

FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS IN MAJOR LIFE DECISIONS

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DEFINITION

The term *false consciousness*, which has had diverse usage in Marxist and existentialist literature refers here to socially produced self and other misrepresentations and related character structures which sustain individual activity to satisfy requirements of the social order. Most subjects are limited in capacity to reflect on the social and life history dimensions of important decisions. Such constraints on self reflection must be adequately conceptualized for a full understanding of the decision making processes. Based on life history research on major life decisions, I find four related aspects of false consciousness:

- 1) Ideological character of predominant approaches to decision making psychology.
- 2) Types of rationalization which underlie false consciousness in major life decisions.
- 3) How false consciousness subverts recognizing primary interests in decision process.
- 4) Collective misunderstanding of the nature of *personal dilemmas*.

The positivist logic of the physical sciences, which makes possible the technical control of nature, is assumed appropriate also for understanding *inner nature*. Traditional rationality may lead to impressive results in industry and the exact sciences, but I question whether it suits as a model for personal decisions and personal problem solving. The ethos of technical rationality is utilitarian. It stresses efficiency, maximum gain, and minimum risk. It assumes fixed behavioral sequences which guarantee effectiveness. Technical rationality may secretly sustain irrationality while supposing to minimize it.

We may initially characterize a decision as a conscious resolution to carry out a project. Speaking of a "major life decision," typically implies that the involvements and activities of the individual will be altered substantially, and that the spheres of the life structure will be transformed. A major life decision always involves rearranging the social field in which the individual is embedded. Without exception such decisions involve changes in meaningful relations with other human figures, either directly, or at imaginary and unconscious levels. Rationalist models of decision making

ignore this *intersubjectivity of deciding*.

COGNITIVE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

That perspective, particularly dominant in social psychology and *cognitive behavioral* syntheses suggests that decisions should be made rationally. They should involve a process of reasoning which confronts reality. Since important decisions involve risk, stress and emotionality, which are assumed to contaminate the reasoning process, they interfere with ideal rationality. Adequate information processing is likely to be displaced by impulsive, premature resolution of a dilemma or endless deliberation. To minimize the adverse effects of emotional disturbance, a stance of vigilance is recommended. This involves a sequence of conscientiously executed cognitive steps. 1) The problem must be conceptualized to know what actually needs to be decided. 2) Various solutions should be surveyed, and options should be searched out. 3) These alternatives are evaluated by risk or probability of success or failure. On the basis of this process, a response to the problem may be selected which is likely to effect a solution.

At first, this cognitive approach seems compelling. This is merely a personalized version of the "scientific" mode of problem solving. As our culture directs us to be logical, we might eagerly adopt such a method to organize our confusion in time of deliberation. Yet this model can be twisted to serve the ends of any determined intention. And a more serious problem: the model fails to contend with the defensive tendency to rationalize. While pretending to induce a clearer view of the reality in which one is deciding, it actually obfuscates the matter. It severs the individual from the historic, social, and unconscious roots of the dilemma. This further decenters the subject, creating the gap which rationalization aims to conceal.

RATIONALIZATION

I use three senses of the term *rationalization*.

- 1) By the Freudian concept, action is justified on grounds other than its primary determinants. Such rationalization can arise from anxiety aroused as an unacceptable intention

seeks to be acknowledged and expressed. Decisions may be made compulsively, "on the back" of rationalizations which cover the return of repressed desire in a familiar social situation. The dynamics of the repetition compulsion sustain all such stereotyped deciding.

2) Rationalization also comes into play at the point where the rationale sought to justify an action is picked from among cliches, excuses and disclaimers which generally pass unchallenged. Social endorsement thus facilitates expressing unacknowledged private intentions, which affirm the existing social order.

3) The Weberian concept of rationalization subsumes the extension of scientific rationality to the conduct of life itself, including *mathematizing experience* by assigning weights to personal goals or values, and *means-ends rationality* by precise calculation of means to attain definite practical ends. Originally, such processes were adopted in administrative and executive circles, but now are frequently used in administering the life course by subjects, and called *life planning*, *goal setting*, and *values clarification*. Such rationalization calls into play related defense measures, such as intellectualizing, denial, undoing, isolation, and projection.

Deliberation following means-ends rationality rarely questions whether the ends sought are desirable. These questions are sidestepped in rationalist models: "Does this decision have to be made now? By me? Am I really trying to solve some problem other than the one related to this decision?" At the same time, the institutions and practices prevalent in society have been rationalized by highly bureaucratized division of labor, mechanization of production, and external assessment of individual performance, to the point that individuals see the social order as "natural." They quickly assume fault if their needs are not met in that framework.

BILL'S DILEMMA

I summarize a series of interviews with a subject called "Bill." He lives in a middle class suburb of a metropolis with his wife and three children. He has a long commute to work where he demonstrates computer systems to prospective buyers. He knows none of his coworkers personally, even though he has been with the company for two years. He

says his work performance is satisfactory, but not energetic. He leaves work as early as he can to join his family. In the evening, he plays with his own and other neighborhood children, watches television, and talks to his wife about the day's doings. On weekends, he watches sports on television, goes to church, and enjoys family life.

Bill's involvement in these spheres is generally calm, quiet, and peaceful. Yet, every four or five days he loses his temper in a manner which frightens him. He is never violent, but he sees images of flying fists as he shouts at his wife or children. His temper is the aspect of his personality which he would most like to change.

After two interviews, Bill reported that he was due for an annual salary review at work. He said he was preparing "... really to go in there and tell it to them like it is." His financial situation was worsening in the face of inflation. He had to reduce too many essential areas of his family's life style. He wanted to ask for a big pay raise, and was willing to work in any sort of position to earn it. In a brave moment, Bill said he might threaten leaving the company if he did not hear a satisfactory response. He might also take a part-time job with the Air Force Reserve. Eight years ago, he entered the Air Force to avoid the draft, serving six years as navigator in intercontinental bombers. He liked flying very much, but missed his family when away. He grudgingly took a big pay cut when he left the Air Force to spend more time with his family.

FAILING STRATEGIES

The psychology of decision making typically picks up the decision problem at the point where it is already specifically framed. Thus, it is easy to adopt a rationalist model which ignores the subject's social embeddedness and his personal history. As yet, Bill is not thinking in terms of having to make a decision. He is only formulating strategies to relieve financial problems. Since it is hard for Bill to admit that the issue is more directly related to a lack of fulfillment in his work, his decision will become framed as: "Should I join the Air Force Reserves to make more money?" This question fails to address his real problem, and regardless of his answer, will not quell his angry outbursts.

The annual salary review failed to proceed as Bill had hoped. They said there were no openings for him in other departments, and that raises had to be kept to a minimum because company profits had fallen off. He then told his supervisors that he might have to take on a part-time job with the Air Force in order to make ends meet. They only seemed concerned that he be on the job when needed.

As I probed the anger Bill may have felt from this incident, he quickly sided with his supervisors, saying: "They had to work within the company's salary guidelines. Inflation hits everyone hard. We all have to tighten our belts." He said he could always look for a job with another company if he needed money badly enough. He hardly recognized that he had backed off almost immediately in the salary "negotiation." While he feared being too pushy, his passivity would ruin any chance for the aspired management position.

RETREAT

I lack space to explain the origins of Bill's passivity in life history perspective. We can see this aspect of his personality resulting from experience in a matrix of social relations which compel him to be peaceful and compromising. Bill's decision takes shape in the *retreat from confrontation*. He had applied to the Air Force Reserve "just to see" if they would take him back. They did. Finding his family then as much burden as joy, he savored the idea of soaring above the earth. "I sure like to fly," he kept saying, as he pondered the issue.

To understand Bill's later decision to join the Air Force Reserves applying the rationalist model, or worse, to use it as a guideline for a better decision, ignores the fact that Bill's representation of himself and his world are not entirely his own. His complex desire to be a *good father*, entails mutually conflicting role images. His *good father* image stresses appearances, such as a high salary, new car, big house, eating out with his children, and designer jeans for his eight-year-old. This image, instilled by our consumer ideology takes precedence over that of the father who spends good times with his children and is emotionally available to them. Both images play off unconscious intentions toward Bill's own father, judged a failure both counts.

When Bill decided to spend more time away from his family, he had to suppress his primary intent to maintain the quality of his family life. The sociocultural context in which he lives, and from which he draws rationales agrees with this move. Bill's status anxiety and his characterological anxiety move him to a position where the social order has him contributing more firmly to its maintenance and literally to its defense.

CONCLUSION

Rationalist models are not structured to give awareness of this *false consciousness* of the ideological core of personality functioning. Privatization of problems, serialization of individuals, fragmentation of neighborhoods and workplaces, all prevent a collective supersession of the need to make self wrenching decisions like Bill's.

False consciousness has two facets in major life decisions: 1) Constraints are not recognized. The social framework for individual life is seen as a natural factor. It produces subjects who have internalized its authority and whose decisions fall neatly into place, even if somewhat haphazard. 2) Domination *is* recognized, but the subject shies away from confrontation with complex structures, relations, or institutions. Typically, a compromise formation results. Gratifications are guiltily sought in private, or the individual's social action is diverted into ineffective realms as regards the social totality, via sports, television, communes, religiosity, and hobbies.

Rationalization functions not only as a private maneuver. The characteristics of this constraint on subjectivity mark it as indelibly social. False consciousness evades the social roots of personal dilemmas, and leads subjects to struggle in isolation with problems which are actually collective. Most decision problems are mini-struggles of social and historical import. If psychological methods and theories, as well as popular culture, ignore the processes of false consciousness, we are not likely to develop effective strategies for solving personal problems and public issues.