

BENEFECTANCE

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BENEFECTIONANCE

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Social Psychology, Cognitive Psychology

1. Core Definition

Benefectionance is a pivotal concept in social and personality psychology that describes a pervasive phenomenon of cognitive bias and self-deception within the individual's personality system. It represents the psychological drive to maintain a positive and morally justifiable self-image by selectively distorting and reconstructing memories of past actions. This selective recall ensures that an individual perceives their historical behavior as having been more benevolent (morally good, generous, and helpful) and more effective (competent, successful, and impactful) than objective reality might suggest.

As a mechanism of self-justification, benefectionance allows the individual to recall their personal history as a coherent narrative of moral goodness and success. This process is often routine and automatic, contributing significantly to the stability and defense of the individual's self-esteem. The term encapsulates the fundamental human need not only to feel good about oneself but specifically to feel successful and morally upright simultaneously, thereby defining a particular type of self-serving bias focused on retrospective behavioral assessment.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of benefectionance was first formally introduced by the influential U.S. social psychologist Anthony Greenwald (b. 1939). Greenwald developed this construct as part of his broader theoretical work on the "Totalitarian Ego," a seminal perspective that views the self-system as an active, defensive, and inherently biased historian of personal experience. Benefectionance emerged from the observation that the ego functions much like a totalitarian government, suppressing negative or contradictory evidence and rewriting historical accounts to align with current ideological needs.

Greenwald derived the term by synthesizing the two core motivational components he identified as central to ego defense: **benevolence** and **effectiveness**. The theory posited that these two motives--the need to be viewed as good and the need to be viewed as competent--are the twin pillars upon which the retrospective self-concept is built and maintained. The formulation of benefectionance provided a specific framework for analyzing how these motivational needs translate into predictable patterns of memory distortion and self-deception, distinguishing it from general concepts of positive self-regard.

Historically, benefectionance played a crucial role in establishing the scholarly consensus regarding the prevalence of self-enhancing biases. It helped shift psychological inquiry away from viewing the

self merely as a passive repository of information toward understanding it as an active, motivated system dedicated to preserving a positive self-view, even at the cost of objective accuracy. Its development paralleled other important work on cognitive biases, memory construction, and the adaptive functions of self-deception, solidifying its place within the field of cognitive social psychology.

3. Key Characteristics and Mechanisms

The implementation of benefactance relies heavily on specific cognitive mechanisms, primarily selective memory retrieval, motivated reasoning, and constructive recall. It is not merely a conscious preference for positive memories, but rather a deeper, often unconscious, process that shapes the structure of autobiographical memory itself.

One of the primary mechanisms is **retrospective enhancement**. When recalling past events, the individual systematically exaggerates the positive impact of their actions or minimizes the perceived severity of any mistakes. If an individual behaved selfishly, benefactance helps them recall the underlying intention as having been selfless, or they may selectively forget the negative consequence of the action entirely. This process ensures that the individual rarely, if ever, attributes failure or moral lapses to stable negative aspects of their own character.

Furthermore, benefactance involves the subtle distortion of causal attribution. Successful outcomes are readily attributed internally--to the individual's skill, effort, or inherent moral character (reinforcing effectiveness and benevolence). Conversely, negative or unhelpful actions are often attributed externally--to situational factors, misunderstandings, or the actions of others. This pattern of attribution protects the core self-concept from damage, making it possible to routinely characterize the past as a predominantly morally-good and successful period.

4. Dual Components of Benefactance

Benefactance is structurally defined by the convergence of two fundamental motivational needs that drive the self-system's reconstructive history, both of which must be satisfied to maintain a maximally positive self-image. These components work in tandem, ensuring the self is perceived as both morally admirable and practically capable.

Benevolence (Moral Goodness): This component reflects the intrinsic human need to view oneself as a morally upright agent, adhering to ethical standards and social obligations. The bias toward benevolence manifests as the selective prioritization and magnification of past actions demonstrating generosity, fairness, empathy, or altruism. Through the lens of benefactance, individuals routinely filter out memories of selfish, inconsiderate, or unethical behavior, or they reinterpret these actions to emphasize some purported higher moral intention. This mechanism is critical for maintaining social acceptability and reducing internal cognitive dissonance regarding

moral identity.

Effectiveness (Competence and Success): This component relates to the fundamental psychological need for mastery, control, and achievement. It drives the individual to recall instances where their efforts resulted in successful outcomes, showcasing personal skill, strategic thinking, and efficacy. The effectiveness bias ensures that the remembered self is portrayed as capable of navigating the environment, overcoming obstacles, and achieving desired goals. Failures are often reframed as learning experiences or minimized in significance, thus preserving the belief in personal competence and control over future events.

5. Relationship to Positive Illusions

Benefectance is often categorized alongside, or as a specific mechanism underlying, the broader concept of positive illusions. Positive illusions, extensively studied by researchers like Shelley Taylor, refer to a set of cognitive biases characterized by unrealistically favorable attitudes toward oneself. These include having unrealistically positive views of the self, exaggerated perceptions of control, and unrealistic optimism about the future.

While positive illusions encompass a wide range of overly favorable self-assessments (e.g., believing one is above average in intelligence or driving ability), benefectance specifically narrows the focus to the retrospective justification of behavior along moral and competency dimensions. Benefectance is the active, self-deceiving act that makes maintaining the specific illusion of a morally good and successful past possible. It is the operational process by which the self-system generates the biased data required to support a general state of positive self-regard.

The key distinction is that positive illusions are the resulting state of overly favorable belief, while benefectance is the dynamic, psychological routine--the mechanism of selective memory and reconstruction--that constantly feeds and protects those illusions concerning one's personal history. Thus, benefectance is essential for the temporal stability of positive self-regard, ensuring that the past serves as a flattering backdrop for the present identity.

6. Significance and Adaptive Value

The pervasive nature of benefectance suggests that it holds significant adaptive value for psychological well-being. By ensuring a continuous positive narrative, the mechanism provides several protective benefits. Individuals who routinely employ benefectance tend to exhibit higher levels of self-esteem and general life satisfaction, as they are shielded from the emotional distress and cognitive dissonance that accompany acknowledging personal failures or moral shortcomings.

Furthermore, benefectance contributes to motivational persistence. If individuals consistently recall their past efforts as effective and well-intentioned, they are more likely to approach future challenges with optimism and resilience, believing they possess the competence and moral

foundation necessary for success. This optimistic self-view can act as a psychological resource, buffering the individual against stress and minor setbacks.

7. Debates and Criticisms

While the adaptive functions of benefactance are generally acknowledged, the concept is subject to debate, primarily regarding the long-term consequences of self-deception. Critics often point out the potential maladaptive aspects associated with high reliance on such biases.

A primary criticism revolves around the impediment to personal growth. If an individual systematically attributes failures externally and selectively forgets mistakes, they lose the opportunity for accurate self-reflection and genuine learning. The inability to honestly appraise past errors can lead to the repetition of non-effective or inappropriate behaviors, ultimately undermining true competence and effectiveness.

Furthermore, extreme forms of benefactance can lead to social friction. Individuals highly invested in their positive self-narrative may be perceived by others as arrogant, unwilling to take responsibility, or lacking in self-awareness, especially when their self-assessment starkly contrasts with objective reality or the memories of others involved in the same events. Thus, while benefactance benefits internal psychological stability, it can sometimes compromise external social relationships and accurate environmental calibration.

Further Reading

[Anthony Greenwald \(Wikipedia Entry\)](#)

[Self-Serving Bias \(Wikipedia Entry\)](#)

[Positive Illusion \(Wikipedia Entry\)](#)