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Interpreting Interpersonal Behavior: The Effects of Expectancies

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Attempts to understand the personal characteristics of others, in interactions with them, are complicated by the fact that one tends to find what one expects. This happens not only because processing of information is selective, but also because expectancies cause one to act in ways that elicit behavior interpretable as confirming those expectancies, even when the expectancies might have been mistaken. Studies provide ample evidence of such self-fulfilling prophecies in social interaction and are beginning to spell out the crucial steps in the process for confirming expectancies. Such studies help link the psychology of first impressions to the psychology of long-term relationships by showing how expectancies are sustained or modified through behavioral sequences that are partially determined by initial expectancies.

THE PROCESS OF PERCEIVING OR UNDERSTANDING ANOTHER person in the course of interacting with that person is the subject of this article. How do we come to know the motives and traits of those around us—those who compose our social world and who mediate our fate in that world? We rarely if ever confront others without some expectations about how they should behave. How are these expectancies integrated with new behavioral information to create our evolving impression about what kind of person the other is? We are not passive observers of our respective social worlds, but active forces in the shaping of those worlds. To an important extent we create our own social reality by influencing the behavior we observe in others. To the extent that we fail to take account of our participation in this creation process, we inevitably misread the significance of the behavior we see and erroneously attribute personal dispositions to others to account for actions that can be otherwise explained.

In 1968, Rosenthal and Jacobson (*1*) reported an experiment in which teachers were led to expect that certain of their first to sixth grade students would "bloom" academically. Although the designated students were randomly chosen, subsequent testing revealed that in fact they did better than the students who were not designated in that way. Though this study aroused considerable controversy and was criticized on a variety of methodological grounds, subsequent research has generally supported the conclusions drawn. The Rosenthal and Jacobson findings were important not merely in showing

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that teachers were able to influence students but because the teachers, operating with an incorrect hypothesis, behaved in such a way as to bring about the confirmation of the hypothesis. And the teachers were not just misled by the false expectancy information to misjudge the performance of the designated students; they created a situation such that the students indeed did perform better by an objective measure, and the teachers were unaware that they had done anything special to create this state of affairs. This is the essence of the "self-fulfilling prophecy," so designated in a classic paper by Robert Merton (*2*) in 1948: "The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a *false* definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come *true*. The specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error. For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning." (*2*, p. 195).

The self-fulfilling prophecy has been widely recognized in many of the social sciences. Contagious shifts of stock prices are often fueled by "authoritative" prophecies of indeterminate validity. Experimental games that feature recurrent decisions about whether to cooperate or to compete (for example, "prisoner's dilemma" games) lend themselves to self-fulfilling prophecies. Players who expect competition respond in ways that inevitably elicit competition from their opponents. In the realm of international security, there are many examples of escalating cycles in which the attribution of hostile intentions to a potential adversary induces one country to increase its armaments, with the effect—often unintended and usually undesired—of decreasing the security of other states and thereby forcing them, too, into an arms race.

In this article, I explore the fate of prophecies or expectancies in everyday social interactions, the kinds we have with co-workers, spouses, dates, bosses, employees, clients, therapists, and patients (*3*). It is widely assumed that interpersonal expectancies are essential for social adaptation, and there is no reason to question the wisdom of this assumption in the general case. Expectancies reflect our prior experiences with others and prepare us for the most probable events of the future. However, to the extent that our expectancies not only affect how we see reality but also affect the reality itself, it behooves us to understand the conditions that promote their influence and to note certain maladaptive consequences.

The Person Perceiver as Information Processor

A crucial step was taken, in the history of research on how people judge other people, when investigators began to shift from asking who makes an accurate judge of what kind of person to a concern with the processes rather than the products of impression formation. Once this shift had begun, experiments of increasing elegance were performed, with the use of audiotape, videotape, and role-playing confederates, to create realistic stimulus persons acting in theoretically interesting social contexts. Study after study provided variations on a theme stressed by attribution theorists (*4*): a person's actions are seen to reveal his or her distinctive propensities only to the extent that these actions are not viewed as clearly called for by the situation. However, these approaches to the attribution of personal dispositions, informative as they were, still treated the perceiver as a rather passive recipient and integrator of available information.

It was long understood, of course, that people are often biased in the way they process this behavioral information. The large literature on prejudice and stereotypes provided abundant evidence that people often see what they expect to see: they select evidence that confirms their stereotypes and ignore anomalies. There are circumstances, of course, in which disconfirmed social expectancies do get discounted or revised, but the literature has stressed the power of expectancies to shape perceptions and interpretations in their own image.

Bias in "Unbiased" Information Search

Perceivers who shape and assimilate information to their expectancies are not, of course, entirely passive. They are participating in and contributing to the ways in which information is used. But this picture still leaves the perceiver as a receptive information processor—fallible and biased, but not actively engaged in producing the information itself. Until recently, then, person-perception research has not taken seriously the long-recognized fact the impressions are normally formed through a process of behavioral interaction in which we elicit much of the information we then attempt to process.

One might argue that the processing biases seen in experiments can be overcome if the perceivers are allowed to control the information they gather about the stimulus person. As it turns out, there are many circumstances under which the opposite is the case. A number of recent experiments have shown that someone who sets out to determine by strategic questioning whether a hypothesis about another is correct, almost invariably ends up confirming the hypothesis. Snyder and Swann (*5*), for example, show that when college student subjects are asked to discover whether a particular person is extroverted, they will ask loaded questions that produce extroverted answers, even from a person who is introverted. The subjects then conclude that the person questioned is indeed an extrovert. Such studies pave the way for a more comprehensive look at just how our expectancies fare in the social interaction process, when the perceiver is free to interact with the person being judged and provides part of the stimulus context to which that person must respond.

Social Interaction and Behavioral Confirmation

When one person begins to interact with another, both bring expectancies to the interaction. These expectancies can be vague (such as those arising from the fact that the other person is a male, or elderly, or an Oriental), they may classify as stereotypes because of their rigidity and invidious tone (he looks like a "preppie" and preppies are bores), they may be based on hearsay (someone told me she was a "gold digger"), or they may be based on past interactions with the particular person. Expectancies can obviously vary enormously in strength and in openness to change, as well as in other, more subtle respects that I shall discuss below. As suggested above, strong expectancies often shape the way in which information about another person is selected and processed. But the self-fulfilling prophecy notion requires that expectancies do more than this; it requires that they have a particular effect on the behavior of the person holding them, that this behavior in turn have an effect on that of the other person, that the other person's behavior tend to confirm the first person's expectancies, and that the first person view this behavior as unsolicited evidence of the expectancies' validity. It is the essence of the self-fulfilling prophecy that a tentative hypothesis produces, through the social interaction process, "real" behavioral evidence that confirms the hypothesis. In addition to perceptual confirmation, then, there is behavioral confirmation. And, of course, this becomes interesting to the extent that the behavioral confirmation arises solely in response to the eliciting behavior of the expectancy holder.

Rosenthal and Jacobson's "Pygmalion in the classroom" example, and the many replications of that study, assure us that such

behavioral confirmation effects do happen. There are also experimental examples in realms having nothing to do with academic achievement or ability. Perhaps the most widely known of these is a demonstration by Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid (*6*). In this experiment, 51 male undergraduates at the University of Minnesota were asked to have "get acquainted" telephone conversations with 51 female undergraduates. Prior to the conversation, each male subject was shown a snapshot, allegedly of his telephone partner, leading him to believe either that she was physically attractive or that she was rather plain. The female subjects did not know about this assignment, and the pictures were in fact randomly assigned. In the conversations, the males who had received the attractive pictures were judged by observers who subsequently rated tapes of the interaction as significantly more friendly, open, and sociable than those who had received the unattractive pictures. Another group of judges exposed only to the female side of the conversation, judged the females in the "attractive" condition to be more poised, sociable, gregarious, and self-confident than those talking to men who supposed they were plain. Thus the men's beliefs concerning their partners' appearance led them to act in a manner congruent with these beliefs. Their behavior, in turn, elicited responses from the females that were also congruent with the males' beliefs about the personal characteristics of attractive and unattractive women. There was, in other words, behavioral confirmation of the male's original beliefs suggesting that the male subjects created a reality that they then presumably interpreted as independent of their own actions.

Such experimental instances of behavioral confirmation are by now sufficiently numerous that the existence of the phenomenon need not be questioned (*7*). Investigators have recently begun to ask more analytical questions that will very likely shape research in the years to come. Is the behavioral confirmation of expectancies in social interaction inevitable? If not, what are the conditions necessary for it to happen? What other fates of expectancies are possible, and what are the circumstances under which these various fates are apt to be realized?

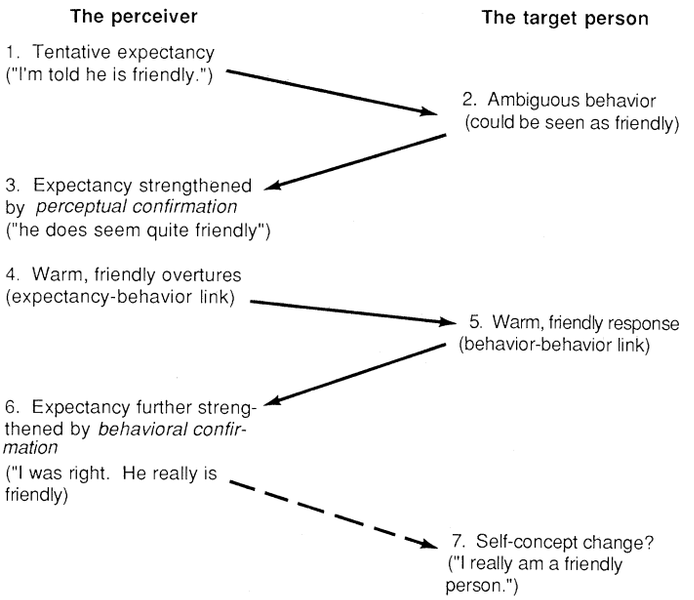

Fig. 1. A typical social interaction sequence (with "he is friendly" as an example of the initial expectancy) in which both perceptual and behavioral confirmation occur.

Steps in the Interaction Sequence

We already have a few partial answers to these questions. To locate our knowledge as well as our ignorance, it is useful to consider the nature of the social interaction sequence within which behavioral confirmation occurs. With the aid of a diagrammatic representation (Fig. 1), we may consider what state of affairs is necessary at each step in the sequence for behavioral confirmation to occur.

The perceiver. It is all but impossible to conceive of a participant approaching social interaction without some set of expectancies, hypotheses, or predictions about how the other participant is likely to behave under various circumstances. As noted above, these may range widely in strength and precision. For our purposes, the most important consideration is whether and how the expectancy influences the behavior of the perceiver. If it does not, then there may be perceptual confirmation of the expectancy but no logical possibility for behavioral confirmation to occur.

Some expectancies have no direct implications for behavior in the normal settings of casual interaction. If we have a hunch that a conversation partner may be unusually honest or basically a coward, such hunches are unlikely to affect our behavior unless our interactions with that person are frequent or protracted. On the other hand, a belief that the partner is warm and friendly, or highly competitive, or very short-tempered is likely to affect a perceiver's behavior in a wide variety of social settings. Such expectancies seem to invite reciprocation or intervention. An approach orientation (for example, one involving smiles and eye contact) is the most likely behavioral reaction to the expectation of warmth, friendliness, and liking. Expectations of hostility or competitiveness tend to breed hostility or competitiveness in response. If we think someone is emotionally fragile, we will typically respond with cautious and accommodating behavior (*8*).

Thus, there are expectancies and there are expectancies. In addition, of course, we must take into account the interaction between the expectancy and the behavioral opportunities afforded by the context. In many contexts interaction is sufficiently constrained by tasks or roles that interpersonal expectancies are entirely irrelevant in the interaction sequence. Other contexts evoke behavioral expression of only certain expectancies. If we think that someone is basically manipulative and self-serving, this may affect our responses to that person in a faculty meeting but have little or no bearing on our interactions with the same person at a wedding party or a funeral gathering.

Behavioral reciprocation. The next step is to consider whether the behavior reflecting the perceiver's expectancy is likely to make any difference in the succeeding reactions of the person perceived. Again, such behavioral repercussions are a prerequisite of behavioral confirmation. Indeed, they are the vehicle of such confirmations. Behavioral confirmation will obviously not occur if the person in question basically ignores the perceiver's expectancy-relevant behavior and continues on a predetermined behavioral path. Or the person may be affected by the perceiver's behavior in ways that do not provide behavioral confirmation of the expectancy. Assuming, for the moment, that potentially confirming behavioral reciprocation occurs, there is one more crucial step in the full behavioral confirmation process: the perceiver must see the other person's reactions as reflecting stable dispositional characteristics.

Correspondence bias. It is reasonable for the perceiver to have an expectancy about another person and to act on it. It is reasonable for the other person to perceive the perceiver's expectancy-related behavior and be affected by it in his or her own subsequent actions. What is not so reasonable is for the perceiver to take the other person's reactions to his own behavior at face value and simply to assume that these reactions are independent of the expectancy and

therefore reveal the other person's inherent, underlying dispositions. Social psychological research has told us very little, thus far, about the conditions under which expectancies get expressed and these expressions are reciprocated. But there is abundant research to document a pervasive human tendency to treat the behavior of others as if it were caused by, or were a direct reflection of, an underlying personality disposition (*9*). There is thus a "correspondence bias": a tendency to assume that a given action can be explained by reference to a correspondent disposition when actually people with a variety of different dispositions would have behaved in a similar way. This tendency toward correspondence bias means that we fail to take fully into account the controlling role that situations play. Thus, persons expressing opinions under extremely constraining circumstances (for example, as role-players in an experiment where the experimenter clearly assigns the position they must espouse) are nevertheless seen to be sympathetic to those opinions.

Does this apparent underestimation of situational constraint occur when the "situation" is essentially created or largely controlled by the perceiver? In the interaction sequence, as depicted in Fig. 1, something the perceiver does affects what the target person does subsequently. The perceiver could discount this appropriately by reasoning, "Well, this person is responsive to me, but I can't tell what he is like because my own behavior induced that response." But recent experiments by Gilbert and myself (*10*) make it clear that correspondence bias occurs when there is situational constraint even when the constraint is imposed by the perceiver.

In a simulated interview situation, 26 Princeton undergraduate subjects believed that their roles as interviewers were to signal interviewees to read answers to questions concerning social or political issues. On each of several trials, the subject, in an isolation booth, asked a question and then pressed a button to signal for either a liberal or a conservative response. It was made clear to the interviewer that the statements on each issue had been previously prepared for the experiment and that the interviewee was merely complying with instructions in reading them verbatim. The results showed a strong tendency toward correspondence bias: even though the perceivers were obviously aware that they had induced the responses they heard, they tended to attribute to the interviewee attitudes consistent with the opinions expressed. On a 15-point scale anchored at the end points by the phrases "extremely liberal" and "extremely conservative," 10 out of 13 subjects faced with a predominantly conservative responder rated him on the conservative side, whereas the predominantly liberal responder was rated on the liberal side by 10 out of the 13 subjects in that condition. Thus the subjects, who could and logically should have distributed their responses around the midpoint, gave ratings systematically biased in the direction of the responses they had induced and heard.

This finding has been replicated with different behavioral content and under different circumstances of behavioral induction. The inducing subjects are apparently quite aware that they have elicited the behavior they are observing. They simply do not take this fully into account when asked what the target person really believes.

These findings are less surprising when viewed in relation to the large literature on correspondence bias (*9*). In more than 20 years of research on the attribution of attitudes, abilities, and personality dispositions, I have found that people almost inevitably prefer to make personal attributions for behaviors that can be fully explained by the circumstances of situational constraint. Such correspondence bias occurs, for example, whether the constraint is in the form of examination instructions, an assignment from a debating coach, a high monetary incentive for playing a particular role, or simply a reasonable request of a target person by an experimenter. Bias effects have been demonstrated for a wide variety of attributed attitudes, for such personality dispositions as introversion-extroversion, and for such emotions as anxiety. The only novelty of our recent research, then, is that correspondence bias occurs even when the constraint is extreme and even when it is induced by the perceiver himself or herself.

In any event, this research provides support, though it is somewhat indirect, for the final link in the behavioral confirmation chain. There is now ample reason to believe that perceivers, whose expectancy-related actions elicit expectancy-confirming responses in the target person, nevertheless are inclined to interpret the behavior they observe as informative about the target person and as independent evidence that their expectancies were correct. This tendency toward correspondence bias may persist, apparently, even when the perceiver is quite aware of his or her inducing influence.

The Target Person

This account has moved through the interaction sequence identifying the logical steps necessary for behavioral confirmation of an expectancy—the defining feature of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The account has stressed the importance of the perceiver's active role in creating his own social information environment. But a full account must of course recognize that in real social interaction "target persons" are also perceivers. They too have expectancies, they too play active roles in creating their social environment. In short, they are not the passive recipients of social influence in the service of confirming the perceiver's expectancies. Figure 1 thus presents an arbitrary perspective, and the columns could just as easily have been reversed.

All participants in an interaction may have purposes or goals. These goals may include the projection of a cherished identity. Swann and his colleagues (*11*) have emphasized those occasions in which people use interactions as opportunities to verify and confirm conceptions of self. Their experiments show how subjects with a strong self-image will seek out and selectively retain reinforcing information from others. In addition, persons who find that they are in danger of being misunderstood can sometimes do something about it. Hilton and Darley (*12*) demonstrated that target persons who are led to believe that a perceiver expects them to be "cold" will successfully try to overcome this negative expectancy.

The success of such efforts depends on the availability of behavioral resources that can readily disconfirm the expectancy. Most people are able to project "warmth," and the opportunities to do so are normally abundant. Expectancies about cowardice, duplicity, or vulnerability to stress may be much more difficult to overcome. It is hard to find situations in which to be brave, to demonstrate one's honesty once and for all, or to prove that one is psychologically tough. Even when an erroneous expectancy could be readily corrected, the resources at the disposal of the target person may be controlled by the perceiver in a way that makes this difficult. Darley *et al.* (*13*), for example, described how the perceiver's interaction goal may determine the questions he or she asks. As a consequence of the pattern of questions asked, the responding person may succeed or fail in overcoming a false expectancy.

People often have goals that go well beyond self-verification. The extensive literature on strategic self-presentation is largely concerned with how people maintain or augment their personal power in everyday interactions. Pittman and I (*14*) have tried to emphasize the richness and variety of self-presentational forms, the numerous kinds of impressions that people try to create in order to protect their interests. Given the fact that persons may be actively engaged in particular impression management strategies, as well as in attempts at self-verification, it may seem to follow that behavioral confirmation is rare in the real world of everyday social interaction.

"Face Work"

Such a conclusion would ignore the typical adherence of socialized persons to norms that inhibit disruptive confrontations between interaction partners. Goffman (*15*) emphasized the implicit ritual contracts that pervade much of social interaction. An important feature of such contracts is the mutual protection of face, or what he sometimes called "face work." When a person claims a particular identity, presenting himself or herself in a particular way, it is bad form to challenge that claim or to cause the person to "lose face." Thus we work to protect our own face, to give it a plausible rendering, but we also expect others to help us be what we purport to be. We expect them not to contest our self-presentational claims, and our part of the bargain is to avoid contesting theirs.

We are often involved in social interactions where the important thing is to get in and out without embarrassment or disruption—to leave the interaction with a face no less acceptable than the one we started with. To the extent that Goffman's (rather gloomy) characterization of many interactions is valid, there is an obvious implication for the fate of interpersonal expectancies. If a perceiver conveys an impression of the interaction partner that the latter considers incorrect, a challenge of that expectancy may in various ways violate the face-work contract. If the perceiver says, "I'll bet you're a Leo," it's easy to correct him and say, "No, actually I'm a Taurus." But many impressions are not that easily identified or corrected. Challenging a false impression normally requires at least a slight disruption of the conversational flow ("What did you mean?"), an attempt to characterize the error ("You must think I'm . . . ."), and the marshaling of evidence to dispute it ("I'll have you know I was voted the most likely to . . . ."). When we look at the prospects of correcting false expectancies in this way, it is easy to believe that the victims often decide it is not worthwhile to challenge them. Unless serious negative consequences follow from the erroneous impression, it is the line of least resistance to proceed as if the error had not been surmised. The costs of either direct or indirect confrontation (which may not be convincing anyway) must be weighed against the costs of continuing to be misunderstood.

Long-Term Relationships and Self-Attribution

It would seem to be a truism that the costs of being misunderstood appreciate as a relationship evolves from one that is casual or based on well-defined roles to one that is close and multifaceted. In recent years there has been a significant shift of research from first impressions (easily studied in conventional laboratory experiments) to close relationships like those between college roommates, dating couples, or family members. A fuller understanding of such close relationships will entail multiple approaches that include but cannot be restricted to laboratory experiments. As we consider the conditions and consequences of behavioral confirmation, is this a phenomenon that sheds new light on close relationship formation? Or do self-fulfilling prophecies tend to be self-corrective in the long run?

These are difficult questions to answer in any general way. Obviously "face work" takes on dimensions that are very different in close relations than those in casual relations—face concerns are still there but they may be superseded in importance by longer term considerations. In addition, it must be recognized that close relations are often chosen because each partner agrees with the expectancies about him- or herself that he or she attributes to the other. In such cases the confirmation of expectancies may be a foregone conclusion. We may also assume that close relationships provide a variety of opportunities for correcting erroneous expectancies. This would seem to suggest that the perpetuation of error through self-fulfilling prophecies may not remain a significant feature of close relationships. But such considerations do not tell the whole story. Two further possibilities must be considered: the possibilities of interactive escalation and the possibility of self-change.

Interactive Escalation

It is certainly possible to imagine interaction sequences in which either hostility or friendly feeling escalates in ways that are fueled by the behavior confirmation process. Recent studies of aggressive boys (*16*) show that these youngsters expect aggression from their peers; accordingly, they see ambiguous provocations as reflecting definitely hostile intentions rather as accidental occurrences. There does not seem to be any reason, then, why such behavior confirmation cycles should be restricted to casual, short-term relationships. The same conclusion would seem to apply even more obviously to the more beneficent escalations of love, where ambiguous responses are interpreted as affectionate gestures that in turn produce reciprocal affection in the perceiver.

Possibilities of Self-Attribution

One of the most fascinating and important possible sequels to the behavior confirmation sequence would be a change in the target person's self-concept. Such a change might follow if the target person learns something from his or her own behavior about the kind of person he or she really is. As Bem (*17*) has argued, sometimes our beliefs are changed by our perceptions of the way we have behaved. So we should ask: Under what conditions does behavior that confirms a perceiver's initially false expectancy also become incorporated into the other person's self-concept? What convinces both the perceiver and the perceived person that the confirming behavior generally characterizes the latter or is correspondent with important underlying dispositions?

Attribution theories suggest some answers to this question. Nisbett and I (*18*) proposed many years ago that actors tend to attribute to the situation the same acts that observers tend to attribute to the actors' dispositions. Although a number of exceptions have been discovered to qualify this "actuarial proposition," it has held up rather well to subsequent research challenges (*19*). An implication of this actor-observer divergence proposition is that target persons will most likely attribute their expectancy-confirming behaviors to the eliciting behaviors of the perceiver. In other words, the perceiver's actions provide an important part of the target person's situation. To the extent that target persons assign responsibility to the situation for their behavior, they will not treat the behavior as if it were informative about their own dispositions.

It turns out, however, that there are some fairly well-defined circumstances under which target persons, as actors, will find their behavior diagnostic of their dispositions. For example, when the influencing conditions provided by the perceiver are fairly subtle, the target person may not recognize their role in the elicitation of behavior. Fazio *et al.* (*20*) showed that Indiana University undergraduate subjects who were asked questions that were deliberately loaded to elicit extroverted answers (for example, "What would you do if you wanted to liven things up at a party?") not only gave such answers but subsequently described themselves as more extroverted than subjects who had previously answered questions loaded in the introverted direction. This difference could have occurred by chance less than five out of a hundred times.

In experiments conducted by several colleagues and myself (*21*)

college student interviewees were taken aside and instructed to present themselves like they felt on a really good day, when many gratifying things had happened, and they were feeling well satisfied with life and themselves. These instructions not only elicited the specified behavior in the interviewees but led to a statistically significant elevation of self-esteem subsequently in a very different setting. Each of these subjects was randomly paired with another subject who was subsequently given the identical responses to present, without the personal responsibility of generating them. These "yoked" subjects did not show the same carry-over of their self-satisfied behavior into a new and different situation. In general, it appears that when people are induced to scan their personal characteristics in a biased way and to present selected features of the self, there will be measurable changes in their self-concept. These changes may not last forever, but they last long enough to reappear in different contexts (that is, in a subsequent experiment supposedly unrelated to the first).

Snyder and Swann (*22*) directly manipulated target persons' attributions for their expectancy confirming behavior. College student subjects, induced by perceivers to act in a hostile manner, also acted in a hostile manner to a third person (in the next stage of the experiment) if they had been specifically encouraged by the experimental cover story to believe that their behavior in the experiment was more a reflection on them than a reaction to the situation. Thus only when the experimenter interjected several comments documenting the relevance of personality factors in the experimental setting did the subjects generalize their hostile behavior to a new target person.

The few studies that do shed light on the carry-over of constrained behavior into unconstrained situations seem to suggest that it is not too difficult to induce target persons to attribute their behavior to their own dispositions, that is, to modify their pre-experimental self-concepts to reflect their induced behavior. This will happen even when the behavior is clearly under the control of perceivers whose actions follow from erroneous expectancies, as long as target persons have at least some sense of personal responsibility for their behavior. With people who have this sense of responsibility, behavior confirmation may indeed form an important link in the transition from casual to close relationships. Though initially false expectancies can undoubtedly be corrected as close relationships develop, and there is more sharing and self-disclosure, increasing contact may also generate patterns of behavioral escalation as well as important changes in the participants' self-concepts—changes that are sustained and buttressed as the relationship evolves.

Conclusion

Understanding the motives and dispositions of the important people in our social world requires that we carefully assess our own contributions to the selves that they present to us. However, recent research shows that we are not good at this kind of discernment and the attributional discounting that should follow. Therefore, though what we observe is often a reflection of what we have asked for, we tend to treat it as useful information that provides independent confirmation of our expectancies. This is ultimately maladaptive since the most basic assumption of person perception or attribution research is that accurate understanding of others is the most secure basis for predicting those of their actions that are relevant to our own purposes. If we misunderstand why a person behaved as he did in one situation, we shall be prone to err in predicting how the person will behave in other situations. The present essay argues that while "self-fulfilling prophecies" are by no means inevitable, there are a number of reasons why they might be widely expected in a variety of settings with different kinds of behavioral expectancies.

The present "social interaction approach" to person perception and attributional processes is offered in contrast to previous approaches that treated the perceiver or attributor as a passive information processor. It also supplements the view that perceivers actively select and transform the available information about others to accommodate their own expectancies. The major lesson of the research reviewed here is that each of us constructs a significant part of the social reality that he or she confronts. Future research can perhaps illuminate the circumstances under which erroneous expectancies are most likely to be confirmed and may alert us to those occasions when we should be especially cautious about inferring stable dispositions from observed behavior.

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