out of my mind*" (p. 182). Among those who followed the group, the interviews showed at least three types of justifications: 1) some thought that the confederates were correct without being conscious that they gave, in fact, incorrect answers; Asch (1951) called this behaviour and justification, *perception distortion*; 2) other subjects pointed out that after various answers they concluded that they were misinterpreting the stimulus and that the majority must be right; Asch called this behaviour and justification, *judgement distortion*; 3) in the group of those who only rarely followed the majority, the justification was that they knew that they gave the right answer, but they followed the majority because they simply did not want to be seen as displaying deviant behaviour from the majority; Asch (1951) called this last case *distortion of action*.

What do these justifications tell us with regard to the combination of persuasion and generalized deception? Various things. Firstly, and from a methodological point of view, that the manipulative experiment itself reveals how natural the practice is of reproducing self-deception with ulterior benefits (scenario B in our axiology), whose second-order justification is the scientific need; remember that this type of experiment is still repeated today in psychology departments across the globe. The question in this context would be: Can it be expected that a deceptive (experimental) artificial environment promotes, as a response, the self-deceptive behaviour of the participants?; secondly, and following Bereczkei's (2015) reflection, can it be that the social influence bias causes a heuristic which functions as an argumentative (toulminian) warrant: *although the answer of the majority may be incorrect, your conformity is justified by the minor necessity to contradict the group*. For contexts that are trivial and artificial, such as that of the experiment, it is reasonable to expect that we behave ourselves in accordance with the group: the incentive is to remain obedient in front of the pack (optimized social cognitive skill).

But in non-trivial contexts, the same tends to happen. Sunstein (2015) reports the case in the American political, financial and musical world. The political example is that no one opposes Kennedy's decision, supported by the White House's oldest council group, to invade Cuba, despite there being many good reasons to seek a diplomatic resolution, as evidenced by a young advisor—many years later—who participated in these meetings and did not raise his voice for fear of dissent from the group of veterans and to be labelled as a softie. So that in situations of social asymmetry, the self-imposed silence is exacerbated by pressure and social influence. In music, we tend to download music downloaded by others. The phenomenon known as *Cascade* is widely seen in the financial and economic world, in all types of business: we tend to support, follow and even uphold established public arguments, ignoring our previous knowledge on the

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<sup>6</sup> The experiment has been carried out with many variations until today, and Asch himself also used many variations.

subject, deceiving ourselves without serious remorse and lying without hesitation, just to converge with the rest. Asch's (1951) experiment, such as these last examples show, makes clear that the group's reason is a justified reason to deceive ourselves.

### 3.2. Self-deception, deception and lies in humour

José Sánchez Mota is a Spanish comedian who has been successful for many years on Spanish TV. His programmes combine specific sketches with different characters. As a good comedian would have it, his *leitmotifs* are to ridicule and make fun of daily stupidities, particularly those pertinent to Spanish culture, but also to Iberian culture (and probably beyond). In 2015, he launched a series of sketches which always started with the protagonist's self-deceptive doubt. Facing the problems, adventures and misadventures that could come about in the plot and the sketch's specific interaction, the protagonist points out: *it could be no... but if yes... this is what worries me, the if yes*. It also has the opposite value at times: *yes, yes... but if not...*

The part that concerns me starts with the casual encounter between the protagonist, who carries papers in his hands, and a new female neighbour who has recently moved to the neighbourhood. She is young, attractive and sure of herself. He drops his papers, and the new neighbour apologizes, to which Mota responds: *no, no, nothing happened* (don't worry), while both bend over to collect the papers. Once they are standing straight again, there is an exchange of looks which couldn't be said to hold anything special, but Mota looking at the camera, reacts by saying: *Here there was something happening... See that, maybe not, but if yes.*<sup>7</sup>

It is true that from the point of view of probabilities, the protagonist might have positive expectations about the girl, there might have been a hint of a possible advantage for him, but the humorous effect is precisely created by the distance between the desire of an unattractive older man and the desire of a young woman. Facing the evident reality, the individual self-deceives and says: *a ver que a lo mejor no, pero y si sí* (let's see, maybe not, but if yes). Trivers (2011) relates the same case of self-deception. It happened when he was walking with one of his Ph.D. students while they were having an intellectual and inspired conversation with what he understood to be mild insinuations, but as they passed by a window that reflected his image, he realized the stark reality: an 80-year old man bent over, walking slowly. There Trivers (2011) realizes the self-deception that pushes his mind, making him believe that he is an interesting and attractive man for a romantic conquest, but who only exists in his glorious mental self-image. It is the strategic mistake of which Kurzban (2012) speaks.

The dialogue between Mota and his neighbour continues. They introduce themselves (her name is Marga) and they point out the apartments where they live. He looks at the camera and asks: *but with or without a boyfriend...* but in the actual dialogue, he asks this less directly, and she replies that her relationship is over, information which Mota uses to confirm his self-deception saying meta-reflexively in an ironic way directly to the camera: *and me worried, look how I am trembling...*

The young woman is moving her house, so Mota offers his help, and says to the camera: *let's see, these are extra hours that one puts in with the intention of sending the invoice* [metaphor to refer to paying the favour back in sexual terms], *which maybe they won't pay, but if yes if yes...* The ridiculousness is completed via self-deception when the scene is resumed with Mota carting furniture and admitting in front of the camera: *yes I am being ridiculous, but if not?*. Then he pretends to be a strong man and lifts a box which weighs 65 kilograms, and the

<sup>7</sup> The sketch can be seen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSW-gRp0TRY>



dialogue is: (she) *Are you okay, is it too heavy?*, (he) *No, no, no*; she says: *hey, thanks a lot, you're a sweetheart*; to which he looks at the camera and says: *yes, yes, don't say no, here yes...* Then she asks: *Hey, so are you married or...?* Before responding, Mota looks at the camera and says: *we have to get out of this in any possible way...* His response to the young woman is *yes, but a little...* After which he looks at the camera and says: *what I said was a small stupid thing...* With this final twist, many things are observed: That self-deception is helped by deception, he tells the truth (that he's married), but tries to imply another interpretation with a weird quantification applied to the adjective (married, but only a little!), which creates an oxymoron: Marriage cannot be quantified; and admitting while looking at the camera that he said something stupid, it becomes manipulation scenario type A: damage to R<sub>1</sub> (the girl) and R<sub>n</sub> (his wife).

Mota's telephone rings during this exchange, he leaves the heavy box of books on the ground, he answers his wife's call telling her that he can't speak and that he will call her in five minutes. It's similar to the example given above with regard to the husband who stayed after work in his office having a conversation with a (female) colleague: Mota doesn't lie, but he does not tell the truth either, that he's helping his new and attractive neighbour to move. But unfortunately, his wife appears seconds later, and here begins the ridiculousness to which we are exposed when we behave with self-deceptions, deceptions and manipulations. The sitcom is fed with new lies and deceptions. The complete dialogue is:

Wife: Jose?

Mota: Paula.

Mota: It's just that... well... I hung up on you, no... it's just that I'm helping our neighbour here to carry some boxes...

Marga: Hello, how are you? I'm Marga [*extends her hand to introduce herself*], the new neighbour...

Wife: I'm Jose's wife [*and she doesn't extend her hand*]...

Mota: Yes, yes, she is known as my wife... well now, here Marga's boxes, this is Paula, my wife [*presenting the boxes to his wife*]... [*the three laugh falsely*]

Wife: Aren't you funny?

Mota: Ehm?... [*looks closely at the camera and says*] well, let's see here, why should I feel bad? For something I haven't done, what could I be accused of?, Of pre-cheating, at the most, and that, where would it take us? Compared to the immensity of the ocean, what is it?, an insignificant thing, pre-cheating, OK, will you send someone to jail for that?, let's see, I would have done it, yes, but if not... [*he starts talking to his wife again*]: darling, I was helping her mainly because the doctor told me to carry heavy things now and then, because that helps your vertebral spine which....

Wife: ... which you now have totally destroyed.

Mota: [*looks at the camera*], she got me, she got me in the end, I say this so many times [*that his back is totally destroyed*] ... [*the new neighbour is watching the situation without demonstrating anything in particular, after which Mota concludes*]... all right, yes, the woman who is going to be my lover is annoyed because she caught me pre-cheating on her with my wife... be careful... be careful...

In this humorous piece, one can observe with clarity what McCornack et al. (2014) point out about the fact that we generate deceptions while the problems are happening in order to fix them online, and that we think or plan deceptions while we are producing discourse. We speak first and then we notice the deception. At the same time, Mota's wife refines her epistemic vigilance, every second distrusting Mota a little more. Mota begins to reveal his Machiavellian profile (Bereczkei, 2015). When some sincerity is expected (when his wife reveals his painful behaviour), Mota begins a self-deception of the second order, that is, he starts to justify his behaviour, towards the new neighbour, with bad reasons to sustain that his behaviour actually is not a problem; these very same reasons show that Mota is lying to himself.

In addition, the example allows us to see, with regard to the relationship between generalized deception and persuasion, that the efforts to resolve argumentative problems in deceptive contexts, push the agent in such a way (nervousness imposes a cognitive burden that minimizes care and attention in parallel cognitive tasks) that makes him use argumentative strategies in a defective way (incorrect analogies: *this compared to the greatness of the ocean. What is it? An insignificance*). It seems to be then that in a generalized deception context the possibility of giving bad reasons is increased.

Why is this case also an example of the way social influence bias works? Maybe the answer lies in the continuation of the sketch when a new participant is introduced, a handsome young man who also lives in the neighbourhood. He introduces himself to the group (Mota, Paula and Marga), and also offers his help to the new young attractive neighbour. His behaviour, like that of Mota, is peer behaviour that mutually influences and pressures its cultural ecology and that has non-trivial consequences. The sketch finishes with Mota admitting that he got more than he bargained for; which apparently means that the Machiavellian manipulator finally is defeated. But, his last words are: *yes, I got more than I bargained for... and I got out... in the end nothing... but if yes, if yes!!!!*

#### 4. Conclusions

While I was writing this paper, manipulation scandals in commerce were made public in Chile. For many years, businesses dealing in chickens, toilet paper, medicine, groceries, clothing (and it seems the list continues), colluded—fixing prices between themselves without having the competitive free market function as such. In the international arena, it was also revealed in 2015 that the German company Volkswagen physically manipulated the software to measure the petrol of their cars, while they simultaneously manipulated the news until they could no longer stop the investigations in the United States which revealed this manipulation.

What do both manipulations have in common? According to two Nobel Prize laureates in economics, Akerlof and Shiller (2015), manipulations and deceptions in the global political and economic system have in common the cheating behaviour at the heart of its own operative logic—as its primary force to push market renovation. Deception in the current economy, according to the authors, is in turn based on the old liberal economic belief of the market's balance: if I don't deceive you, someone else will.

So evidently, we shouldn't only consider mental biases, discursive forms and personality types to understand self-deception, deception, lies and manipulations, but also the cultural practices and contexts where generalized deception is favoured by our narrative necessity: There is always a deceptively presented product which comes to fill a need that does not exist. The recipe, according to Akerlof and Shiller to change the state of affairs is to rewrite our mental

frameworks. Perhaps, the recipe of someone working on cognition and argumentation theory would be to have the liar justify himself and, for this reason, make a fool of himself.

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