

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

The term *self-fulfilling prophecy* was first coined by sociologist Robert Merton. Merton believed that self-fulfilling prophecies had the potential to create large-scale social problems. He proposed that self-fulfilling prophecies contributed to discrimination against African Americans. During the early part of the 20th century, labor unions prohibited African Americans from joining on grounds that they were strikebreakers. This exclusion made it difficult for African Americans to find work. As such, when work opportunities did become available, African American laborers were quick to respond, even if that meant filling positions left vacant by striking workers. Merton argued that the originally false belief that African Americans were strikebreakers, created a situation in which they had no choice but to become strikebreakers, thereby confirming the originally false belief that was held about them by union members.

One reason that social scientists are interested in studying the effects of self-fulfilling prophecies is because of their ability to contribute to social inequalities. For example, a teacher, biased by racial and ethnic stereotypes, may develop the false belief that a minority student is less capable than the student is in reality. The teacher may then act on his or her false belief by treating the student as if he or she is not capable. In comparison with other students in the class, the teacher may behave less warmly toward that student, call on that student less often, spend less time with that student, and teach that student less difficult material.

The student may then confirm the teacher's originally false belief by showing poorer academic performance. By virtue of learning less, the student is now on a course that could have serious consequences. For example, because of the student's poor performance, he or she may be less likely to be placed into advanced classes, less likely to enter college, and less likely to be hired for a good job. In this

manner, people's biases may start a chain of events that have the potential to undermine the opportunities and competencies of individuals who are the targets of negative expectancies such as women and ethnic and racial minorities.

Three steps are involved in the self-fulfilling prophecy process. First, one person must hold a false belief about another person. Second, the person holding the false belief must act on it by treating the other person as if it were true. Finally, the person about whom the false belief is held must subsequently behave in a manner consistent with the false belief. Through this sequence of events, people have the potential to socially construct reality.

Willard, Jennifer, et al. "SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY." *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*. 2008. SAGE Publications. 13 Oct. 2010. <http://www.sage-reference.com/ethnicity/Article_n506.html>.