

## WHAT IS NEGATIVE ABOUT POSITIVE ILLUSIONS? WHEN BENEFITS FOR THE INDIVIDUAL HARM THE COLLECTIVE

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In considering the broader implications of the processes of illusion that are described in this issue, what strikes me is that our very capacity to deceive ourselves so well—to live by illusions, to invent face-saving excuses—is toxic for us as a species, even though it plays such a vital role in the psyche of the healthy individual.

Consider the grandest illusion of all. That illusion concerns the fact that we live in an unparalleled moment in human history: For the first time in human memory, the end of our species' life, or a catastrophic decimation of our planet, has become imaginable.

And yet, in the face of this peril, we live our daily lives as though nothing had changed—as though the dangers did not exist.

The death could be a slow one, from the ecological disasters that are already unfolding: the inexorable spread of desert and eroded wasteland where once there was arable land; the gradual destruction of the world's tropical jungles; the thinning of the planet's protective ozone layer and the gradual heating produced by the greenhouse effect; the slow using up of our underground water and its pollution, along with the acidification of rain.

Or the death could be instantaneous. Despite the thaw between East and West, there remain enough nuclear warheads in the world's armamentarium to make the planet uninhabitable several times over. Meanwhile, devastating chemical weapons are making a comeback, while biological ones are being developed. And the capacity for these weapons is spreading to nations that are beyond the reach of arms agreements.

And yet despite these threats to the planet and the human race, daily life largely continues as it always has. There is relatively little

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reflection on the ways in which our habits of thought and living underlie these threats to our planet. (See, *e.g.*, Robert Ornstein and Paul Ehrlich, 1988.) Only in recent years, for instance, has there been much press attention to the chemical chains that begin with spray cans and auto exhaust and end in global warming. And despite the attention, there is little serious attempt to change our habits of consumption accordingly. As a species, we live as though these global perils had nothing to do with us, either as perpetrators or as victims.

How do we manage this massive self-deception? I contend that we fool ourselves so easily about the dangers to our species because our illusions work too well. While our emotional and physical well-being is based in part on artful denial and illusion, the state of the world is such that we can no longer afford that artifice.

### NEUROBIOLOGY AND SELF-DECEPTION

Let's start at the most primitive level—the neurobiological. The basic blueprint for the utility of denial can be found in the nervous system, in the receptors for pain.

The brain has discretion in how pain is perceived. While direct stimulation of nerves in many parts of the pain tract evoke pain, stimulation in other parts of that tract does quite the opposite: It eases pain. The effect is so strong that stimulating certain brain sites in a rat allows it to stay calm during stomach surgery without analgesics. Analgesia, the soothing of pain, is as much a property of the system as is the perception of pain.

The brain's own analgesics are the "opioids," a group of neurotransmitters so-called because they mimic the effects of opiates like morphine: They both numb pain and produce a mild euphoria—a biological illusion. One finding about endorphins, the best known of the opioids, is particularly telling: When rats are subjected to electric shocks, they secrete endorphins only when they are unable to control the shock. But rats able to stop it by pushing a lever do not secrete endorphins, even though subjected to the same total amount of shock (Shavit *et al.*, 1983). In short, the brain numbs pain when it is out of control.

This design of the central nervous system is so widespread that it is found in every species, from mollusks up through the entire ladder of phyla. The opioids are part of the body's stress response; the molecule that releases endorphins also releases other stress hormones, such as ACTH. A biological mechanism so widespread presumably has had a

powerful survival value in evolution, probably in allowing wounded organisms to ignore their pain during crisis while they took steps—fleeing or fighting back, for instance—that would allow them to pull through.

## FUNCTIONS OF DENIAL

A parallel mechanism is built into the design of the mind: Psychologically, denial soothes. I do not argue that the opioid system directly underlies psychological denial, but rather that the basic principle—that the perception of reality can be altered to ease pain—is at work at the psychological level as well as neurologically. In the psyche, denial and illusion work hand-in-hand.

One reason for the ability of the human mind to distort reality may well be that, like the opioid response, it has had direct survival value. There is, for instance, accumulating data showing that in certain contexts denial bolsters physical health.

One strand of evidence is from studies of patients undergoing medical procedures. In one key study, for instance, patients were interviewed in their hospital rooms the night before undergoing surgery (Cohen & Lazarus, 1973). Patients fell along a continuum of how attentive to the details of their situation they were. At one end were those who were extremely vigilant, trying to collect all the information about the surgical procedure they could find. They were highly concerned about the dangers; one patient said, "I've made my will. I could die in there."

At the other extreme were those patients who seemed to tune out the dangers altogether. They were largely unconcerned about the risks of surgery. One said, "Being in the hospital is just like being on a vacation."

The outcome: those patients who were indifferent to the risks of surgery had fewer medical complications and got out of the hospital sooner than those who were so vigilant about the dangers.

Of course, the context in which such denial has health benefits is limited. It is only in a situation in which the danger faced is large and the steps one can take to make any difference in facing that danger are minimal or nonexistent that denial is such a useful strategem. Being a patient about to go into surgery is one such situation; being a passenger on an airliner going through heavy turbulence is another.

As Richard Lazarus (1983) has argued, excessive vigilance and worry in such situations—when there is no concrete step that that mobilization will help one take to alleviate the danger—does nothing more than expose the body to the rigors of stress. Rather than worry oneself sick—

or sicker—it is more useful to adopt a coping response that minimizes anxiety. Denial is such a response.

That is, of course, also the case with the opioids: It is in facing those dangers that are out of one's control that this biochemical system is most likely to be triggered.

## ILLUSIONS AND WELL-BEING

Illusions are self-confirming beliefs, models of the world that, once established, are preserved through selective attention and selective memory. People retain information that supports their illusions, and disattend or forget what does not (See, e.g., Taylor *et al.*, this issue.) Thus we preserve our positive self-image—that, for instance, we are a little kinder, smarter, more skilled than we really are—by focusing on instances that confirm that belief and disattending to or discounting those that do not. And that positive self-image nurtures our sense of efficacy and well-being.

That illusions play a role in health similar to that of denial has been well-documented by Shelley Taylor and Jonathon Brown (1988). Three illusions in particular, according to their review, have benefits for mental and physical health: an exaggerated sense of control over the circumstances of life, a somewhat unfounded sense of optimism, and an unrealistically positive sense of oneself. Holding to these positive illusions seems to buffer people against the stresses of life, tending to make them more resilient psychologically and protect their physical health.

Another psychological mechanism that works hand-in-hand with these illusions is excuse-making, as Snyder and Higgins (in press) have shown. The artful use of excuses helps people protect their sense of self-esteem, either distancing them from responsibility for an unpleasant occurrence, or putting in a more positive light an untoward event that they are connected with.

Excuse-making, along with the faculty for positive illusions, is a mode for protecting a positive self-schema, a point made by Ronnie Janoff-Bulman (1988). These cognitive artful dodges, for instance, help protect people who have been victimized from abandoning their sense of themselves as good and worthy people. In the face of an overwhelming attack—for example, a physical assault—these psychological maneuvers protect the tenets of one's self-schema, the most basic assumptions about oneself and the world: that the world is benevolent and oneself worthy of enjoying it. The ability to maintain these positive illusions is abetted by denial, as I have described in *Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception* (1985).

All these processes of self-deceit—positive illusions, excuse-making, denial—are ordinarily benign, even essential in maintaining a sense of well-being, especially in the face of an overwhelming threat. But what concerns me here is the sense in which these very self-deceptions, which serve the individual so well, can themselves become threats to the survival of the collective.

## THE COLLECTIVE SELF AND GROUP ILLUSIONS

What is true for the individual is true for the group. There is a sense in which there is a collective self, a shared identity that people partake of to the extent they identify as a member of a given group. And that group self employs all the strategems of the individual in preserving a positive self-schema: illusions, excuses, denial.

Indeed, a well-functioning group is bound together by a kind of group narcissism, one that subscribes to the familiar positive illusions: an unrealistically positive sense of itself, the somewhat grandiose sense of how much the group can make a difference—*i.e.*, control circumstances—and an overly optimistic sense that things will turn out well. These positive illusions support a rosy glow about membership in the group, a sense of specialness that is protected by skews in information-gathering quite parallel to those that protect the individual self-schema.

The most thorough description of the way a group protects its positive illusions is Janis's study of groupthink (1983). One of those illusions, for instance, is that of invulnerability, the sense that whatever the group plans is bound to succeed—an illusion that is virtually the sum total of the three positive illusions that Taylor describes for the individual.

Among the means that groups employ to preserve their positive illusions are suppressing doubts from individual members, sanitizing information that comes to group awareness so that it does not contradict the illusions, and rationalizations—excuses for things that seem to go wrong, or that might.

One of the pathologies of illusion-sustaining processes, as Janis points out, is that they make it easy for members of a group to deny the implications or consequences of their actions. Janis uses the term "ethical blinders" to describe the moral effects of subscribing to the basic illusion that the group is, *a priori*, good and wise, an aspect of its self-image of invulnerability. If the group is good, then whatever it does must be good in the minds of those who subscribe to the collective credo.

Such collective illusions are sustained by the tacit collusion of individuals within the group to suppress their own doubts. This leads

them to keep quiet about information that might disconfirm the collective illusions; their silence thus makes those illusions all the stronger.

## COLLECTIVE SELF-DECEPTION

The mechanisms of illusion that operate within the individual and within small groups, such as Janis studied, can be seen at work within society as a whole. An excellent example of this is the phenomenon of "perception theory," a doctrine enunciated by Pentagon strategists during the 1970s and described by Steven Kull (1988).

The assumptions underlying perception theory are roughly as follows:

1. In an age of thermonuclear overkill, no new weapons system makes a real difference in the military balance of power.
2. However, if a new weapons system is made to seem to matter militarily, it will matter psychologically, and thus politically.
3. Therefore, Pentagon planners should act as though new weapons systems mattered militarily, so that they will matter psychologically.

As Kull (1985) put it, ". . . in international power relations, perceptions of the superpower military balance are the coinage of international affairs even though all the key parties involved seem to recognize that the coins are counterfeit . . . All the key characters know a certain secret—that strategic symmetries are militarily irrelevant in an age of overkill—but because they think that others do not know the secret they act as if they do not know the secret either."

How can such a charade persist? Because it plays into illusions that the large collective as a whole seems to want to believe in. For instance, in 1986 a national poll of Americans found that close to 90% agreed with the proposition that a nuclear war is unwinnable. And, in the same poll, close to 70% agreed that the United States should build more and better weapons.

Sustaining those contradictory beliefs is the illusion of invulnerability: the sense that others are more at risk than myself, that something can be done to protect me against even the most overwhelming of threats—nuclear war, in this instance.

It is at this level, the collective, that the positive illusions lose their utility. For they can have the effect of building a psychological cocoon, a feeling of personal well-being, at the expense of a clearheaded picture of the threats that face us and our planet as a whole.

We seem most likely to fall back on our illusions in the face of an overwhelming threat, in situations in which we feel powerless to make

a difference. That is true, too, of the circumstances that evoke the biological equivalent of denial and positive illusion, the opioid response.

Thus, given the dangers from the nuclear threat or other catastrophic weapons on the one hand, or those from the ecological crisis on the other, our positive illusions can become a pathological response. The illusion of unfounded optimism can lead to the conviction that everything will turn out all right for the planet, or that nothing much is really wrong, and so there is nothing one need do to try to change things. The illusion of an unrealistically positive self-view, coupled with the power of excuse-making, can make one feel that even if things look dim, one is doing enough, no matter how little that may be.

One sad consequence of these illusions can be tuning out the suffering that is now being felt by those most impoverished in the planet, who are feeling the most extreme consequences of the ecological crisis: famine produced by overgrazing and erosion of farm land, crushing poverty, and the like. Meanwhile, those of us who live in the First World, and we Americans particularly, feel no such pain in our personal lives and can easily ignore both the pain of those less fortunate as well as what we might do to alleviate that pain.

As for the ecological crisis itself, because our positive illusions tend to cushion us from feeling discomfort about ourselves or about future turns of events, we can easily disattend to the links between how we live our lives and the ecological consequences. Most specifically, we can ignore the ways in which our habits of consumption and waste are the engine driving the ecological devastation of the planet: The most privileged 6% of humans consume 60% of the world's resources. When we eat hamburgers at fast food chains, for instance, do we stop to consider that the rain forests of Central America are being destroyed to raise that same beef?

The illusions and excuses that serve us so well individually, then, allow us to ignore the consequences of how we live. Relying on those illusions creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: By acting as though nothing we do makes a difference for the worse, we do nothing that might make a difference for the better.

The one positive illusion necessary to confront these overwhelming crises is the sense of control, that what we do can make a difference. And if we don't put aside our illusions and denials and act, our grandchildren may never forgive us.

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