Friend or Foe? Self-deception in organisations

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Abstract

Purpose: Self-deception is generally deemed an adaptive psychological mechanism that ensures wellbeing, a sense of identity, and social advancement. However, self-deception can be maladaptive when it undermines the critical thinking essential to personal and organisational change. This paper advances a theoretical model of self-deception, specifying and contextualising its intrapersonal and relational components in organisational settings. Further, it provides guidelines for practitioners to identify self-deception tactics, and minimise maladaptive self-deception in organisations.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Drawing on affective coping, system justification, and self-categorisation theories, the paper illustrates how the interplay of intrapersonal and relational factors with organisational practices renders self-deception adaptive or maladaptive.

Findings: Maladaptive self-deception is prevalent in organisations that deter critical reflection, and intensify motivated biases to self-enhance and self-protect, undercutting organisational development change.

Originality/Value: This paper offers several contributions, namely the development of a socially and organisationally embedded model of self-deception, the characterisation of adaptive and maladaptive self-deception in organisations, and the specification of ways to identify and minimise maladaptive self-deception.

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Devotion to a sports team, unwavering allegiance to a political party, and enduring commitment to a company are examples of strong affiliative stance toward organisations and their guiding principles. This sense of affiliation often means that individuals turn a blind eye to institutional failings, and focus on confirmatory evidence that bolsters its merits. But why is this averting gesture so pervasive? To what degree are we aware of our biases toward organisations and even personal attributes? What organisational practices reinforce or mitigate these biases?

Self-deception is intensely debated in contemporary research (for cross-disciplinary reviews, see Bachkirova, 2016; Mele, 1997; von Hippel and Trivers, 2011), and although scholars agree regarding the phenomenon's ubiquity, they hold differing views about its merits; some argue that self-deception undermines authenticity as it skews outlooks on the self and life events (self-deception as foe), others highlight its adaptive function in the face of overflowing and often conflicting stimuli (self-deception as friend) (e.g., Bachkirova, 2016). As a result, while early scholarship has defined self-deception as positive self-bias and stressed its adaptive value, the phenomenon is presently conceptualised as unconsciously motivated, inherently social, and associated with both adaptive and maladaptive outcomes (e.g., Bachkirova, 2015; Clegg and Moissinac, 2005; Dings, 2017).

The multidisciplinary breadth of the self-deception literature has provided important insights into the phenomenon, but also sustained its fragmented conceptualisation (Bachkirova, 2015; Caldwell, 2009). Functionalist perspectives of self-deception in philosophical and psychological research underscore its intrapersonal foundations (e.g., Caldwell, 2009). These perspectives characterise self-deception as the upshot of individual belief systems and biased cognitive processing, suggesting that people engage in self-deception to varying degrees on the basis of these factors. Social constructionist perspectives

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draw attention to the relational and contextual embeddedness of self-deception, claiming its emergence and outcomes are contingent on person-environment interactions (e.g., Bachkirova, 2016; Dings, 2017). We argue that an integrative model of self-deception that draws on cross-disciplinary insights, and elucidates the interplay of intrapersonal factors, social dynamics, and organising practices, is both theoretically necessary and practically useful to organisations seeking to develop authenticity, wellbeing, and a learning mindset. We propose a socially-embedded model of self-deception in organisations, specifying its intrapersonal, social, and contextual components. Then we illustrate how the interplay of these components with organisational features renders self-deception adaptive or maladaptive, and discuss strategies to identify and minimise maladaptive self-deception toward organisational development.

A tripartite model of self-deception

The topic of self-deception has ignited rich academic debate, one that spans over five decades, and intersects numerous disciplines. This debate covers the phenomenon's conscious and unconscious nature, and its association with belief formation processes and cognitive-affective mechanisms. We concur with Bachkirova's (2016) view that an interdisciplinary outlook is essential to fully grasping the nature of self-deception, as each discipline provides unique insights that clarify the phenomenon. Thus, we draw on insights from philosophy, psychology and management disciplines, and propose a socially-embedded perspective of self-deception in organisations. This perspective positions self-deception as *a subconsciously motivated phenomenon, resulting from ongoing interactions between intrapersonal and relational factors in organised environments*. Figure 1 depicts the conceptualisation of self-deception in organisations proposed here. The figure suggests that cognitive processes, motivational biases, and individual differences (i.e., intrapersonal self-deception) represent core elements of the phenomenon. We argue that these elements offer an

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incomplete account of self-deception, and are inextricable from the relational tactics individuals employ to maintain self-deception (i.e., social self-deception), and from the strength of shared motives and goals that sustain group beliefs (i.e., collective self-deception) (Dings, 2017; Smith *et al.*, 2017). Further, we contend that ways of organising influence, and are influenced by, the three model components.

(Insert Figure 1 here)

Social self-deception comprises intentional and unintentional influence tactics. The philosophical psychology literature portrays self-deception as resting on the fringe of consciousness, in that it involves some retention of the truth and it is fundamentally strategic and context-sensitive (Funkhouser and Barrett, 2016). In this regard, people can maintain deception by avoiding evidence that challenges an existing belief (e.g., seeking the company of likeminded individuals), or by withholding information from others, and distorting the information provided to them. Maintaining close ties with likeminded individuals reduces the likelihood of being confronted with belief-defying information. In addition, manipulating or withholding information in social exchanges is expected to influence others' beliefs and subsequent actions in ways that maintain one's self-deception (Dings, 2017; Smith *et al.*, 2017; von Hippel and Trivers, 2011). This in turn shapes and sustains collective self-deception over time, as it strengthens shared beliefs and motives.

The external environment also plays a part in self-deception. Preliminary evidence indicates that people avoid belief-defying evidence or intentionally manipulate beliefs in some contexts, but not in others (Funkhouser and Barrett, 2016; van der Leer and McKay, 2016). Think about a person who holds a general belief about the superiority of male leadership. Now consider that this belief, and the systematic avoidance of contradictory evidence, are only manifested in the context of corporate leadership, and find no expression in community or political leadership spheres, where the person holds a more egalitarian

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stance. In this scenario, self-deception is influenced by contextual cues that reinforce or undermine gender egalitarianism at work, for instance, the proportion of women in leadership positions and other organisational cues.

The discussion above highlights two premises in self-deception: 1) at some level, people acknowledge the flaws in the belief held, and engage in socially-oriented tactics to uphold that belief (i.e., in social self-deception), and 2) contextual cues sustain or challenge self-deception. While the former proposition has merited some attention in the literature, whether and how the organisation shapes self-deception remains unexamined. We propose that an in-depth understanding of how intrapersonal, social, and contextual factors interconnect is essential to the identification and effective management of adaptive and maladaptive self-deception.

Intrapersonal self-deception

Pragmatic cognitive systems

Pragmatic cognitive systems minimise cognitive and emotional overload by favouring heuristics over efforts to reconcile conflicting or novel information, and by prioritising error minimisation over error detection, rendering truth-seeking efforts a more infrequent undertaking. This suggests a relationship between pragmatic cognitive systems and self-deception, wherein individuals self-deceive to minimise the cognitive and emotional effort involved in challenging held beliefs (Lauria *et al.*, 2016). The pragmatic cognitive systems theory is consistent with mainstream philosophical views of self-deception, which propose that individuals may hold opposing beliefs at different levels of depth, and commit to a given belief irrespective of its truth-value (Mele, 1997). The default position is one where the status quo is upheld, and confirmatory information is preferred to belief-defying information.

Biased motives

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Self-deception has also been credited to the motivation to inhibit acknowledgement of biased, self-serving reasoning, and to avoid belief-threatening information (Baumeister and Leith, 1997). People are motivated to engage in affective self-protection to maintain positive emotional states, reflected on systematic avoidance of emotionally taxing evidence (Mele, 1997), and to hold self-enhancing beliefs about their competence and performance, suggesting an ego-protective tendency to see themselves in a positive light, and to refute threatening evidence (Hirschfeld *et al.*, 2008; von Hippel and Trivers, 2011). Thus, self-deception is motivated by the need to sustain positive emotional states, and to justify behaviours consistent with self-protection and self-enhancement motives.

Self-enhancement motives have been extensively researched in the context of positive illusions, described as inflated favourable views of personal attributes, perceptions of control over events, and unrealistic optimism about the future (Kruger *et al.*, 2009). Positive illusions have been examined in the context of intimate relationships, mental health, and general wellbeing, and only recently discussed regarding organisational phenomena (e.g., change) (Biggane *et al.*, 2016). To be clear, positive illusions are not synonymous with self-deception. While positive illusions refer to positive self-ascription of attributes and control perceptions related to self-enhancement motives (i.e., a self-deception facet), self-deception is not necessarily linked to positive self-enhancement, and may hold negative or neutral valence (Kruger *et al*., 2009). Despite their conceptual distinctions, scholarly debate about positive illusions and self-deception is similarly contentious with respect to their adaptive or maladaptive nature. On the one hand, positive illusions have been associated with wellbeing and adaptability through their effect on positive self-concept, socialisation outcomes, the motivation to learn from mistakes and maintain a sense of control through adversity, and the extenuation of inner-tensions arising from changing or conflicting beliefs (Biggane *et al.*, 2016; van der Leer and McKay, 2016). Other scholars have cautioned that positive illusions

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have diminishing returns. The short-term wellbeing and social gains are offset by negative performance outcomes following inflated competence perceptions, and by the personal costs of unfulfilled expectations (Young, 2014). This contextually- and temporally-anchored take on the benefits and limitations of positive illusions signals that the adaptive and maladaptive outcomes of self-deception motives may also be best understood by attending to context.

Individual differences

Epistemic motivation, a dispositional factor defined as the extent and frequency with which people engage in deliberate information processing, may explain differing levels of self-deception (De Dreu *et al.*, 2011). People with high epistemic motivation are disposed to critically evaluate the status quo, engage in knowledge acquisition, and recognise personal biases. These individuals are less prone to relying on heuristics, and therefore less susceptible to systematic self-deception. However, they may also be less likely to self-deceive to ensure a sense of congruence between authentic and idealised self, and to avert wellbeing threats in autonomy-restrictive contexts (e.g., directive leadership, hierarchical structures).

Knowledge perceptions may also play a significant role in self-deception, and bring about adaptive or maladaptive outcomes in organisations. For instance, the Dunning-Kruger effect describes inaccurate self-assessments of competence, where less competent individuals are more likely to overestimate their ability, and to question others' competence (Kruger *et al.*, 2009). This overestimation has been ascribed to low levels of skills and abilities, such as analytical thinking (Pennycook *et al.*, 2017), and to insufficient knowledge about a domain (Gibbs *et al.*, 2017). Regarding the latter, if a person perceives a given domain to be narrow in scope (e.g., leadership), they are tend to overestimate their knowledge and competence in that domain (e.g., self-deceive about their ability to hold a leadership position, while lacking leadership skills).

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The intrapersonal component of self-deception described here reveals that individuals engage in biased interpretations of events to minimise inner tensions, further personal agendas, and maintain relationships. Importantly, the discussion suggests that levels of self-deception, and its adaptive or maladaptive outcomes, cannot be elucidated by the intrapersonal component alone, and require consideration of social and contextual influences.

Social and collective self-deception

The self, and by extension self-deception, do not occur in a vacuum, excised from a social context (Caldwell, 2009; Clegg and Moissinac, 2005). It is therefore surprising that while notions of collective embeddedness and social exchange feature prominently in studies about the self in organisations (e.g., Brockner and Wiesenfeld, 2016), this relational perspective remains a marginal topic in the self-deception literature, where much of the research focuses on motives and cognition (e.g., Dings, 2017). Next, we offer an overview of three theoretical approaches that illustrate the interplay of intrapersonal self-deception with self-deception's social and collective components: affective coping, system justification theory, and self-categorisation theory.

Self-deception as affective coping

A view of self-deception as affective coping suggests that individuals eschew emotionally taxing evidence, and regulate evidence-seeking efforts, despite potential for long-term negative outcomes. When evidence contradicts a belief, and is seen as a threat to wellbeing, individuals engage in three types of appraisal (see Lauria *et al*., 2016). The first type consists of appraising evidence as ambiguous or not compelling enough to justify truth-seeking efforts. In complex social systems, including organisations, this is possible through affiliation with likeminded groups, or by persuading others using belief-supporting evidence (i.e., social self-deception) (Dings, 2017). The second type of appraisal concerns the anticipation of a negative affective state in the face of belief-challenging evidence. In organisations,

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individuals may self-deceive about competitive behaviours to avoid negative feelings. This is achieved not only by discounting evidence of the negative impact of competitive behaviours on social interactions, but also by relying on co-workers' acceptance or active support of competitive behaviours (i.e., collective self-deception). The third type of appraisal refers to coping potential appraisal. People are more likely to maintain self-deception about matters they perceive to have limited control over. Although these typically comprise fixed attributes, such as intelligence, it is plausible that organisations with strict norms and a strong culture are also construed as low control situations. Individuals experiencing low control in organisations sustain deception in order to self-protect and self-enhance (e.g., ensure career advancement and feelings of competence). They rely on social and collective self-deception to evade critical reflection about, and ultimately sustain, workplace dynamics and practices.

System justification and self-categorisation theories

System justification theory posits that people are consciously and unconsciously motivated to legitimise the status quo, and to embrace it despite its faults (Jost et al. 2004; Liviatan and Jost, 2011). Justifying a system serves the need to safeguard a sense of belonging and coherence (Liviatan and Jost, 2011), and is manifest in attempts to emulate the organisation's espoused values and goals without questioning (Cable *et al.*, 2013). The justification of institutional pressures and practices is adaptive to the extent that it safeguards wellbeing, supports social exchanges and access to organisational resources, and ensures a sense of coherence. However, system justification reflects maladaptive self-deception if it reflects avoidance of critical assessments (Bachkirova, 2015). System justification theory illustrates how, faced with autonomy-restrictive organisations, people may still legitimise their practices and undermine the severity of imposed restrictions. Even if individuals are not strongly motivated to self-deceive, and are disposed to integrating new knowledge and meanings, a flawed organisational system remains unchallenged in the absence of a system that explicitly

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invites critical reflection. Social self-deception explains the influence processes that reinforce system justification, and collective self-deception accounts for the impact of a referent group in framing the current system as indispensable or unchangeable, despite its limitations.

Self-categorisation theory draws on system justification, social identity, and social dominance theories to describe a person's inclination to either uphold or change a system (Reynolds *et al*., 2013). This inclination is contingent on the degree of identification with a referent group, and with the overarching system. For instance, individuals support the views of a work group if the group is perceived as representing the self, and will buttress (or challenge) the organisation's ideology depending on whether it is aligned with the group's. Collective self-deception elucidates how organisational values and goals are upheld or challenged through the group's motivation to preserve their shared values and goals. If organisational values and goals reflect those of the group, and the group strives for alignment with the organisation, individuals remain relatively impervious to negative cues (Elsbach and Breitsohl, 2016). In practice, isolated episodes of misconduct (i.e., unethical leadership) are met with efforts to redress felt discrepancies by focusing on evidence that highlights positive organisational features. Individuals highly identified with the organisation may sustain positive illusions, as positive perceptions of the organisation are interwoven with positive perceptions about the self. Further, they may avoid exchanges with individuals who draw attention to organisational inadequacies (Reynolds *et al*., 2013).

Overall, a socially-embedded and contextualised perspective of self-deception extends our understanding of its mechanisms and outcomes. It suggests that self-deception outcomes encompass biased evaluations about the self, but also about organisational values and practices. In what follows, we outline ways and levels at which self-deception in organisations is adaptive by ensuring a sense of identity, belonging, and social cohesion, or maladaptive by deterring reflection about the self and the organisation.

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Self-deception on organisations: friend or foe?

Self-deception as friend

The unconscious motivation to feel aligned with one's organisation, and to enact its identity through social processes, reflects adaptive self-deception. Self-deception signals context responsiveness, and can be associated with positive wellbeing and performance outcomes, when individuals sporadically bypass evidence that places organisational goals and values at odds with views of the self. Over time, they become increasingly identified with the organisation (Funkhouser and Barrett, 2016), and build the confidence in their competence and social standing to sustain a positive view of self-in-role (Lopez and Fuxjager, 2012). In that regard, we concur with the idea that a modicum of self-deception is necessary to ensuring and sustaining wellbeing, as it facilitates socialisation, identity development, and positive coping (Bachkirova, 2016; Biggane *et al.*, 2016; Kreiner *et al.*, 2015; Lauria *et al.*, 2016).

> *P1*. Low-to-moderate levels of self-deception in organisations are associated with positive socialisation, identity development, and wellbeing outcomes.

Still, we caution that self-deception is only adaptive to the extent that a) it is not prompted by repressive organisational systems, b) it does not sustain dysfunctional or unethical practices, and c) it is associated with both short- and long-term wellbeing and performance outcomes. These tenets suggest that the merits and legitimacy of any efforts to minimise self-deception must be evaluated against contextual contingencies (Bachkirova, 2016), as self-deception also ensures individuals maintain a sense of congruence with the organisation. In essence, the organisation has influence over, and accountability for, enabling self-protection and self-enhancement functions while encouraging employees to challenge assumptions and engage with learning and change.

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Self-deception as foe

Maladaptive self-deception arises when individuals systematically avoid addressing felt discontinuities between self and organisation, and have an inflated sense of organisational fit and ability to achieve goals. The latter is manifested in overestimation of personal competence, knowledge, and control. This overestimation may seem adaptive since it favours networking, employee selection outcomes, and the pursuit of high responsibility roles, but as the discrepancy between perceived (high) and actual (low) attributes and control becomes evident, the immediate positive outcomes prove unsustainable (e.g., Baxter and Norman, 2011; Gino *et al*., 2011).

> *P2*. High levels of self-deception reflected in overestimation of knowledge, competence, and situational control are associated with negative performance outcomes.

Maladaptive self-deception is also characteristic of environments where one's role and social standing are uncertain. Recent research suggests that individuals create facades of conformity, which consist of false self-representations aimed at projecting an image of value congruence to offset feelings of social alienation (Hewlin *et al*., 2016). However, there are negative attitudinal and behavioural outcomes associated with disavowing discrepancies between self and organisation, including turnover, low engagement, feelings of inauthenticity, and decreased wellbeing (e.g., Hewlin *et al*., 2016). This indicates that a seemingly adaptive strategy elicits maladaptive outcomes at high levels of self-deception.

> *P3*. High levels of self-deception reflected in inflated perceptions of fit with the organisation are associated with negative performance, attitudinal, and wellbeing outcomes.

Social self-deception tactics range from sporadic avoidance of belief-challenging evidence, to the systematic tendency to seek evidence consistent with a given view of the self (Funkhouser and Barrett, 2016). The sporadic avoidance of belief-challenging evidence serves adaptive

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functions, such as sustaining wellbeing and resilience through high workload periods. On the other side of the spectrum, exclusive affiliation with likeminded people, manipulation of information, and systematic avoidance of evidence that contradicts held views about the self and the organisation signify robust social self-deception tactics. If pervasive in a group, and compounded by individual differences and organisational cues, these tactics produce maladaptive outcomes, namely low self-awareness, skewed view of resource availability and utility, and social cliques that undercut cohesion and cooperation. Further, a group's motivation to uphold shared beliefs and goals (i.e., collective self-deception) may cast the organisation either in a tendentiously positive or negative light, undermining change.

P4. High levels of robust social self-deception tactics are associated with negative developmental, social, and performance outcomes.

Minimising maladaptive self-deception toward organisational development

Self-deception allows people to circumvent contradictions and tensions that arise from continuing or episodic change. In organisations, avoidance of evidence that supports need for change signals not only intrapersonal factors (e.g., dispositional resistance), but also the degree to which social and organisational cues buttress resistance. We posit that maladaptive self-deception is ubiquitous organisations with conservation cultures, rigid hierarchical structures, and that reinforce conformity through rewards and other practices. Nevertheless, maladaptive self-deception can be minimised through leadership that fosters critical reflection and discussions about identity, goals, values, and emotions.

Based on these assumptions, we propose that maladaptive self-deception can be minimised if organisations bridge the notions of 'change' and 'routine operations' (Feldman and Pentland, 2003), framing change as integral to organisational functioning. This is accomplished by inviting employees to reflect on how new or unexpected events inform and add value to everyday operations (e.g., Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Such a view of change may

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contribute to the consideration of novel, ambiguous, and belief-defying evidence as non-threatening and valuable. Relatedly, organisational change can be framed both in relation to its relatively set and long-term strategic objectives, and as ongoing and participative learning. Exclusive reliance on a 'boardroom' conception of change management constrains participation by stipulating a change strategy and indicating how employees ought to engage with it. Framing change strictly in relation to fixed and long-term strategic goals may stimulate maladaptive self-deception through: 1) conformity without critical thinking, or 2) dissent without acknowledgment of the change's strategic merits. If change is framed as an unpredictable and fluid process in which organisational members continually define their role and identity, this increases change engagement and minimises maladaptive self-deception.

Maladaptive self-deception can also minimised through participatory practices. Employees discuss how the proposed change vision is consistent with, or departs from, current organisational goals and direction, and the trade-offs between continuity and change. This creates an ownership to change by legitimising but also critically evaluating individual perspectives on what is known and valued. It also alleviates the cognitive and affective load associated with solitary efforts to gather novel or threatening information about change, and emphasises a sense of continuity between present and future. Research suggests that inviting critical reflection about the organisation helps maintain automatic appraisals of the organisation to a desirable, functional level, even at the risk of some tension and dissent (De Dreu *et al.*, 2011; Elsbach and Breitsohl, 2016; Laurin *et al.*, 2013). Organisations can support employees to openly share and discuss their experiences at and of work. These processes are not necessarily nor reliably associated with positive attitudes and behaviours, and may expose a critical stance toward the self and the organisation. Precisely for this reason, organisations that acknowledge the challenges inherent in maintaining a coherent

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perspective of self-in-role, and the range of emotions in response to change, are likely to minimise maladaptive self-deception.

Self-deception can be maladaptive not because it sustains resistance irrespective of the change's strategic merits, but because it precludes critical opposition. Resistance to change often signals the need for earnest discussions about change appropriateness, implementation plan, and value to employees (e.g., Ford and Ford, 2010). However, a strong organisational push toward fulfilling the change agenda may impede critical reflection about the change, and overemphasise its virtues while systematically downplaying evidence of its inadequacies. Individuals become susceptible to self-deceiving about the value of a proposed change, and disseminate these beliefs throughout the organisation (i.e., social self-deception).

Further to the maladaptive outcomes outlined above, individuals may also be disposed to, and deploy social self-deception tactics toward, avoiding or disregarding corrective feedback on performance. While self-deception buffers against threats to self-worth brought about by critical feedback, it becomes maladaptive if it hinders the ability and motivation to engage in continual learning and improvement.

Conclusion

Self-deception reflects the disavowal of belief-challenging about personal attributes, social status, and even the virtues and inadequacies of an organisation. We argue that intrapersonal and relational factors interact with the organisational environment to determine levels of self-deception, and whether it is adaptive or maladaptive. Self-deception is deemed maladaptive if it stems from, or further contributes to, practices and norms that impede critical reflection and constrain autonomy. An organisation's ability to minimise maladaptive self-deception is predicated on its capacity to grasp intrapersonal factors underlying self-deception, identify social self-deception tactics and collective self-deception, and understand the short- and long-term outcomes of self-deception across levels of analysis. Reliance on contextualised 360-

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degree data, implicit measures, and qualitative employee surveys can be used to identify self-deception tactics, their pervasiveness, and explain or anticipate some of their maladaptive outcomes. In addition, social and collective self-deception can be identified through multilevel analysis of organisational climate surveys, focus groups, and other group-level indicators of self-deception.

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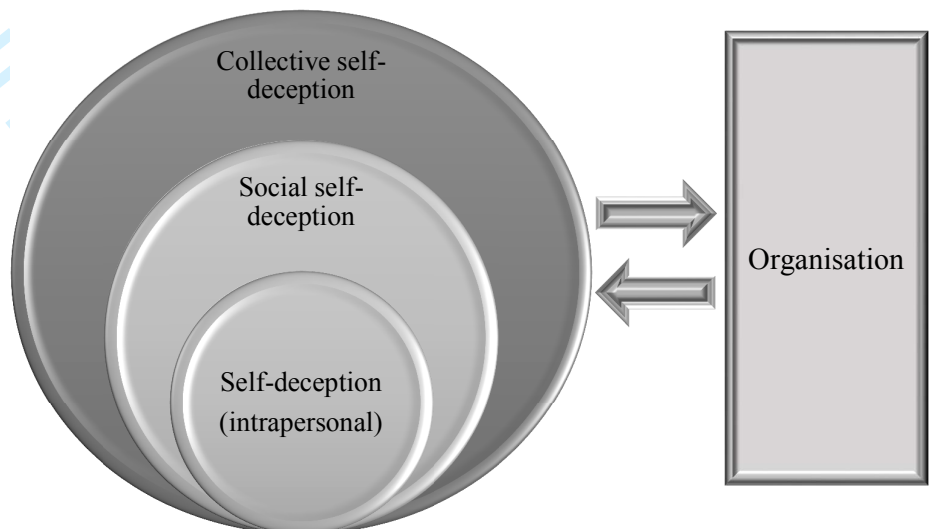
Self-deception in organisations

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Figure 1. Conceptual model of self-deception in organisations.

Collective self-deception

Social self-deception

Self-deception (intrapersonal)

Organisation