

Title of Submission – The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy and Sexual Harassment: A Social Psychological Investigation of How Erroneous Beliefs May Lead to Unwanted Sexual Attention

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The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy and Sexual Harassment: A Social Psychological Investigation of  
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Ridge (2000) has proposed a model of sexual harassment that builds on the phenomenon of the *self-fulfilling prophecy* (Merton, 1948). According to this model, some men may engage in seductive behaviors toward a woman because they erroneously believe that she is attracted to them. This belief may lead the men to engage in belief confirming overtures, such as flirting, talking about personal matters, or “coming on” to the woman. Because the overtures are generally subtle so as to avoid detection (and the potentially negative consequences that could result from such behavior, such as poor work evaluations or sexual harassment claims), they may not be consciously perceived by the woman. The overtures may, however, elicit from the woman unwitting flirtatious or seductive responses in return. This is the essence of a self-fulfilling prophecy (i.e., the men engineer a social outcome that is consistent with their expectations).

Perceiving the woman’s elevated flirtatious or seductive responses, the men may conclude that they were correct in their assumptions and subsequently escalate their covert overtures, thereby beginning a cycle of overtures and corresponding responses that may eventually become overt. If the woman perceives the overt nature of the flirtatious overtures, yet remains unaware of her unwitting, yet elevated, flirtatious responses, she may judge the overtures to be unwelcome and unwanted, and may conclude that she is being sexually harassed. The men, on the other hand, may be surprised by this claim because the woman has responded to them by behaving flirtatiously. This may then result in conflicting “he said/she said” accounts of the preceding interactions (e.g., “*He’s harassing me.*” “*She invited the flirtation.*”).

The essential elements of this model have been demonstrated in empirical research. Ridge and Reber (2002) led men to believe that women were either attracted or unattracted to them, and then allowed the men to converse with the women in 10-minute conversations. Results of the study showed that the men elicited elevated flirtatious behavior from women in the attracted condition as opposed to the unattracted condition, but that the women were unaware of either the men's overtures toward them or their elevated flirtatious responses. Current research is now underway to examine the processes by which this phenomenon occurs. Specifically, we are currently conducting three studies to investigate: 1) whether some men are more likely than others to initiate this self-fulfilling prophecy; 2) what strategy men may use to elicit flirtatious and seductive responses from women; and 3) whether individual differences can account for women's flirtatious behavior in general and their responses to men's flirtatious overtures specifically.

With respect to the first area of inquiry, Larsen (2000) has developed a reliable, valid instrument that measures individual differences in men's beliefs of their sexual attractiveness to women. Whereas Ridge and Reber (2002) artificially manipulated men's beliefs about women's attraction to them in their research, Larsen proposes that some men might be dispositionally more likely to believe that women are attracted to them, and therefore might be more likely to treat women as if this belief were true and elicit a flirtatious response in return. We discuss the design and preliminary results of Larsen's investigation to determine if this individual difference accounts for differences in men's perceptions and treatment of women in both simulated and real-life interactions.

With respect to the second area of inquiry, Payne (2002) proposes that men may engage in a well-known interaction strategy known as *biased hypothesis testing* (Snyder & Swann, 1978)

to elicit belief-confirming behavior from women. Biased hypothesis testing occurs when a person (designated the *perceiver*) holds a belief about another person (designated the *target*) and asks questions and makes comments that constrain the target to respond in belief-confirming ways. In Payne's research, men are led to believe that female job applicants are either attracted or unattracted to them, following which the men must select questions they would like to ask the women in an upcoming interview. Some of the questions are markedly more unprofessional and personal than others and are designed to elicit more personal responses from the women. The selection of these questions by men in the attracted condition as opposed to the selection of more professional questions by men in the unattracted condition is an indication of a biased interaction strategy that may result in belief-confirming responses from the women.

Finally, with respect to the third area of inquiry, we discuss research by Nelson (2002) that investigates individual differences in women's beliefs of their sexual attractiveness to men. Nelson hypothesizes that women who believe that they are sexually attractive to men may be more generally flirtatious than women who don't share this belief and may be more likely to respond to men's flirtatious overtures with flirtatious responses. We discuss the design and preliminary results of Nelson's research to establish the reliability and validity of an instrument designed to assess this construct in women and to examine how this belief may contribute to the self-fulfilling prophecy discussed by Ridge (2000).

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