Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Importance for individuals and society. Concerns about whether it is important at all have inspired social scientists to probe more deeply the origins and underpinnings of self-esteem to determine how, if at all, it matters. The result is one of the most richly described, frequently studied, and intriguing constructs in the social sciences.

SEE ALSO Guttmann Scale; James, William; Mental Health; Psychology; Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale; Scales; Self-Awareness Theory; Social Science; Trait Theory

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SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES

Psychological theory proposes that people's beliefs construct reality. The emphasis on the construction of reality dates back to the 1940s and 1950s. During this time, “New Look in Perception” research challenged the idea that people perceive reality accurately by proposing that what people perceive is heavily influenced by their motives, emotions, and expectations. The self-fulfilling prophecy is a quintessential process of this perspective because it involves people's beliefs changing social reality. A self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when one person causes her or his own false belief about another person to become true.

A self-fulfilling prophecy includes three steps. First, one person must hold a false belief about another person. For example, a teacher may overestimate a student's ability, believing that the student is more capable than the student really is. Second, the person holding the false belief must treat the other person in a manner that is consistent with it. A teacher who overestimates a student's ability would have to treat the student as if she or he is highly capable. The teacher may often call on that student, spend extra time with that student, teach that student especially difficult material, and provide that student with feedback contingent on performance (Rosenthal 1973). Third, the person about whom the false belief is held must, in response to the treatment she or he receives, confirm the originally false belief. The student who is treated as if she or he is highly capable may enjoy and value school and, consequently, invest more time and effort on school work than other students do. In turn, this student may ultimately learn more than other students in the class, thereby confirming the teacher's originally false belief that she or he was highly capable.

The term self-fulfilling prophecy was introduced to the social sciences by Robert Merton (1948). A sociologist by training, Merton proposed that the self-fulfilling prophecy was capable of creating large-scale social problems such as social inequalities. For example, he described how in the early part of the twentieth century African Americans were barred from joining labor unions on the grounds that they were strikebreakers. This left African American laborers with few job opportunities, forcing them to take any work that presented itself, including work that became available as a result of white laborers going on strike. Thus, according to Merton, the belief that African Americans were strikebreakers caused them out of necessity to become strikebreakers, thereby creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY RESEARCH

Merton's contribution to the field's understanding of the self-fulfilling prophecy was purely theoretical, meaning that he explained how self-fulfilling prophecies may operate, but never actually tested whether they occur. Nonetheless, his analysis resulted in hundreds of experimental tests of the process that have provided clear evidence that the self-fulfilling prophecy is a real phenomenon that occurs in a variety of settings.

For example, Robert Rosenthal (a professor at Harvard University) and Lenora Jacobson (an elementary school principal in San Francisco) tested whether teachers' false beliefs about their students' intelligence create self-fulfilling prophecies. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) were concerned that one reason disadvantaged students may perform poorly in school is because that is what their teachers expect of them, and they wondered if disadvantaged students might perform better if their teachers expected them to improve academically. To test this, they told elementary school teachers that Harvard researchers had created a new IQ test that could identify “intellectual blooming.” They then told the teachers which of their students had been identified by this test as one of these “late bloomers” for their class. They told the teachers that these students were expected to improve academically. When the year ended, the teachers who had been told which students were expected to improve academically had indeed taught these students better than those teachers who had been told nothing or who had been told the students who were expected to improve academically were not in their class. 

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bloomers”—students who would have substantial gains in their IQs over the course of the school year. In reality, there was no special test to measure intellectual blooming; students had simply been administered a typical IQ test, and random assignment determined which students would be labeled as the late bloomers. Because the late bloomers were chosen at random, they were really no different from any other students intellectually. The only difference between the students labeled late bloomers and those not so labeled was their teachers’ expectations for them. Therefore, any difference between their IQs at the end of the school year could be attributed only to a self-fulfilling prophecy, which is exactly what Rosenthal and Jacobson found. By the end of the school year, the late bloomers had significantly greater gains in their IQs than did the other students.

THE MAGNITUDE AND IMPLICATIONS OF SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES

The large body of research on self-fulfilling prophecies shows that people’s false beliefs can influence the behavior of others. However, the magnitude by which they do so is usually modest, meaning that, on average, people’s false beliefs only influence other people’s behavior through self-fulfilling prophecies a little bit. Even so, there are conditions under which self-fulfilling prophecy effects are larger than average. For example, self-fulfilling prophecy effects are strongest among individuals who are stigmatized, including African American students, girls in math classes, students who are tracked into low-ability groups within their classrooms, and students who have histories of poor academic achievement (Jussim, Eccles, and Madon 1996).

Self-fulfilling prophecy effects can also become larger than average through a process of accumulation. In a typical day an individual interacts with many people, each of whom may hold a false belief about that individual and have a self-fulfilling effect on that individual’s behavior. When the false beliefs that different people hold about the same individual are similar, their independent self-fulfilling effects may combine, thereby causing small self-fulfilling prophecy effects to become large. Consistent with this process, research has shown that parents have the strongest self-fulfilling effects on their children’s alcohol use when both hold false and unfavorable beliefs about their child’s likelihood of drinking alcohol (Madon, Guyll, Spoth, and Willard 2004). The accumulation of self-fulfilling prophecy effects across people has particularly important implications for stereotyped individuals because such individuals are disproportionately exposed to false and unfavorable beliefs from many different people.

Although any single person’s stereotypic beliefs may have only a small self-fulfilling effect on another’s behavior, that effect may combine with the self-fulfilling effects of other people’s stereotypic beliefs to ultimately have a large and harmful impact on the outcomes of stereotyped individuals such as women and minorities.

SEE ALSO  Merton, Robert K.; Pygmalion Effects; Stereotype Threat; Stereotypes

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SELF-GUIDES

Self-guides are constructs in social psychology that refer to representations of the self. Self-guides are desired self states that have motivational implications and are involved in the process of self-regulation.

The various types of self-guides, proposed by psychologist E. Tory Higgins (1987), are the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self. The actual self refers to the way individuals view themselves currently. The ideal self refers to the person that individuals would like to be, and the ought self refers to the person that individuals feel they should be. Individuals’ ideal self-guides tend to be associated with hopes and wishes, while their ought self-guides tend to be concerned with safety and responsibility. These ought self-guides represent the internalization of expectations of others and society.

The source of self-guides can also be distinguished as being from the self or from an other. For instance, an indi-