

Social Influence by Requesting Self-Prophecy

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Asking people to predict whether they will perform a target action often increases the probability of their performing that action. This article reviews published and unpublished research evidence for this "self-prophecy" phenomenon and reports 2 new experiments. The studies reviewed demonstrate that the self-prophecy effect occurs in a variety of situations and that it is a moderate-size effect. The new experiments introduce a 1-session procedure that is considerably more efficient in testing theory than the 2-session procedure of previous experiments. In the prior studies, as in the present self-prophecy studies, participants appear to reduce a discrepancy between their principles and their behavior, made salient by prediction, through changing the behavior. Toward the ends of encouraging future investigation and developing theoretical understanding of the effect, the article concludes with discussion of related programs of research that may provide theoretical explanations for the effect.

People overstate their likelihood of performing socially desirable actions for which they are asked to make predictions. Although this is not surprising, it is remarkable that once predicted, the action is more likely to occur. In other words, the prediction becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. As a compelling example, Sherman (1980) seminally demonstrated this phenomenon's use to increase the rate of students at Indiana University volunteering to do charitable work. Sherman labeled this type of effect the *self-erasing nature of errors of prediction*, because (a) participants predicted that they would perform the action with greater probability than was observed in a no-prediction control group (in this sense, the predictions were in error)

but (b) increased subsequent performance of the action, making the apparent overprediction of behavior not (or less) erroneous (in this sense the error was self-erasing). We use *self-prophecy effect* as a shorthand label for the phenomenon.

Greenwald, Carnot, Beach, and Young (1987) observed that “the [self-prophecy] influence technique is remarkably simple: It involves asking people to predict whether they will perform the target action” (p. 315). Although exploration of the self-prophecy effect since Sherman’s publication in 1980 has been modest, both (a) the effect sizes found in published and unpublished experimental tests and (b) the variety of contexts in which the effect has been observed are compelling. This article provides a meta-analytic review of published and unpublished self-prophecy research and reports new research using a one-session experimental procedure that is considerably more efficient for theory testing than the two-session format used in all previous self-prophecy work. Toward the end of developing parsimonious interpretation, the article concludes with discussion of potential theoretical explanations for the effect.

META-ANALYTIC REVIEW OF EXISTING STUDIES

A summary of each of the self-prophecy tests the authors could locate and relevant meta-analytic statistics are shown in Table 1. All results were drawn from published reports or raw data provided by the original investigators. To confirm reported results for each study included in the meta-analysis, these authors reconducted all analyses of self-prophecy effects.

Sherman (1980) introduced the self-prophecy effect with three experiments. Depending on the context, the prediction request had the ability to decrease (i.e., singing over the phone and writing a counterattitudinal essay) as well as to increase (i.e., volunteering for charity work) the probability of the predicted action. In all three of Sherman’s original experiments, having (mis)predicted a given behavior, participants were likely to confirm their predictions in subsequent behavior—the errors were thus self-erasing.

In seeking to determine whether the self-prophecy effect could be consequential in an important nonlaboratory setting, several tests were conducted in relation to public elections. Greenwald et al. (1987) reported a directionally consistent but not statistically significant self-prophecy effect for Ohio State University dormitory residents contacted by telephone with respect to registering to vote, and a significant self-prophecy effect regarding actual voting behavior. Initial contact was made 1 or 2 days prior to the behavioral opportunity; the naturally occurring dependent measures (using official precinct and poll records) regarded the 1984 U.S. presidential election.

Using procedures similar to those of Greenwald et al. (1987), two studies were conducted by Greenwald, Klinger, Vande Kamp, and Kerr (1988) in relation to (a)

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