



THE EVOLUTION AND PSYCHOLOGY  
OF SELF-DECEPTION  
WILLIAM VON HIPPEL

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Bill von Hippel is Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Queensland, Australia. His research activities have been primarily focused on the interplay of conscious and unconscious processes in stereotyping and prejudice and on the impact of age-related atrophy of the frontal lobes on social behavior in older adults. He has recently become interested in evolutionary psychology, and his project at Wiko is an outgrowth of this interest. Bill was born in the USA, and after receiving his B.A. at Yale University and his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, he taught at Ohio State University for a dozen years. He then taught at the University of New South Wales, in Sydney, for five years before moving to the University of Queensland. – Address: School of Psychology, University of Queensland, St Lucia, QLD, 4072, Australia.

Working with Robert Trivers is a unique experience. He is mercurial and brilliant, and this is apparent to even the most casual observer. Perhaps the question I was asked most frequently at Wiko was how our collaboration was going. Although I don't know what Robert was asked, I suspect that this question wasn't on everyone's lips when they talked to him. To paraphrase the immortal words of Derek Smalls, I was the lukewarm water to his fire and ice.

The purpose of my time at Wiko was to collaborate with Robert on a project on self-deception. This project has been on Robert's mental back burner for decades, and the time is now ripe in psychology to gather a large body of empirical work under the rubric of an evolutionary approach to self-deception. Still, it wasn't clear when I arrived at Wiko whether we would be able to write a coherent theoretical paper on the topic. I was unsure

about whether we'd be on the same page theoretically, and I was also unsure whether we would have anything of interest to say beyond what Robert had already planned to include in his book on the topic.

For the first two months, Robert and I met semi-regularly to discuss why self-deception might have evolved and to think about empirical work in social psychology that was relevant to the topic. Over this time we began broadening his theoretical perspective somewhat to consider the role of self-deception when a deception is discovered and to include the possibility that self-deception might play a role in motivating the self. Progress on these ideas came in fits and starts, after a lot of reading in psychology and some in biology, and thus it wasn't until the end of December that we decided we could write a theoretical paper in psychology.

In the meantime we also visited fellow psychologists in Germany. We had an excellent visit to Würzburg, which included a trip down the Autobahn that set new land-speed records for both of us. In Würzburg we met with Wilhelm Hofmann, Malte Frieze, and Fritz Strack, who are conducting some of the best work on when people's conscious vs. unconscious attitudes predict their behaviors. We also took a day trip to Leipzig and the Max Planck Institute there, where we had the chance to meet with Michael Tomasello and his collaborators to discuss deception and theory of mind. We bounced our ideas off Tomasello's group and got some excellent feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of our approach.

I also made a trip to the Netherlands without Robert, where I visited with Ap Dijksterhuis, Jens Förster, Pam Smith, Daniël Wigboldus, and several others who are at the forefront of research on implicit social cognition. Dijksterhuis in particular has a very well known and highly controversial line of work on unconscious decision-making and its advantages over conscious decision making. Robert and I were unsure whether to include this research in our paper, but after conversations with Ap and a bit more reading we decided that the controversy surrounding the work would be an unnecessary distraction from the points we were trying to make.

Once we got underway on writing our paper, we made rapid progress. I attribute this to the fact that we had discussed the ideas for quite awhile prior to writing, so by the time we put finger to keyboard the story was pretty well jelled in our minds. This is not to say that we agreed about everything we wrote, or that I was convinced that we would be able to agree about everything that would eventually appear in the paper, but in the end we were able to write the paper in a way that satisfied both of our concerns.

The paper was a new experience for me in many ways, one of which was that I learned to approach the research literature in social psychology from the perspective of an evolutionary biologist. This was eye-opening for me, and it led to new ways of understanding old conundrums. On a more mundane level, the paper was about ten times longer than the usual empirical pieces that I write, and included no new data on our part. Robert has made enormous theoretical contributions in the past without new data to support them, but I have not attempted to do so myself.

After I returned from Berlin we sent the paper around to a few colleagues for comments. One of those colleagues, Harvard social psychologist Marzu Banaji, suggested that we submit the paper to *Brain and Behavioral Sciences (BBS)*. Our paper was substantially over the word limit at *BBS*, but they agreed to consider it if we could cut it to a compromise length, which we were able to do without any great harm to our argument. *BBS* would be an excellent outlet for our work, as its readership cuts across behavioral biology, neuroscience, and the social sciences, all of which are areas that are relevant to the evolution of self-deception. *BBS* would also be well suited for our work because it includes open peer commentary, and thus an opportunity to explore whatever disagreement or controversy might emerge from our work. Because we weren't shy when we disagreed with the way other researchers were interpreting their own experiments, I suspect that there is every chance that they will disagree with us as well, and hopefully this will lead to useful discussion and progress in these areas. Still, at this point the manuscript is only under review, and thus it is an empirical question whether it will see the light of day at *BBS*, or anywhere else for that matter.