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# You Are What You Wear: An Interactive Demonstration of the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

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*This article presents evidence in support of an interactive classroom activity that demonstrates the self-fulfilling prophecy. After a brief description of the topic, 5 volunteers from an introductory psychology course of 81 students blindly donned one of several labeled hats (i.e., intelligent, attractive, good leader, annoying, lazy). The instructor told volunteers to treat each other in accordance with the labels while they completed a series of group tasks. During the task, volunteers acted in accordance with their label, thereby confirming the self-fulfilling prophecy. Findings indicated that the demonstration does elicit the self-fulfilling prophecy and that students' understanding of this phenomenon improves. Furthermore, students overwhelmingly reported that this demonstration was interesting and enjoyable and recommended its use in future classes.*

Although some psychological phenomena discussed in introductory and social psychology classes resonate easily with students' perceptions of the world, other phenomena are more counterintuitive, abstract, and difficult to teach students of psychology. One such concept is the pervasive manifestation of self-fulfilling prophecies. Most individuals perceive their behavior to be volitional and independent of others' expectations (see Wegner & Bargh, 1998). To address this challenge, an interactive learning task is an ideal method by which to help students appreciate the power of self-fulfilling prophecies.

Classic investigations of the self-fulfilling prophecy illustrate its potency (see Jussim, 1986). Merton (1948) proposed that self-fulfilling prophecies can occur when an individual behaves in such a way that his or her expectations of another individual are confirmed. In one of the earliest studies, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1966) informed a sample of school teachers that the performance of a particular group of students would improve sharply. The group of children (chosen randomly) did show significantly improved performance, leading the researchers to conclude that the teachers' expectations elicited the students' improvement.

Research on the self-fulfilling prophecy has extended beyond its implications for education. For example, Kelley and Stahelski (1970) found that people who believe others to be competitive provoke uncooperative behavior. In an early study on the behavioral confirmation of stereotypes, White participants interviewed Black and White "applicants" (Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974). Although the applicants' responses were standardized, their performance was undermined by the interviewers' behaviors. Investigators from another classic study (i.e., Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977)

tape-recorded male "perceivers" conversing with female "targets" who they believed to be either attractive or unattractive. Female targets who were labeled attractive behaved in a manner that was friendlier, more sociable, and more likeable than those targets labeled unattractive. Similarly, in a study on the stereotypes of obese individuals, condition-blind coders rated the behaviors of women in conversations with male partners who believed the women to be either thin or obese (Snyder & Haugen, 1995). Men's expectations of their conversation partner's weight and the associated stereotypes affected women's behaviors. These studies elucidate the problematic role of self-fulfilling prophecies in a destructive cycle of stereotyping.

Students can extract a cursory understanding of self-fulfilling prophecies from a psychology textbook definition. An oral presentation of the aforementioned research could also enrich comprehension. However, an activity that allows students to observe a self-fulfilling prophecy as it unfolds is likely to be a much more powerful teaching tool (e.g., Benjamin, 1991).

## Method

### *Participants*

Eighty-one undergraduates (45 men, 36 women) from an introductory psychology course observed the classroom demonstration. After warning students that the task might be somewhat embarrassing, the instructor solicited 5 volunteers (3 men, 2 women) from the class to participate in the activity. An additional 20 students from a separate introductory psychology class served as a control group.

### *Materials*

This demonstration required five standard baseball hats, labeled with dark ink and large letters: "good leader," "very attractive," "funny," "annoying," and "lazy."

### *Procedure*

To guide students' attention during the activity, the instructor presented a brief description of the self-fulfilling prophecy to the entire class before requesting volunteers.

This presentation included a definition of the concept and a discussion of the historical context of research on the self-fulfilling prophecy and the relevant findings. The demonstration commenced when the instructor asked that volunteers come to the front of the classroom.

Without their knowledge of its content, a labeled hat was placed on each volunteer's head. The instructor told the volunteers to treat each other in accordance with the information on their hat while working together on a series of group tasks. These tasks required volunteers to (a) name a new school mascot for their university, (b) determine the three best reasons for being a psychology major, (c) decide the distance between two major constructions on the school's campus, and (d) line up in order of their presumed likeability as a function of the previous interactions. After each task, the instructor asked for the group's answer and noted which volunteer responded with the answer before presenting the next task. After they completed the tasks, each volunteer guessed whether his or her label was positive or negative, what it said precisely, and what clues he or she used to make guesses. Finally, the instructor facilitated a class discussion to elucidate specific examples of the self-fulfilling prophecy from the demonstration.

## Results

### *Preliminary Evidence*

As evidence of the communication of volunteers' expectations for each other, each volunteer guessed the label of his or her hat. All five responded correctly regarding the positive or negative nature of their label, and all five correctly guessed the label itself.

### *Eliciting the Prophecy*

Four assessment techniques indicated the degree to which the demonstration illustrated the self-fulfilling prophecy. First, the observable behavioral results from the tasks served as indicators of the demonstration's success. Second, the observers rated the degree to which the self-fulfilling prophecy emerged on the tasks with a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not a lot*) to 5 (*a lot*). Next, using the same scale, the observers rated the degree to which each volunteer behaved in accordance with his or her label. Fourth, students provided an example of a self-fulfilling prophecy from the demonstration.

The results of the tasks provided evidence of the emergence of the self-fulfilling prophecy in the demonstration. When asked to decide on a mascot, after strained discussion, the "good leader" offered that she should be the new mascot. The "good leader" also reported that the results of the second task were that the top three reasons to be a psychology major were getting to wear hats, sleeping, and friends. During the third task, the volunteer wearing the "funny" hat began to make jokes about the volunteer wearing the "lazy" hat. For example, when determining the distance between two points, the "funny" volunteer asked the "lazy" volunteer, "Have you ever walked that far?" Volunteers lined up in order of

likeability (attractive, good leader, funny, lazy, annoying) very quickly, without resistance from those wearing the negative hats. In fact, the "annoying" volunteer said loudly, "I guess I'm at the back." Across tasks, the "good leader" consistently reported the group's decision.

Overall, the observers rated the tasks to be effective in eliciting the self-fulfilling prophecy ( $M = 3.93, SD = .72$ ). The observers also reported that the volunteers acted in accordance with their labels overall ( $M = 3.78, SD = .84$ ). However, a repeated measures ANOVA suggested that some roles were more effective in evoking the self-fulfilling prophecy,  $F(4, 77) = 17.24, p < .01$ . The role that received the highest rating was "good leader" ( $M = 4.00, SD = .85$ ), whereas the role that received the lowest ratings was "attractive" ( $M = 3.01, SD = 1.02$ ).

The observers recalled an example of the self-fulfilling prophecy from the demonstration to qualitatively illustrate the activity's effectiveness. The respondents recalled specific instances of the self-fulfilling prophecy in the demonstration. For example, one student wrote that "the good leader was naturally looked up to and took that role by providing good firm decisions that others could follow. Because others looked up to the leader she stepped into the role of a leader." Another student responded, "The person wearing the funny hat would make wisecracks about the people around him, so in a sense people treating him as funny may have inspired confidence in him to actually be funny." Yet another student wrote that "the annoying person seemed kind of annoying as a result of how people treated him."

### *Overall Evaluation*

We obtained pre- and postdemonstration ratings of the students' knowledge of the self-fulfilling prophecy. To measure this knowledge, we averaged three knowledge items at each time with a response scale ranging from 1 (*not a lot*) to 5 (*a lot*). A sample item from this scale was, "How much do you know about the psychological phenomenon of the self-fulfilling prophecy?" A paired sample  $t$  test,  $t(81) = -19.64, p < .01$ , for this scale revealed that knowledge was significantly higher after the demonstration ( $M = 3.89, SD = .76$ ) than prior to it ( $M = 1.74, SD = .81$ ). To test students' memory of the topic over time, the instructor included a multiple-choice question regarding the demonstration on the students' first exam 2 months after its presentation. All of the 81 students (100%) who took the test answered the related question correctly.

An additional 20 students from two sections of a course in social psychology who did not do the learning activity also responded to this question. This class had covered the topic of the self-fulfilling prophecy in lecture and thus could serve as a control group for comparison to the experimental group. Almost a third of these students (30%) responded incorrectly when asked to choose the definition of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Students who witnessed the learning activity were significantly more likely to answer correctly than were students who were in the other classes,  $\chi^2(1, N = 101) = 25.84, p < .01$ .

Students who participated in the activity also reported that the demonstration taught them to think critically about

social interactions ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) and that they found it to be interesting ( $M = 4.43$ ,  $SD = .84$ ), educational ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = .89$ ), and enjoyable ( $M = 4.49$ ,  $SD = .76$ ). Finally, participants reported that they would recommend the activity to future classes ( $M = 4.40$ ,  $SD = .85$ ).

## Discussion

The results of this study suggest that the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy can be presented to psychology students effectively and enjoyably through an interactive learning task. The expectations assigned to volunteers by labeled hats elicited their behavioral confirmation. Both volunteers and observers provided evidence of the self-fulfilling prophecy's emergence in the demonstration. The participants reported that the demonstration was interesting and educational. Finally, students' knowledge of the self-fulfilling prophecy was significantly higher after the demonstration than before it.

Many potential applications exist for this demonstration. Depending on the research presented, the activity could be used in classes of introductory, social, industrial/organizational, educational psychology, or research methods. An introductory-level presentation should include reference to the experimental investigations in each area (see Jussim, 1986), whereas social psychology classes might focus more heavily on discussion of the self-fulfilling nature of stereotypes (e.g., Snyder et al., 1977). For the purpose of educational psychology, attention should be paid to Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1966) original findings of the "Pygmalion in the classroom" effect and more recent replications (e.g., Madon, Jussim, & Eccles, 1997). The self-fulfilling prophecy as it applies to experimenter bias (e.g., Rosenthal, Persinger, Kline, & Mulry, 1963) is also relevant for discussion in research methods classes. Students in organizational psychology classes could benefit from the task as it relates to self-fulfilling prophecies in the workplace (e.g., Davidson & Eden, 2000).

One potential limitation to the study is that we compared responses to the multiple-choice item from the participants who took part in the demonstration to a convenience sample of students from a class that differed in its size and teacher sample. Hence, the classes may not be maximally comparable. Another potential limitation of this research is that all students who participated in the demonstration were aware of its goals. This knowledge may have induced demand characteristics on the part of observers and actors. However, although detracting from the experiment's elegance, awareness of the demonstration's goals enhances understanding by guiding students' focus during the demonstration. Finally, students who participated in the demonstration may not have taken the tasks seriously. This lack of seriousness may arise, in part, from the experience of being in front of a large class and may be avoided by separating the class into smaller groups.

This article described an interactive learning task illustrating the self-fulfilling prophecy that has numerous classroom applications and provided strong empirical support for the demonstration's effectiveness. The results of this study showed that students both learned from and enjoyed their participation in this task. Therefore, this demonstration provides a powerful tool with which teachers of multiple areas of psychology can enhance students' understanding of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

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## Notes

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2. We thank Sarah Burnett, Jennifer Knight, and Clare Reilly for their indispensable help in conducting this study.
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