Self-Fulfilling Prophecy Essay, Research Paper

More often than not, the outcomes of events that occur in a person?s life is the product of the idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy. It is that which ?occurs when a person?s expectations of an event make the outcome more likely to occur than would otherwise have been true? (Adler and Towne, Looking Out, Looking In 66). Or restated, as Henry Ford once put it, ?If you think you can, you can. If you think you can?t, you?re right!? This brief research paper touches on the two types of self-fulfilling prophecies, those that are self-imposed and those that are imposed by others. Additionally, it gives a discussion on how great of an influence it is in each person?s life, both positively and negatively, and how it consequently helps to mold one?s self-concept and ultimately one?s self.

The first topic of discussion is the self-imposed, or self-inflicted, self-fulfilling prophecy. This idea follows that if one has a preconception or notion of an outcome, then chances are that person will raise the possibility of making it so. Take for example these cases-in-hand that Channing Grigsby, teacher of self-esteem speaks of:

?I can?t handle this.? And guess what? We don?t handle it well. If I tell myself I won?t have a good time at the party I?m going to, I am likely to behave in ways that generate exactly that reality, eliciting from other people indifferent responses, proving my premise. (?A Course in Self-Esteem? 5)

Additionally, and antithetically, consider the example of the student studying for a mathematics test the following morning whose belief is that since he is and has been studying and has a good working knowledge of the subject area, that he will do well on the test and does so the following morning. When compared to another student doing the same but is less prepared and knowledgeable in the area and additionally thinks that he will fail and did, he performed better because of his positive expectation and preparedness. Take a moment to reconsider the inclusion of the idea of preparation in the example. Here, preparation is just as important a factor to consider because it is a variable that can greatly surpass the influence of the self-fulfilling prophecy. The other student who did not prepare well and did not know the material as well would have failed anyway, despite how great of preconceived thoughts he may have had. In this case, because the conception or expectation was unrealistic, what would have been a positive self-fulfilling prophecy turns out for the worse. The point in this case is that realistic expectations play a great role in promoting positive and negative outcomes. But chances are, if he had a positive outlook, despite his ill preparedness, he stay may have received a higher failing grade. Nonetheless, Grigsby?s examples are interesting and does a great job of portraying what occurs in an individual?s mind when that person is projecting or making judgements of what outcome a certain event is going to yield. It is so because not only are they uncomplicated enough to visualize, but also because they are examples that one may even recall having done. The greater message in this sub-category is that this kind of thinking can and does play a large role in helping to determine how and what one feels during pre-conceived events and the reality that is borne from it. In the case of the person thinking he will not have a good time at the party he attends, he ends up not having it because he generated responses that contributed to that outcome (i.e. not socializing, criticizing the home, etc.). As for the student who performed well on his math test, he partly did so because of good preparation and knowledge and a realistic expectation that the other was lacking. Or as Adler and Towne put it:

The self-fulfilling prophecy is an important force in interpersonal communication, but it doesn?t explain or affect all behavior. There are certainly times when the expectation of an event?s outcome won?t bring it about. Your hope of drawing an ace in a card game won?t in any way affect the chance of that card turning up in an already shuffled deck, and your belief that good weather is coming won?t stop the rain from falling. In the same way, believing you?ll do well in a job interview when you?re clearly not qualified for the position is unrealistic. Similarly, there will probably be people you don?t like and occasions you won?t enjoy, no matter what your attitude. To connect the self-fulfilling prophecy with the ?power of positive thinking? is an oversimplification. (Looking Out, Looking In 70)

Additionally, that ?to a great extent, we are what we believe we are? (Looking Out, Looking In 71).

Next, consider self-fulfilling prophecies imposed by others. Or restated, those thoughts about one?s self that are consequential of others communicated beliefs. Take for example, the case presented by some psychologists in their study of whether catharsis, aggression and persuasive influence are self-fulfilling or self-defeating prophecies. In the particular section in the article, the authors speak of how in one scenario:

People would be persuaded that catharsis effects are real and effective and would act on these beliefs. When angry, they would believe that the best response would be to express this anger, possibly against a surrogate (displaced) target. These beliefs might actually help them perceive beneficial effects that have eluded laboratory researchers. That is, the expectation that catharsis relaxes the person and reduces subsequent aggression might cause people to feel relaxed and to behave less aggressively after they indulge in some form of anger expression (Bushman, Baumeister and Stack, ?Self-Fulfilling or Self-Defeating Prophecies? 4).

Moreover, and in another scenario that:

[?] an alternative, darker scenario might be proposed if the self-fulfilling prophecy effect is weaker than the aggression-enhancing effects of expressing anger. In this view, belief in catharsis could cause people to choose to express anger, but these actions would increase, rather than decrease, their feelings of anger and their aggressive inclinations. As a result, people would end up behaving more aggressively than they would have otherwise. The media endorsement of catharsis would thus have the potential for increasing violence through a self-defeating prophecy effect: The expectation elicits behavior that produces results opposite of what was expected (Bushman, Baumeister and Stack, ?Self-Fulfilling or Self-Defeating Prophecies? 4).

In context, in both instances one realizes that the outcome of the self-fulfilling prophecy imposed by others can have?like the self-imposed one?both a positive and negative outcome. All other things equal (variables), one can conclude that others communicated beliefs of individuals can and does influence them. In this example, with the media?s portrayal of ?venting? exercises as being beneficial to lessening aggression, the result, for some, are feelings of reduced subsequent aggression and for others, a heightened one. In the bigger image of things, this, too, is a part of that term called ?self-concept.? As defined by Lee D. Millar Bidwell and Brenda J. Vander Mey in their book Sociology of the Family: Investigating Family Issues it is where ?an individual?s self-concept reflects or mirrors what the individual perceives others in society think of him or her? (67).

Lastly, let one consider how the idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy helps to mold one?s character. As one travels through life, he will undoubtedly encounter moments where he finds that what he thinks will occur, does, whether because it is self-imposed or imposed by others. Oftentimes, it is probably because of those conceptions that he had before having the experience. Regardless of the conceptions, however, what is perhaps best to advise is that when one finds oneself making pre-judgements, that one makes realistically positive ones. For the reality is that it is impossible to be rid of preconceptions because of the numerous interactions one has with other people throughout the day and their respective influences, whether if it is one knows or which one is in acquaintance. Additionally, because humanity has a tendency to be too judgmental?whether with others or one?s self?and so will undoubtedly make or expect imaginary outcomes that soon enough manifest themselves because of the stated reasons. Because of those, it is safest to decide to have realistic expectations when sojourning with self-fulfilling prophecies so that one is more satisfied, elated, and content rather than miserable, sad, melancholy, and/or unpleasant. Perhaps that ?becoming real or true by virtue of having been predicted or expected? as stated by Merriam Webster?s Collegiate Dictionary is best interpreted, in simpler terms, as having something positive become real or come true from a pre-conceived notion or expectation (?self-fulfilling? 1061) rather than a negative one.

The reasons for the importance of this topic are multi-layered and faceted. However, to take it down to its most primal state, it is because it deals with human interaction and development. And because it does so, it is absolutely essential that as a collective, as a body, as a society, as a people, that a certain degree of understanding is found. That is so that individuals may have a better understanding of their internal, emotional and psychological processes as well as those of others. And with that, a mutual understanding of one another that helps to promote community and a better state of physical, mental, social and spiritual health.

Works CitedAdler, Ronald B., and Neil Towne. Looking Out, Looking In. USA: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1999.

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