

Notes for a review of *Deceit and Self-Deception* by Robert Trivers, 2011

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Robert L. Trivers, author of a new book titled simply, *Deceit*, is one of the truly brilliant standouts in the history of efforts to understand the puzzling and sometimes both consciously and unconsciously disguised complexities that form the social life of the human species. As a graduate student 40 years ago, Trivers published what was perhaps the most enlightening contribution to the structure of modern human sociality: the roles, manipulations, and consequences of social reciprocity. Reciprocity entered the arena of human sociality as a partner to the structure of human kinship systems, worked out mainly in 1964 by the parallel brilliance of the late William D. Hamilton. The explanation and coordination of these two meshing social systems have provided a general basis for steadily unraveling the dual organization of the lifetime makeup of humans, which all together comprise the sometimes maddeningly obscure and inscrutable phenomena generated within the universe of life. From the insights of Charles Darwin and Ronald A. Fisher, followed by those of Hamilton and Trivers, the thread of a growing understanding of ourselves has become a major factor in the continuing effort -- and the desperate need -- to enlighten humanity about itself, and to expand the elusive pathways that can ultimately lead us toward the haunting and distant goal of global harmony.

The book is an easy read, especially considering the stimulating parade of profoundly significant aspects of human behavior that have rarely or never been taken into account. The book is organized in a comfortable and simple fashion, with a simple two-ranked hierarchy: chapters and a second extensive level of labeled essays and stories. He has consistently used down-to-earth and straightforward language. He has utilized an abundance and variety of examples and stories that often reflect what he regards as his own shortcomings; he has also shown refreshingly forthrightness on many personal issues that some might have considered incautious. He uses his chapter openers effectively to explain the upcoming topics, and to call attention to their later placement. The book is extensively referenced, via an easily used method that removes all clutter from the text pages. [345 words to here]

When Robert Trivers took on the ins and outs of deceit, he plunged himself into what I regard as the most important and least understood problem of human existence: and that is a conscious and general understanding of human behavior. It is by no means a simple topic, and the topic is not distinct from Trivers's approach to conscious and non-conscious deception. There is scarcely any doubt that virtually every human accepts, almost without reflection, that he or she fully grasps the notion of a general understanding of human behavior. It is easy for that opinion to be deflated, merely by absorbing no more than a few fragments of the consequences of non-conscious deception.

To begin serious solving of the above . . .

The truth is, however, that

When Trivers immersed himself in the study of the [broad and effectual -- deep?] topic of deceit, he risks setting himself into the deepest aspects of human behavior (i.e., he gets into every level of not merely behavior but the underlying physiology and morphology and ????? -- he seeks to approach the whole monte. . ).

Many different levels and expressions of consciousness can be involved in human selflessness, and in compensating indirectly reciprocal interactions. The resulting social connections can create expanding networks of reciprocating selflessness nourished by return beneficence. Examining the complex interplay of social investment and return beneficence in religions and other tightly-knit social groups is potentially a useful approach to understanding how humans can work toward global harmony.

How many stories has Trivers told? How many examples has he explained?

Is there a way to end by talking about the difficulty of getting straight the problems that remain for humans to become conscious of the major aspects of their existence, and the difficulty of discovering about our own behavior, as opposed to molecular information that is not linked yet to behavior that is “at the top” of the most complex, most formidable, least conscious patterns of behavior.

This is a man who has been regarded as one of the 100 most important thinkers in the U.S.

148 sets of stories? -- how many stories in the sets?! Santa Cruz is the University where he taught years ago -- his students recall his lectures in which he frequently presented examples of conscious and unconscious deceit.

Can we solve all our social problems by reducing or eliminating conscious and unconscious deception? Can we reduce our social problems by reducing or eliminating conscious and unconscious deception?

Robert Trivers has engaged his extraordinary mind to explore and explain the most important questions for all of humanity -- even, perhaps, eclipsing the possibility of extra-terrestrial aliens or monster physical objects and catastrophic climatic alterations -- because his topics can diminish the impact of our worst consequence of evolution via natural selection. Why are we so extensively and elaborately tangled up with conscious and unconscious deception?

Trivers can do the above solely because he has brought together, in simple everyday language -- and with great penetrance -- the problem of understanding the facts of the whole of human behavior and that evolution via natural selection has inevitably shaped all of us humans via the collections of genes in groups called genomes that are re-arranged from generation to generation. In general, only genes survive between generations [Bring in the consequences of increasingly rapid -- and novel and poorly understood -- changes in technology and culture.

There is a certain degree of contentment, or satisfaction, among individual humans, as if we understand ourselves more or less completely -- or at least satisfactorily -- but

What circumstances lead to use of deceit -- especially the kid that fails(?!).

(p. 275) The reason for religion being successful is that it is an effective system for ratcheting (p. 285 ff.) group-living (increasing sizes of groups and giving such groups strengths in the larger population of local humans) (see p. 279) (muting and manipulation of evolved consciousness).

p.282: On selfishness and muted consciousness

p. 284: first full paragraph -- not a supposition or guess -- see top of p. 285.

pp. 285, 288: Team competition: are we designed (evolved) to be deceived (when thinking only of the team, etc.). Are we evolved to be deceived (sometimes?) by our associates?

How do we direct ourselves to seek beneficial rather than deceitful changes in human sociality -- as with war, or changing of social systems -- how can we tell that they are indeed "in need" of alteration (or not)?

Every sentence of RLT's is crucial -- loaded with significance.

RLT thinks so profoundly that despite the simplicity -- and explanatory rephrasing - one sometimes has to go over his narratives repeatedly to be clear (sure? certain?).

Every person who wishes to promote understanding of self needs to travel with extreme concentration and care to absorb accurately and completely how evolution (natural selection) has built its consequences. I believe that this knowledge development almost required step-by-step absorption of what Trivers has to say -- perhaps early always via multiple participants.

Trivers writes simply, but the arguments are often so deep -- so close to the complexities of truly understanding human mentality -- that the effort to grasp it (all and completely) is almost frightening.

I should turn to my view of complexity of humanity.

Read and re-read pp. 10-15.

All human deceit relates to competition within the species, and -- in re to members of own species being principal competitors -- i.e., their own principal hostile forces of nature.

This is the kind of book that begins the incredible problem of human self-understanding. And the real essence of that problem lies in comprehending the whole of behavior; the problems and deepest aspects of self-knowledge arise out of human comprehension that is closely connected to adjustments and shiftings of the interpretations of behavioral aspects of human life.

pp. 16-18 deception more than self-deception

Read C again

How does one weigh the impact of male-female deception compared to PHFN in humans?

D Why is deception so difficult to detect?

E -- p. 20: He starts with real examples.

How about blushing? Sweating? Which of such are adaptive? And why?

G Maybe it. . .

H But future-seeking is less in non-humans?

I War: Over-confidence -- shunting risk to others

J?

K Unknowingly ignorant?

Lots of evidence of knowledge of relevant studies

Robert Trivers did not start talking about deceit recently: Beginning at least 21 years ago he was pouring a stream of 6-7 subsequent doctoral students into the University of Michigan (alone!). I was informed about the stories concerning deceit, that Bob related during his lectures at Santa Cruz [Kyle Summers, John Pepper, Andy Richards, Rachel Smolker, Richard Connor, Heather Heying, Bret Weinstein.]

Trivers is not afraid to speak his mind -- to place blame where it belongs, even if the blame is his own.

I'll tell a story of my own: I was attending a symposium at the University of Michigan. Bob was scheduled to give a lecture. He arrived rather late in the auditorium, holding a large bottle of California wine and looking about nervously. When he finally located me he came over, and there was a quick but definite hug between us. He handed me the wine, and I knew it was a gift resulting from some difficulties during his last visit to the U-M a year or so ago. I told him that my wife, Lorrie, who worked nearby in Ann Arbor, was coming to hear his lecture. He told Lorrie later that when he heard she was coming he went immediately back to his room and began again to work on his lecture.

L, O: How does group derogation serve those being drafted by the military? -- especially dangerous to the drafted individuals, but also especially useful for those convinced that war is essential -- hyper-competitiveness and hyper-patriotism are both being served.

M: So how do we minimize such outgroup effects?

N: There may be some errors or weaknesses here and there in RLT's narratives, but most are on target.

Q Humor

R: RLT stealing (or other admissions. . .)

S: Behavior is special.

T: Computer spam!

U: Brood parasites (good evolutionary stuff, but not my central interest -- restricted to humans except for examples that can apply to humans)

V: W: Why sex?

X: Writing about trauma p.136ff.

My mother's words at the train taking me to Chicago as a draftee headed for infantry rifleman training. As she hugged me goodbye she said, "I didn't raise you to be a soldier, but I know you'll be a good one." Wow! I didn't want to be a soldier -- good one or not."

For a long time it has been growing on me that we members of the seven billion souls occupying the planet Earth have, sadly, remained in ignorance, apathy, unconcern, and disinterest regarding how we behave. That is, mountains of ignorance, confusion, fearfulness, and combativeness -- and all too extensively deceptiveness by what I have called hyper-competitiveness and hyper-patriotism. Our children are driven to win at virtually all costs, and we assure ourselves repeatedly and all too comfortably that our sons . . .

If we were to be confronted by a population of humanoids much like ourselves with respect to intellect but with entirely different views of [the description above], we would not resemble or outdo ourselves in respects other than hyper-competition, including hyper-patriotism. The only way to resolve that dilemma is for us to somehow become monumentally more keen about exactly what we are like and what we do with the kinds of "liking" that we promote continually.

The only solution is to discover how to analyze ourselves more deeply than we ever imagined possible. The solution is re-analysis of behavior -- our human behavior. The range of discoveries that might accomplish such changes for ourselves includes all discoveries about all of our traits and tendencies from molecular discoveries right up to the deepest and most penetrating knowledge-building in ourselves. It will be a very long time before the whole structure of human behavior is unleashed (unpacked?) and laid out for all to view and use. Believe that we need to focus on the kinds of approaches seen in Bob Trivers' book about conscious and non-conscious deception. I feel this way because Trivers has taken on a very large slice of the behavioral "everything" that we will have to understand if we are ever to even begin to approach global harmony. We cannot continue to accept that blessing our obvious tendencies and ability to destroy everyone we decide is a competitor. . .

Put together natural selection: behavior, genetics, environment -- the variables. . .

There is a solid reason why more than a million people per year have been deliberately killed in wars, genocides, and murders of recent times. [Explain the factual nature of natural selection -- from my essay in the mockingbird book]. Darwin's Hostile Forces of Nature focused within our species -- not among the uncountable millions of non-human species but uniquely within our own species. No other species takes as its principal HFN the members of its own species. Why have we unmatched intellectuals languished in such a backward morass? Why have all efforts to move toward global harmony somehow been stymied?

A solid reason underlies . . .

1. Not knowing what are the problems of humans
2. Principal HFN -- same species (consequences)
3. Gaps between neuro- and molecular findings, and everyday behavior (RT discusses some of this)

social investment  
return beneficence

Bigelow's statement

Diseases, injuries, experience, learning. . .

Natural selection -- Mark Twain  
Genetic variation  
Environmental variations  
Ontogenetic changes and variations  
Learned behavior

Why so much deceit? And the kinds? Because our own PHFN is our own species? Deceit and PHFN go together in humans. Do we try directly to reduce or diminish PHFN?

RLT should be applauded for speaking straight out.

For not being afraid to lay it on the line -- meaning deceit etc. -- falsified histories.

Also for tackling a whole set of problems with the most complex difficult -to-understand BEHAVIOR.

And for taking on a perhaps more extensive and complex -- the whole enchilada -- arising from [comprehending humans?]

War is not the way to help people who need help.

Mysteries of human consciousness

The truly important problems with humanity are about the “top level” of human behavior -- everyday life -- everyday activities -- the behaviors that mix and coordinate and improve the intellect and how all its functions work. It’s the level that is by far the most important -- and that will remain the case for a long time. It’s a long way from DNA (molecular biology) to accomplishing the most effective and significant working of the human brain (intellect).

RLT’s book should be read by everyone because it leads directly into the growing understanding of that top level of human understanding. Perhaps only from there can we go on to get a start on global harmony.

Straightforward language  
Frank explanations of his efforts

What is deceit?

How does deceit between species differ from within-species. . .

Do humans deceive as if different species as well as within species?

Is it the proportions of non-consciousness or the specific forms of hidden but potential consciousness?

Everyone has some understanding of the nature of species. Including that humans are a distinct species. Most humans realize that consciousness is a special trait, compared to nearly all other non-human species (some primates. . . maybe others). But it does not follow that humans understand the \_\_\_\_\_ proportions of potentially or actually conscious behavior. How does selection take us from gene changes to mental feedbacks that build and expand deception -- or, really, all aspects of human behavior (as contrasted with the “permanence” [slow change] of “evolved” (genetic?) changes)?

p.7: Mutationism versus reciprocity?

How do the counter-moved changes with humans versus non-humans -- within species versus between-species?

p. 8: stick insects evolve to be better “hidden” (by “deceit”). What about humans?

p. 9: It’s terrific that RLT is explaining himself. Do we hide reality or does NS?  
The stick insect does not use [what?]

p. 9-10: Blushing (not mentioned?) but -- explain. Why “blushing”

Tendency to reduce or eliminate knowledge (in the interest of deception?) accomplished because of NS -- how? What are the possibilities?

p. 12: So far no functional explanation of some deception -- ? Why not? Just didn’t evolve? (not critical?) or false exhibition of nervousness, or is it a signal of so, regarding what?

p. 12: [Unconscious processes] predominate when conscious degree of control is minimized because of cognitive load.

p. 13: crickets and reasons for success in aggression (and vice versa)

p. 29: Co-evolution and deception as “acted out over evolutionary time.”

What is the relationship between my notion of principal hostile forces of nature and the in and out complexities of deceit.

What is the relation between “on site” flexible (and adjustable) variations of consciousness and deception (etc.?) and how NS works -- or, say, cricket males fighting versus deceit?

A p. 29: Evolutionary struggle favors intelligence on both sides (deceiver and deceived)

But why did humans take off so dramatically? Why were their close relatives obliterated? What are we humans like?

I can write about RLT’s brain, his work -- thinking -- or about. . .

p. 30: What of “spontaneous” or sudden or novel capabilities?

p. 31: Birds (eating) versus butterflies hiding (change) in a color etc. Bird uses on-the-spot “thought,” butterfly unchangeable

p. 32: In a way, deceit is about almost everything. Explain that.

RLT’s coverage is monumental (in several directions)

p. 36: ff -- and intelligence

p. 36: Does it reverse?

Can we not use variety coming from deception?

p. 37: What’s “behavioral deception?”

p. 37: The smarter the species (primate) the more often deception occurs. Self-deception too? Why?

What can cause smarter apes and people to lie less?

One big long story, with amazing depth

Asserting power even when tied down in a hospital bed or when he realized that the fellow catering to a female companion suddenly saw himself passing in a store window as a bent over old man.

In my opinion everyone should have a copy of this extraordinary book and the effort of this remarkably intelligent man -- also because of the topic (topics) -- who writes in everyday language about everyday happenings, yet comes up with incredibly valuable facts.

Don't try to read the whole book -- or even a large part of it. Once you've settled into it, read one story at a time and try to comprehend the simple but profound and novel. . .

*-edited by David Lahti, 9/5/2021*