

Human Communication. A Publication of the Pacific and Asian Communication Association.
Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 373 – 380.

The Relationship Between Self-Deception and Extrinsic-Personal Religiosity

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between self-deception and religiosity in two different samples: (1) fifty members of a non-denominational church, and (2) 54 students at a state university. The participants responded to Allport and Ross (1967) Religious Orientation Scale and the Paulhus (1984, 1998) Deception Scale. The results indicated that the nature of the relationship depends upon at least three factors: (1) the type of extrinsic religiosity being measured (personal or social), (2) the gender of the individual, and (3) whether the individual is affiliated with a religious institution. The form of self-deception identified as impression management was inversely associated with extrinsic-personal religiosity. Further, although this association was present in the total sample, it could only be verified for females and for those respondents who were affiliated with a church. This latter relationship might be described as the “Plain Mary” who establishes a personal image based on her religious activities rather than her appearance.

The Relationship Between Self-Deception and Extrinsic-Personal Religiosity

Self-deception has been identified with such topics as alcoholism (Strom, & Barone, 1993), psychology (Johnson & Burroughs, 2000; Shapiro, 1996), religion (Leak & Fish 1989; Hall, 2000), science (Mele, 1997), and marital relationships (O'Rourke & Cappeliez, 2005). Some researchers have attempted to explain it as apparent ignorance about a belief that is formed by an individual's motivations or an influence of an individual's desire to protect themselves from various beliefs that may threaten their self (Statman, 1997).

Some scholars view self-deception as a normal activity and a means of communicating with ourselves (Fingarette, 1998; Patten, 2003). Moomal and Henzi (2000), however, have noted a paradox in that concept because it is logically inconsistent to believe without believing at the same time. Similarly, Kirby (2003) noted that self-deception has a built-in paradox in that the individual being deceived is also the deceiver. The issue is further complicated by trying to distinguish instances of self-ignorance, or wishful thinking, from self-deception (Levine, 1998). Regardless, the hypothesis that typical self-deceivers do not intentionally deceive themselves has gained support (Mele, 1999).

Verkasalo and Lindeman (1994) noted that self-deception is associated with an individual's ingratiation and exemplification goals. People who deceive themselves cannot consider the situation in an objective manner because there is a suspension of the normal objective interest in reality. Thus the process of self-deception must include a way of hindering in advance the consciousness of adverse tendencies or feelings and doing so without self-awareness (Shapiro, 1996).

Some authorities describe self-deception as a psychological coping device. Hagedorn (1996) linked it to happiness and life satisfaction. Lewis (2004) argued that self-deceivers distort the past so that they can live more comfortably in the present. That approach is similar to the view that self-deception is a defensive mechanism that protects the individual's ego (Norem, 2002). Others view self-deception as an ego-enhancement device (Tester & Gleaves, 2005), a concept that is supported by research that links self-deception to impression management (Pauls & Crost, 2004).

Another research approach has identified a potential link between self-deception and moral behavior. Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004) identified self-deception as an enabling device that promotes unethical behavior. Paulhus and John (1998) argued that self-deception develops from both egoistic and moralistic motives. Von Hippel (2003) argued that self-deception is a component in self-serving biases. Johnson (1997) identified self-deception as a source of fallible moral judgments. Levy (2004), however, argued that self-deceivers were not necessarily morally responsible for their deception since it "is simply a kind of mistake and has no more necessary connection to culpability than have other intellectual errors" (p. 294).

Regardless, the potential link of self-deception and morality suggests a possible relationship between the concept and religiosity. Indeed, several sources have reported a potential link in self-deception and religious beliefs (Saroglou & Galand, 2004), including beliefs about the soul (Johnson & Burroughs, 2000), salvation (Hall, 2000), religious conversion (Jones, 1998), and hypocrisy (Statman, 1997). Other studies have looked at the links of religiosity to self-esteem (Pradhan, 2001), depression (Wink, Larsen, & Dillon 2005), and well-being (Glenn, 1997; Krause, 2003), while

Williams, Francis and Robbins (2006) found a positive relationship between low self-esteem and rejection of Christianity.

Burris (1994) noted that intrinsic religiosity (the internalization of religious beliefs and values) and extrinsic religiosity (behavioral manifestations of religiosity) were inversely related and that both variables are related to self-deception and impression management. Burris and Navara (2002) looked directly at the relationship between religiosity and depression and identified a positive correlation between self-deception and intrinsic religiosity. Similarly, Leak and Fish (1989) found a link between intrinsic religiosity, impression management, and self-deception. They concluded that intrinsically religious individuals have “tendencies toward distortions in the way they see themselves and in the way they intentionally present themselves to others” (p. 355).

What is missing from these findings is support for Burris’ (1994) contention that there is a relationship between extrinsic religiosity and self-deception. Given the strong relationship between self-deception and impression management, such a relationship would be anticipated. Extrinsic religiosity, after all, is a form of impression management within the religious context, but the only support for this contention is Burris’ reporting of an inverse relationship.

Two factors may account for this negative finding. First, the results may be contaminated by testing extrinsic religiosity as a uni-dimensional concept. Paulhus’ (1984, 1998) version of extrinsic religiosity includes both a personal and social dimension, with the personal dimension closely related to impression management. This creates the possibility that self-deception could be related to extrinsic-personal religiosity even if the social dimension is unrelated. Further, the lack of association with one dimension could mask the relationship with the second, if extrinsic religiosity is measured only from a unidimensional perspective.

Second, the results may be limited by samples that have not distinguished adequately in terms of varying degrees of religiosity. Past studies have typically used convenience samples from student populations or from religious institutions. Both approaches have the disadvantage of potentially constricting the range of responses. As such, the lack of a significant association based on high or low religiosity may be due to the fact that one sample is dominated by low religiosity scores (student samples) while the other may suffer from little variation among high religiosity scores (church samples). Either way, the lack of significant variation in the samples could result in little variation in participants’ responses, and thus little ability to measure the relationship between the variables. This study sought to re-test the relationship of religiosity to self-deception using samples from both a secular and a religious setting. In addition, previous studies have not differentiated between male and female respondents. Thus the following hypotheses were tested:

1. There will be a negative relationship between extrinsic-personal religiosity and self-deception.
 - 1a. The relationship will differ for male and female respondents
 - 1b. The relationship will differ for secular and religious samples.
2. There will not be a relationship between extrinsic-social religiosity and self-deception.
 - 2a. The relationship will not differ for male and female respondents
 - 2b. The relationship will not differ for secular and religious samples.
3. There will not be a relationship between intrinsic religiosity and self-deception.
 - 3a. The relationship will not differ for male and female respondents
 - 3b. The relationship will not differ for secular and religious samples.

Method

The participants were 104 adults and students (46 males, 58 females). Fifty (50) were members of a non-denominational church in Alabama, and 54 were students at a state university. These participants responded to a question that included the Allport and Ross (1967) Religious Orientation Scale to test intrinsic religiosity, social extrinsic religiosity, and personal extrinsic religiosity. The participants also responded to the Paulhus (1984, 1998) Deception Scale (formerly the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding, BIDR) to test self-deception and impression management. Pearson's correlations between religiosity, self-deception, and impression management were used to test the hypotheses.

Results

Hypothesis 1 was supported. Self-deception was negatively associated with impression management ($-.49, p < .01$). Impression management, in turn, was negatively associated with extrinsic-personal religiosity ($-.28, p < .01$).

Hypothesis 1a, which predicted a gender difference in the relationship, was supported. For females, self-deception was negatively associated with impression management ($-.31, p < .05$) and impression management was negatively associated with extrinsic-personal religiosity ($-.35, p < .01$). For males, self-deception was negatively associated with impression management ($-.67, p < .01$), but impression management was not associated significantly with extrinsic-personal religiosity ($-.21$).

Hypothesis 1b, which predicted a difference in the secular/church subsamples, was also supported. Within the sample from the church group, self-deception was negatively associated with impression management ($-.47, p < .01$); impression management was also negatively associated with extrinsic-personal religiosity ($-.39, p < .01$). For the student sample, self-deception was also negatively associated with impression management ($-.53, p < .01$), but impression management was not associated with extrinsic-personal religiosity ($-.10$).

Hypothesis 2. The null hypothesis of no relationship between self-deception and extrinsic-social religiosity was verified. There was no significant correlation between the two variables ($.10$).

The null hypothesis 2a, which predicted no difference between males and females on this relationship, was supported. There were no significant associations between self-deception, impression management and extrinsic-social religiosity.

The null hypothesis 2b, which predicted no difference between the two samples on this relationship, was verified only for the student sample ($r = .08$). There was a significant correlation between self-deception and extrinsic-social religiosity for the church sample ($-.37, p < .01$).

Hypothesis 3. The null hypothesis of no relationship between self-deception and intrinsic religiosity was verified. There was no significant correlation between the two variables ($.03$).

The null hypothesis 3a, which predicted no difference between males and females on this relationship, was supported. There were no significant associations between self-deception, impression management and intrinsic religiosity for either gender subsample.

The null hypothesis 3b, which predicted no difference between the two samples on this relationship, was also verified. There were no significant associations between self-deception,

impression management and intrinsic religiosity for either gender subsample.

Discussion

The results indicate that the relationship between self-deception and religiosity is somewhat more complex than previous studies have indicated, particularly as it applies to extrinsic religiosity. Specifically, the nature of the relationship depends upon at least three factors: (1) the type of extrinsic religiosity being measured (personal or social), (2) the gender of the individual, and (3) whether the individual is affiliated with a religious institution.

The form of self-deception identified as impression management was inversely associated with extrinsic-personal religiosity. Further, although this association was present in the total sample, it could only be verified for females and for those respondents who were affiliated with a church. Thus individuals, particularly church-going women, who score higher on impression management will tend to have lower scores on extrinsic-personal religiosity.

One possibility is that those who enter the religious environment with high impression management needs might view extrinsic religiosity behaviors as unnecessary. Conversely, those with low scores on impression management will have higher scores on extrinsic-personal religiosity. For these individuals, the personal religious behavior may fill an impression need that is not met by their own impression management behavior. This latter behavior might be described as the “Plain Mary” who establishes a personal image based on her religious activities rather than her appearance.

One explanation may be that both high-impression management females and high extrinsic personal religiosity females are “presenting” themselves to an homophilous audience. Additional, membership in particular religions may affect both the demonstrated religiosity and the low impression management. Such an approach is likely to be taken by conservative religions with two values: (1) low tolerance for media images, especially as they relate to sexuality; and (2) what might be referred to as a “dress code” for its members. Thus, both groups may be controlling their impressions – just in different ways for different audiences.

The results also indicated that higher scores on self-deception are associated with lower scores on impression management. This supports previous research and may indicate that people who are deceiving themselves make less effort to control the impression they make on others.

Regardless, future research is needed to verify these concepts. Is the “church-going wallflower” an accurate description of this phenomenon or merely a convenient stereotype? To what extent is this effect gender-based and influenced by religious affiliation? More research in broader contexts and in different religious environments are needed.

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