

Book Review

A Necessary Pain in the Heart*

A Review of *Why We Lie: The Evolutionary Roots of Deception and the Unconscious Mind* by David Livingstone Smith. New York: St Martin's Press. ISBN 0-312-31039, 2004.

Thomas E. Dickins, School of Psychology, University of East London and Centre for Philosophy of Natural and Social Science, London School of Economics, London E15 4LZ, United Kingdom. Email: t.dickins@uel.ac.uk.

* This is a line from Stevie Wonder's song *Ordinary Pain*, on his album *Songs in the Key of Life*, 1976. This song advocates a stringent functionalism about emotional responses.

Six years ago, at the annual Human Behaviour and Evolution Society conference, I sat down to dinner with a group of fellow evolutionary behavioural scientists. Everyone was in high conference spirits and everyone at my table was male. Soon conversation moved from social gossip about fellow delegates to talking about relationships, and one of our number posed the question "does working in this field hinder your romantic relationships?" The table was divided, with half of the men claiming no influence whatsoever, for in those intimate circumstances their behaviours simply played out naturally. The other half saw knowledge about evolved mating behaviours as a hindrance to their interactions, for they often failed to seize the moment and instead went off-line and observed the interaction with a critical eye. I placed myself in this latter camp.

At the time the conversation was an amusing conceit and I thought little more about it. But during the course of the following six years my personal life continued and, as it turned out, my relationship history unfolded somewhat unfortunately. When my wife and I separated I quite naturally tried to think about the situation from an evolutionary perspective and I asked myself whether I could conceptualize the failure in our relationship in terms of what I knew about mating decisions. Of course, I soon chastised myself for trying to jump from statements about human universals to an analysis of the fine-grained sequences of behaviour that constituted my marriage. Nonetheless, I had started down a particular road in my thinking. I did not understand the nature of the emotional pain I felt, but I recognised that it was patterned; I did not understand my motivations for saying certain things during the separation process, but I saw that they achieved certain specific effects. Surely, these things were not idiosyncratic to me and surely there must be a functional story to tell about this aspect of psychology?

Whilst I reflected on this I remembered the conversation at the conference and realised that no one on the table had claimed that an evolutionary perspective could *help* a relationship; the only expressed options were no effect or hindrance. Perhaps, I rather grandly reasoned, an evolutionary account of the emotions felt around separation might form the foundation of a useful therapeutic tool. During discussions with a number of patient colleagues, one of them reminded me of Freud's ambitions. Freud had hoped to integrate an account of personal-level psychological machinations with contemporary neurological science. Freud, of course, failed in this attempt but his expression of the problem can only be seen as useful.

Recently, Timothy D. Wilson (2002) has more formally resurrected Freud's project in his book *Strangers to Ourselves*. The subtitle of this book is *Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*, which captures Wilson's thesis that much of our psychology is unconscious and adapted to solve specific problems. Our conscious, or personal-level processing is perhaps best seen as a calibrational tool, or set of tools, that finesses work done by the unconscious. In making this claim, Wilson brings the Freudian project into contact with modern evolutionary approaches. However, Wilson does not offer a detailed adaptationist analysis of our unconscious psychology and instead tantalisingly hints at a variety of possible functions that are served by such processes. David Livingstone Smith's book, on the other hand, sets out to achieve an adaptationist decomposition of at least one aspect of our unconscious psychology; that which delivers/underlies social manipulation.

The first half of the book is an introduction to evolutionary psychology and to theories of deception and self-deception. It is from this half that the book gains its title. For those well versed in evolutionary approaches to the behavioural sciences this can be skipped: however, for those who are not, its light touch and pace will bring them rapidly to a point Smith's core thesis can be digested.

It is as follows. We tell stories; or rather we construct narratives about much of what goes on in our lives. These narratives are for our own private consumption, to explain events as well as to shape and predict futures. Our stories find public uses too, for they act as communicative structures. However, most of our conversational machinations are not, in fact, under personal-level control, but instead are under the unconscious or sub-personal-level control of a social module. This module is a domain-specific device, in keeping with contemporary assumptions in Evolutionary Psychology, and it delivers (small-*p*) political insight, in keeping with the Machiavellian Intelligence Hypothesis, as well as more general social scanning. The key point is that this module renders us highly sensitive to other people and it influences our narration in such a way as to deliver unintended messages. At the personal-level we tell ourselves we are delivering message *x*, but our sub-personal-level cognition is in fact causing us to send message *y*.

An example of such coded communication happened when I once entered a public house in the U.K. with a fellow academic. We were engaged in a debate about some aspect of cognition, vigorously disagreeing with each other while we found somewhere to sit. We eventually perched on the edge of a shared bench and

continued arguing, seemingly oblivious to the world around us. At one point my antagonist, who had grown frustrated with my line of argument, declared that “your argument is about as useful as a one-armed man on a building site.” Sitting next to him, further along the bench, was a one-armed man who was clearly manipulating pints, wallets, cash and handshakes in a different manner than most. No one had mentioned this man, and my protagonist claimed he had not even seen him; but, according to Smith, the likelihood is that my colleague had seen him, had registered his loss of an arm, and had had a series of thoughts about the consequences of such an injury. Such features are of importance to a social animal, and according to Smith, are the kind of thing we might comment on to the extent that even if we do not directly discuss the issue, it will find a way to be expressed in our conversation.

Smith has many examples of situations in which public pronouncements indirectly (and not always too subtly) convey messages about key social facts. One striking example is of a conversation among some of Smith’s students. Three students had turned up to a class on a harsh winter’s morning, and the remaining four had not. Whilst they were waiting for the class to start a conversation ensued that included the following exchange:

Amy: I heard a horrible story on the news, but I can’t remember what it was.

Michelle: There was this guy who drove up into the mountains with his three-year-old child. He went out hunting and left the kid all by himself in the truck. When he came back his son was frozen to death. He just went off to enjoy himself, and when he came back his son was dead. (p. 129)

Smith claims that this conversation was a coded way of commenting on the absence of the other class members, and that the “man in the story appears to stand for the absent students and his abandoned child stands for the three students who turned up for class” (p. 130). Amy and Michelle would not necessarily have been aware of this, but their concerns were filtering through, none the less.

It is clear from the above examples that Smith has retained much of the Freudian project. Here we have an attempt to uncover unconscious motivations by attending to the content of conversations, which is reminiscent of psychoanalysis. Analysing conversations in this manner, as Smith readily admits, appears to stretch credulity at points: what external measure do we have to validate such claims? Nonetheless, Smith is not putting this forward as a *fait accomplis* but rather as an open hypothesis for future refining and testing.

Smith’s thesis presents an interesting counter to many social scientists working in the constructionist tradition (see Dickins, 2004 for a discussion of this tradition and its weaknesses). In its mild form this tradition claims that much of our knowledge about the world is socially constructed in a language that does not directly represent reality. Instead, we create narratives that reflect our various interests, and

that are malleable in the face of small-*p* and big-*p* political forces. Such narration impairs our ability to deliver objective knowledge about the world, according to some theorists. A typical (and adequate) retort to this position is to undermine the wholesale application of the concept of narration and present some form of realist philosophy of science. Smith has extended this reply by treating human narrative practices, in social situations, as a phenomenon to be explained; as something that is patterned, seemingly designed and therefore open to an adaptationist analysis. Smith has in effect asked the question – “if we generate narratives then what are their properties and how do we understand them?” His answer is that they are highly social and indirect forms of communication that are influenced by a Machiavellian module.

Although the book is well written and engaging, it is not entirely clear how to relate the discussions of deception with the discussion of unconscious influences on our narratives. One possible link is through the discussion of self-deception, in which Smith outlines the familiar argument that the best way to deceive others is by deceiving ourselves. In this way we are so certain of the untruth that we will not give away any “tells” that might undermine the necessary deception. Such an idea is clearly an aspect of the relationship between personal- and sub-personal-level interactions; but functionally this is quite distinct from the indirect signalling functions of our narratives. At most, all that can be said is that both deception and indirect signalling are about social manipulation, but this is too coarse-grained analysis to yield a useful evolutionary psychology. Instead it seems that Smith has discussed two aspects of the evolutionary Freudian project.

I opened this review by asking whether or not, as with the original Freudian project, evolutionary psychology could ever hope to deliver understanding of human troubles, and perhaps even some order of therapeutic intervention. Smith has not attempted to do this (despite a therapeutic background) but his thesis must surely be of interest to those involved in the “talking therapies”; indeed, some of Smith’s examples come from therapeutic conversations. By turning an adaptationist eye to the possible sub-textual social signalling of our narratives we might begin to recognise patterns of expression that are indicative of malaise and low-mood. We might also begin to see how seemingly normal conversations between people, in whatever form of relationship, are encoding and signalling discontent and frustrations. Just as we are uncovering the necessary elements of emotional pain, so we might uncover the ordinary sub-personal signals of everyday conversation.

References:

- Dickins, T. E. (2004.) Social Constructionism as Cognitive Science. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 34 (4), 333-352
- Wilson, T. D. (2002) *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*. London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.