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Self-Prophecy and Dissonance Reduction

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Abstract

Making a self-prediction about the future performance of a behavior increases the probability of people performing a target action in a socially normative direction. This *self-prophecy effect* has been shown to be robust with meaningful effect sizes. Only recently has research investigated the theoretical process underlying the phenomenon suggesting that self-prediction makes salient a discrepancy between principles and past behavior with resultant dissonance leading to behavior change. This article presents a series of experiments supporting the hypothesis that the act of self-prediction regarding socially normative behaviors generates cognitive dissonance, thereby obtaining greater compliance with subsequent requests to perform the behavior as a dissonance reduction strategy.

Self-Prophecy and Dissonance Reduction

"Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin."
James 4:17 NAS Bible

That knowledgeable transgression makes us uncomfortable is essential to cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957)—one of social psychology's most enduring theories. This principle appears to underlie what has come to be referred to as the *self-prophecy effect*—that is, people making self-predictions perform differently than a control group upon subsequent behavioral opportunity with regard to socially normative behaviors.[1] Although prior research indicates promise for the consistent, wide-scale application of self-prediction to the benefit of society, theory-relevant research has only recently begun to appear in the literature (e.g., Spangenberg, Sprott, Grohmann, & Smith, 2003; Sprott, Spangenberg, & Fisher, 2003). The present article presents a series of experiments exploring the causal mechanism for the effect. We consider the general hypothesis that the act of making self-predictions about socially normative behaviors elicits cognitive dissonance in people, thereby obtaining greater compliance with subsequent behavioral requests as a strategy to reduce dissonance.[2]

Self-Prophecy

Self-prophecy is a simple influence strategy—merely ask someone to predict his or her behavior regarding a normative target action and the likelihood of performing the behavior significantly increases. Sherman (1980) introduced this compelling empirical phenomenon by demonstrating its effectiveness for increasing people's willingness to volunteer to work for a charity, decreasing willingness to sing over the phone, and reducing likelihood of writing a counterattitudinal essay. In the past 20-plus years, self-prophecy has been demonstrated for a variety of behaviors (see Spangenberg & Greenwald, 2001) including: registering to vote and

voting in elections (Greenwald, Carnot, Beach, & Young 1987; Greenwald, Klinger, Vande Kamp, & Kerr, 1988), reducing cheating in college coursework (Spangenberg & Obermiller, 1996), attending a health club (e.g., Spangenberg, 1997), recycling aluminum cans (e.g., Sprott, Spangenberg, & Perkins, 1999), reducing implicit gender stereotyping (Spangenberg & Greenwald, 1999), giving to one's alma mater (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 2000), choosing a healthy snack food, getting a health assessment (Sprott, Smith, Spangenberg, & Freson, 2004), and helping a charity (e.g., Spangenberg et al., 2003).

When considering the behaviors for which the technique has been effective, a shared characteristic becomes apparent—specifically, all behaviors have a socially normative component. Indeed, *all* successful published experiments report behavior change occurring in a socially normative direction. For socially desirable behaviors (e.g., voting and charity work), the behavior change is upward; for the normatively undesirable behaviors (e.g., writing a counterattitudinal essay, singing over the telephone, and cheating), it is downward. Consistent with the notion that normative behavior is a precondition for self-prophecy is a recent study demonstrating that the magnitude of a self-prophecy effect is moderated by a person's normative beliefs regarding the behavior (Sprott et al., 2003).

The wide variety of situations that have produced self-prophecy effects create confidence that the phenomenon is robust enough to be of practical significance. Spangenberg and Greenwald's (2001) review includes a meta-analysis of all (to that date) known published and unpublished self-prophecy work showing that associated effect sizes are homogeneous, ranging from $r = .08$ to $r = .40$ (small-to-moderate effect sizes [Cohen, 1988]), with an average of $r = .19$. Although moderate-sized, a technique that produces an effect of this magnitude can be of great practical significance if applied on a large scale, as demonstrated by Spangenberg et al. (2003)

who successfully mass-communicated prediction requests within advertisements to a target population. Overall, the body of existing work suggests promise for consistent, wide-scale application of self-prophecy to the benefit of society by encouraging relevant and socially desirable changes in human behavior.

While research has clearly demonstrated the nature of the effect, much less work has been done to determine the theoretical underpinnings for the effect. Based on their review, Spangenberg & Greenwald (1999) suggested cognitive dissonance as the most compelling theoretical explanation for the effect with Spangenberg et al. (2003) introducing the first evidence supporting this postulation in the context of mass-communicated prediction requests. The current work seeks to develop and empirically verify this hypothesis.

A Cognitive Dissonance Explanation for Self-Prophecy

Festinger's (1957) original conceptualization presented cognitive dissonance as fundamentally motivational in nature; that is, an inconsistency among a person's cognitions generates a negative intrapersonal state (dissonance), thereby motivating the person to alleviate this aversive psychological condition. The self-prophecy paradigm is reminiscent of well-established experimental procedures for eliciting cognitive dissonance. For example, classic induced compliance dissonance experiments (e.g., Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959) use the implicit authority of an experimenter to elicit agreement to perform a counterattitudinal action, which in turn yields attitude change toward a position consistent with the induced action. In this instance, as with self-prophecy, influence occurs when people respond to the preliminary request. It is this line of reasoning motivating Spangenberg and Greenwald's (1999) dissonance proposal.

A dissonance-based explanation for self-prophecy suggests that the act of self-prediction

causes psychological discomfort or tension by making people aware of a discrepancy between the values they hold (e.g., normative beliefs about performing the target behavior) and how they have behaved in the past with regard to the target behavior. Thus, upon making a self-prediction, people become aware of what they *should* do, in addition to what they *have* (or *have not*) done previously regarding the behavior. If these cognitions are discrepant (e.g., "I should recycle. I have recycling services available to me, but I throw away many recyclable materials in the trash."), cognitive dissonance results. People making a prediction request alleviate associated cognitive dissonance by performing the socially desirable action they otherwise would have been unlikely to perform.

The pattern of effects reported in prior self-prophecy research supports the process that self-prediction leads people to consider *what they have done* and *what they should do* regarding a behavior. A consistent finding is that participants in a control group behave in a less socially desirable manner than those who have completed a prediction request. Based on this evidence, it is clear that people (left to their own accord) perform socially normative behaviors in a manner that is sub-optimal as compared to the norm. Further, it is reasonable to assume that a behavioral self-prediction is likely to remind people of their failure to perform behaviors as they *should*. In addition, it is clear from prior research that people tend to make self-predictions in the direction of the social norm (e.g., Spangenberg & Greenwald, 1999) indicating that they understand the norms associated with the focal behaviors. Taken together, these findings suggest that the necessary ingredients for dissonance to occur exist at the time of prediction. In the current research, we therefore test for the presence of dissonance in the context of self-prophecy.

It has also been noted (Spangenberg and Greenwald, 1999) that the self-prophecy paradigm coincides nicely with the dissonance-based 'induced-hypocrisy' program of research

conducted by Aronson and colleagues (e.g., Aronson, Fried, & Stone, 1991; Fried & Aronson, 1995; Stone, Aronson, Crain, Winslow, & Fried, 1994). In this stream of research, hypocrisy is induced when people advocate a position beneficial to others through proattitudinal speeches while being made mindful of their past failure to act consistently with that advocacy. The combination of these two factors—advocacy and awareness of failure to perform the behavior—arouses dissonance, but either factor in isolation does not. In a similar (though procedurally truncated) manner, self-prophecy may remind people of what they should do regarding a behavior and that they have not lived up to those normative prescriptions; the resulting dissonance can be alleviated by changes in behavior.

As suggested above, empirical evidence for the role of dissonance in the self-prophecy effect is limited but does exist (Spangenberg et al., 2003). There is also empirical evidence indicating the importance of social norms to self-prophecy. Sprott et al. (2003) showed that the effect of a prediction request is greater when people have stronger social norms about performing the behavior (as compared to weaker norms). Although this finding is consistent with a dissonance explanation for self-prophecy (i.e., greater cognitive dissonance is evoked for those with stronger social norms), it is not conclusive evidence for the account.

Thus, following Spangenberg and Greenwald (1999) and Spangenberg et al. (2003), we interpret the self-prophecy phenomenon within a cognitive dissonance framework. Behavioral self-prediction makes people mindful of the discrepancy between their actual and normatively ideal states regarding the behavior, thereby producing a dissonant state; subsequent action consistent with norms reduces this discrepancy. This general hypothesis is tested in the series of experiments reported.

Experiment 1: Self-Prediction and Selective Recall of Past Behavior

In Experiment 1, we test whether self-prediction might bias report of past behavior. Festinger (1957) described the psychological discomfort as a result of the proportion of dissonant elements. To reduce the dissonance caused by making the prediction, we propose that people will selectively recall past behavior that is consistent with the norm, thereby reducing the proportion of dissonant elements, and report higher levels of norm-appropriate behavior. Another possibility is that the prediction will remind participants of their prior failings to perform the behavior in a normative fashion and result in reporting of lower (rather than higher) levels of prior normative behavior, in comparison to a control group. We do not favor this explanation since recalling and self-reporting failures to perform behaviors in a normative manner would threaten a person's view as a moral, good and competent person (Aronson 1968; 1992) and produce additional dissonance (above and beyond what was generated from the prediction request). This operates against the basic tenants of dissonance theory—namely, that people will attempt to reduce (not seek to increase) dissonant cognitions. Thus, we hypothesize that participants who make a self-prediction will subsequently report higher levels of norm-relevant behavior than control participants.

Method

Participants and Design. Participants were 56 undergraduate students participating for a modest amount of course credit. Students were randomly assigned to one of two between-participants experimental treatments. Treatments included two prediction scenarios: donations to a charity and recycling of aluminum cans.

Materials. All participants completed a self-prediction about job preference (a control prediction drawn from several published self-prophecy studies):

> You are considering two job offers; one would pay you $30,000 per year. There is little hope for advancement but your future with the company would be very secure. The second job starts at $25,000 per year but there seems to be more opportunity for advancement. Do you predict that you would take job: a) for $30,000; b) for $25,000?

Half of the participants then responded to the following charity donation question:

> Imagine that you are walking across campus on a warm day, when you walk by a table where students are asking for donations to help the survivors of an Earthquake? Do you predict that you would make a donation? a. Yes, I would make a donation. b. No, I would not make a donation.

The second question for the remaining participants asked for a prediction regarding recycling:

> Imagine that you are walking across campus on a warm day, drinking a soft drink in an aluminum can. Do you predict that you will make the effort to place the empty can in a recycling container? a. Yes, I would make the effort to recycle it. b. No, I would not make the effort to recycle it.

These two self-predictions are associated with normative behaviors (i.e., one *should* donate to a worthy charity and recycle aluminum cans) and have been empirically demonstrated to result in self-prophecy effects in published research. Further, participants were all likely to have had opportunity to perform these behaviors and failed to behave consistent with the social norm, at least in some instances.

Procedures. The experiment was conducted in two stages. The first stage consisted of a one-page questionnaire with the two prediction questions described above (i.e., the job offer and charity donation or recycling). The second stage, which followed approximately one hour later, with a classroom assignment intervening, consisted of two self-report items, one for past recycling behavior and the other for past charity donation behavior. Thus, each group of participants served as a control group for the focal prediction request completed by the other group.

Measures. The dependent variable was a self-reported measure of one's own past behavior regarding a behavior for which participants had made a prediction and a behavior for which no prediction had been made. For recycling, students read and estimated:

> Consider all the opportunities you have had to dispose of aluminum cans over the past year. You probably cannot remember each time, but make your best estimate of the proportion of those times in which you made the effort to see that the cans were properly recycled.

For donating to charity, students read and estimated:

> Consider all the times over the past year that you have been asked to make a donation to some charity. You probably cannot remember each time, but make your best estimate of the proportion of those times in which you did make a donation to charity.

Both measures employed 10-point scales (ranging from 0 to 100%) anchored with "absolutely never" and "absolutely every time."

Results

Analysis consisted of a simple mean comparison of the reported behavior for those who had made a prediction versus those who had not. Participants who had made a self-prediction about recycling in the future reported recycling (67.1%) more in the past year than those who had not made such a prediction (51.4%), t (55) = 2.54, p = .01. Participants who made predictions about donating to a charity reported more charitable donation in the past year (40.3%) than those who had not made this prediction (20.7%), t (55) = 3.33, p = .002).

Discussion

Consistent with a dissonance-based explanation for self-prophecy, these results support the hypothesis that a prediction biases self-report of past behavior in a normative direction. Our interpretation of this finding is that participants reduced their psychological discomfort (i.e., dissonance) by biasing recall of, or selectively recalling, past behavior consistent with the social norm. One might argue that these findings are the results of impression management, but the anonymous nature of predictions and responses in this study, and the fact that all participants reported past behavior for both recycling and donating, preclude such an interpretation. To eliminate any question as to whether making norms more salient motivated response, Experiment

2 focused on the behavior of other people—a dependent variable not susceptible to an impression management interpretation. In the second study, we also explore an alternate account of self-prophecy based on the salience of social norms.

Experiment 2: Self-Prediction and the Behavior of Others

The most reasonable competing hypothesis to a dissonance-based explanation of self-prophecy is salience of social norms (Sherman 1980; Sprott et al. 2003; also see Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). This view holds that the self-prediction merely increases the salience of social norms and that these norms affect how the person making the prediction behaves in the future. Either the dissonance or norm salience process could conceivably produce the same behavioral outcome—that is, a person's behavior will more likely follow a socially normative pattern after making a self-prediction. As another test of the dissonance-based account of self-prophecy (and a means to rule out the salient norm explanation), we modified the form of previous self-prophecy experiments by exploring the effects of prediction on a person's perception of other people's behavior. A different outcome should result depending on which process is in effect.

If a request for prediction merely increases the salience of social norms, this salience should affect not only one's own behavior, but also correspondingly affect how that same person predicts the behavior of others. From this theoretical perspective, people (once having predicted their own future behavior) should be more likely to predict that others will perform the behavior in a manner *consistent* with social norms (as compared to a control condition), since the salient norms will bias the estimate of others' behavior.

If dissonance accounts for the effects of self-prediction, however, a different outcome is expected. A dissonance explanation would predict that the self-concept of those making a self-

prediction is threatened as they are confronted with their own history of norm violation. From this perspective, people making a self-prediction should be motivated to perceive others to have performed in a manner *inconsistent* with socially normative prescriptions (via downward social comparisons), as compared to a control condition. In response to evoked dissonance, self-predictors can justify their (non-normative) history by concluding that others would have acted similarly (e.g., "Even though we all know what we *should* do, I'm not so bad if I do what everyone else does."). From this perspective, people making a self-prediction should be more likely to predict that others will (also) perform the behavior in a manner *inconsistent* with social norms, as compared to a control condition.

To test these alternative explanations we conducted an experiment with two replications incorporating a self-prediction prior to asking respondents about their perceptions of other people's behavior. The replications were nearly identical except for the behavior; Experiment 2A dealt with recycling and Experiment 2B, with cheating. Both behaviors have been shown to be affected by the self-prophecy technique in prior research, but in opposite normatively consistent directions—that is, while the temptation to cheat was *reduced*, recycling behavior was *increased* (see Spangenberg & Greenwald, 2001).

Method

Participants and Design. Participants were undergraduate students (Experiment 2A, N = 155; Experiment 2B, N = 113) taking part in the experiment for a modest amount of course credit, randomly assigned to one of two experimental treatments. The treatments, similar to prior research, included individually administered self-prophecy and control prediction conditions.

Materials. In the control prediction condition, participants were asked to complete the job preference question previously described (identical for both Experiments 2A and 2B). In the

self-prediction condition, participants were asked to prophesy their own behavior regarding recycling in Experiment 2A:

> You frequently drink soda from aluminum cans. Do you predict that: a) you will recycle the cans; b) you will not recycle the cans?

Similarly participants were asked to predict regarding cheating in Experiment 2B:

> You are taking an exam or working on an individual assignment and find that you are not adequately prepared. There is virtually no chance of being caught copying someone else's answers or cheating in any way. Do you predict that you: a) will cheat; b) will not cheat?

Procedures. In both replications, participants first completed the self-prediction followed by perceptions of other people's behavior. In all cases, order of the two prediction choices ("a" and "b" above) was counterbalanced to preclude any possibility of order effects.

Measures. The main dependent variable was the perception of other people's behaviors (i.e., "other students in your college"). For recycling, participants responded to the following:

> Other students in your college frequently drink soda from aluminum cans.
> Do you predict that for the most part: a) the students will recycle cans; b) the students will not recycle cans?

For cheating, research participants completed the following item:

> Other students in your college are taking an exam or working on an individual assignment and find that they are not adequately prepared. There is virtually no chance of anyone being caught copying someone else's answers or cheating in any way. Do you predict that most students: a) will cheat; b) will not cheat?

Again, the order of choices ("a" and "b") was counterbalanced.

After completing these measures, social norms regarding the focal behaviors were collected from research participants to further account for the role of norms in the current experiment. For both behaviors, social norms were collected with 2 Likert-type scale items: "Students I know make it a priority to recycle"; "Students I know think it's important to recycle" (recycling items correlated at $r = .68$); "Students I know resist the temptation to cheat,"

"Students I know think it's important to avoid cheating" (cheating items correlated at $r = .64$). These items were drawn from recent research (Sprott et al., 2003) and averaged for each behavior for inclusion as covariates in analyses.

Results

Table 1 presents results of chi-square difference tests between participants' own predictions and their perceptions of others' behaviors. As expected, the prediction of one's own behavior had a significant directional influence on how participants perceived the behavior of others regarding both recycling and cheating. Specifically, when asked to make a prediction about their own recycling and cheating behavior, participants subsequently stated that other people were less likely to recycle, χ^2 (1, N = 155) = 9.36, $p = .002$, and more likely to cheat (χ^2 (1, N = 113) = 3.75, $p = .053$, compared to control participants not making a self-prediction.

Logistic regression was used to further assess the role of social norms in the experiment. For both behaviors, the perception of other people's behaviors was regressed on the self-prediction factor (predict vs. no predict) and social norms regarding the focal behavior. The logistic regression models were significant for recycling, χ^2 (2, N = 155) = 30.61, $p < .001$) and cheating, χ^2 (2, N = 113) = 26.79, $p < .001$). In both models, social norms had a significant influence on the perception of others' behaviors (p's < .001) such that people's beliefs about others matched their own normative beliefs about performing the behavior. As with the chi-square difference tests, there was a similar influence of self-prophecy for both behaviors (recycling, $\beta = 1.21$, $p_{1\text{-tail}} = .001$; cheating, $\beta = -.78$, $p_{1\text{-tail}} = .045$). The self-prophecy by social norms interaction was not significant for either behavior therefore not included in either logistic regression model.

Discussion

Results of Experiments 2A and 2B provide support for the cognitive dissonance explanation for the self-prophecy effect. When research participants were asked about other people's behavior after predicting their own behavior, they appeared to alleviate their cognitive discomfort by suggesting that others are not likely to avoid cheating or engage in recycling. They appear to be engaging in a form of cognitive self-affirmation: "I know the right thing to do, but I'm not too bad of a person if I haven't done it in the past because that is how most people behave." Self-esteem is bolstered by downward comparison with others.

The cognitive dissonance explanation for self-prophecy proposes that dissonance is evoked through self-prediction and subsequently alleviated through fulfillment of the prediction request at behavioral opportunity. The preceding experiments demonstrate that the act of self-prediction causes people to react to self-prediction by downward comparison with others and biased recall of past behavior. We now report a study with an unexpected development that presented the opportunity to strengthen the case for dissonance as explanation for self-prophecy.

Experiment 3: "We interrupt this research with the 2000 U. S. Presidential Election"

Researchers have commonly established the existence of cognitive dissonance by "turning off" the effects of dissonance through experimental manipulation. One such treatment induces research participants to misattribute their dissonance to sources (e.g., temperature of the room, an ingested drug) unrelated to the actual source of the dissonance (e.g., Fazio, Zanna, & Cooper, 1977; Fried & Aronson, 1995; Zanna & Cooper, 1974). The effect of dissonance on a target attitude or behavior is expunged when subjects misattribute their discomfort to some other source. A fortuitous opportunity to use misattribution in a test of the dissonance-based

explanation for self-prophecy was presented by the 2000 United States Presidential election.

During the week of the 2000 U.S. Presidential election, a self-prophecy experiment was planned and initiated regarding willingness to commit to a health and fitness assessment—a behavior related to prior research demonstrating the effectiveness of prediction requests on health-related behaviors (Spangenberg, 1997; Sprott et al., 2004). We observed that data collected on Monday indicated a significant self-prophecy effect, $p < .01$; but, no such effect manifested for sessions completed on Election Day Tuesday, $p = .16$. Recall that the 2000 Presidential balloting was contentious and not finally resolved until several weeks after Election Day. The intense news coverage early in the day (importantly, the study was conducted in PST zone) regarding the unsettled outcome of the election suggested the hypothesis that the lack of a self-prophecy effect on Election Day Tuesday may have been due to misattribution of the dissonance generated by prediction request to the unsettled election. If making a prediction request evokes dissonance, subjects may have confused the psychological tension generated in the experiment with the cognitive discomfort generated by the Presidential election—a process that would reduce the likelihood of a self-prophecy effect.

To test the hypothesis that prediction dissonance was misattributed to the Presidential election on the Wednesday and Thursday immediately following the election (during which time there was still no winner declared in the election), perceived tension regarding the U.S. Presidential election was measured and included as a blocking variable in the original experimental design. We expected that people reporting higher levels of tension regarding the election would not reveal a self-prophecy effect since they were likely to misattribute prediction-based dissonance to the tension associated with the election. Alternately, people with lower

levels of tension regarding the election should exhibit a self-prophecy effect because they should have no explanation for their dissonance other than the self-prophecy prediction request.

Method

Participants and Design. Research participants included 97 undergraduates receiving a modest amount of course credit for participation. The experiment employed a 2 (control prediction vs. self-prophecy prediction: manipulated) × 2 (low vs. high election tension: blocked) between-participants design.

Materials. The self-prophecy manipulation asked students to predict their willingness to participate in a health assessment a socially normative activity drawn from prior published research; Sprott et al., 2004); the prediction request was included in a survey containing three other unrelated predictions with the manipulation consistently appearing in the second position. In the self-prophecy condition, participants were presented with the following prediction request (order of response choices was counterbalanced):

> A health and fitness assessment is locally available to you. The assessment will evaluate your overall physical fitness and health and is offered free of charge to you as a member of the university that you attend. Do you predict that: a) You will not participate in the health and fitness assessment? b) You will participate in the health and fitness assessment?

In the control condition, the self-prophecy prediction was replaced with one regarding tipping at an expensive restaurant at which one had received bad service.

A measure of felt tension was taken from participants on Wednesday and Thursday following Tuesday's controversial election results.

Procedures. At the beginning of each laboratory session research participants completed a survey containing their respective self-prophecy treatment followed by several unrelated filler questionnaires. Near the end of the hour-long research session, the experimenter requested

participants to read a memo and respond to a short survey for the university's Wellness Services (an actual on-campus unit). Participants were told that the memo was unrelated to the surveys completed in the lab and that the survey was being distributed as a favor to the unit. The memo contained a description of the health and fitness assessment and the dependent measure for the study. There was a 20-minute separation between administering the self-prophecy treatment and distribution of the memo; the measure of election dissonance was then collected.

Measures. The dependent variable was students' commitment to attend a free health and fitness assessment offered by [university] Wellness Services. The dependent measure appeared on a memo (printed on university letterhead) from Wellness Services. Prior to asking for their commitment, participants were provided with brief information about the assessment. After reading this information, participants were asked to respond to the dependent variable: "Are you interested in participating in the health and fitness assessment? Yes or No."

Tension regarding the Presidential election was measured with a single item: "When I think about the results of this year's U.S. Presidential election I feel a sense of tension about it" (1 = "Strongly Disagree" and 9 = "Strongly Agree"). A median split resulted in categorizing participants at or below the scale midpoint *(N* = 47) as a low-tension group and those responding above the midpoint as the high-tension group (*N* = 50).

Results

Results of Experiment 3 provide support for the ameliorating effect of election-related tension on self-prophecy. In particular, there was a significant influence of self-prophecy prediction requests on commitment to the health assessment *only* for participants who reported less tension about the U.S. Presidential election, χ^2 (1, N = 47) = 3.80, p = .05; there was not a similar effect for participants who reported more tension about the election, χ^2 (1, N = 50) =

1.36, $p = .24$. The nature of these effects is depicted in Figure 1. An alternate approach to assess the effects of election dissonance on self-prophecy was to estimate a logistic regression model including the continuous measure of election dissonance. In support of the individual chi-square tests, the results of this logistic model indicated a significant interaction between election dissonance and self-prophecy, $\beta = -.49$, $p = .02$.

Discussion

Experiment 3 provided the opportunity to test the dissonance explanation for self-prophecy in a natural setting. The tension surrounding the contentious vote count was palpable across the United States—avoiding media coverage was nearly impossible for citizens and certainly unlikely on the large college campus where the experiment was conducted. The immediate disappearance of the self-prophecy effect from Monday to Tuesday of election week was initially puzzling but ultimately explainable in terms of a dissonance hypothesis. Results after including a measure of election-related tension suggest that dissonance felt by some of those making a prediction was misattributed relative to the tension evoked by the election. And, as with any public event, a subset of people were less affected by the election; true to self-prophecy form, these participants then alleviated the dissonance evoked by the prediction through subsequent agreement to participate in a health assessment offered on campus.

Experiment 4: Making Self-Prophecy Disappear through Dissonance Misattribution

Experiment 3 demonstrated that naturally occurring tension may reduce or eliminate dissonance-based effects through processes much like classic dissonance misattribution studies conducted in the laboratory (e.g., Fazio et al., 1977; Fried & Aronson, 1995; Zanna & Cooper, 1974). While the results of Experiment 3 were encouraging, research following a more

traditional paradigm of dissonance misattribution under manipulation conditions of laboratory control (as opposed to the naturally occurring election manipulation) was needed to convince us of our findings. Thus to provide additional evidence of a dissonance-based process for self-prophecy, Experiment 4 conceptually replicates Experiment 3 under laboratory control.

The behavior for Experiment 4 was based on one of original studies conducted by Sherman (1980) that found a prediction to reduce participant's willingness to sing the Star-Spangled Banner over the telephone. Our behavior focused on the completion of a survey administered over the telephone. In recent years, researchers have become increasingly concerned over declining rates of agreement for telephone surveys, with the increased use of and negative perceptions regarding telemarketing held responsible. Research suggests that people do not differentiate between legitimate research surveys and telemarketing contacts. For example, Remington (1992) reported a majority of people completing a telephone survey believing that they find "nothing" to like and "everything" to dislike about telemarketing suggesting that although people will participate in a telephone survey, normative beliefs about the behavior are such that they feel they should not have done so. Self-prediction in a phone survey situation should evoke dissonance, since people's view of themselves as just and competent is confronted by the fact that they formerly completed surveys while likely feeling that they should have (or would like to have) avoided compliance (see Aronson, 1992 for a discussion of how the self-concept view of dissonance accounts for this classic pattern of effects produced via induced compliance). Thus, corresponding to Sherman's (1980) seminal research showing self-prediction to reduce willingness to sing the Star-Spangled Banner over the telephone, it was expected that a self-prophecy prediction request would *decrease* response rates (and, thereby, *increase* refusal rates) for a telephone survey. The dissonance misattribution treatment should

remove the effects of self-prophecy and result in refusal rates lower than those demonstrated in the self-prophecy condition and similar to those found in the control condition.

Method

Participants and Design. Research participants were undergraduate students ($N = 288$), randomly assigned to a between-participants design with 4 conditions: prediction control ($N = 67$), self-prophecy prediction ($N = 77$), self-prophecy prediction with dissonance misattribution ($N = 65$), and helping norms control ($N = 79$).

Materials. In the prediction control condition, participants were presented with three prediction requests related to seeing a movie, tipping in a restaurant with poor service, and selecting a restaurant. In the self-prophecy prediction condition, the restaurant selection prediction was replaced with the following (order of response choices was counterbalanced):

> "If a WSU student contacted you to answer a ten-minute survey for a student research project, do you predict you would answer the survey? Yes or No?"

Following procedures established in prior research (e.g., Fried & Aronson, 1995), the self-prediction with dissonance misattribution condition included a misattribution manipulation with the prediction request. The idea underlying the misattribution manipulation was to provide research participants with a plausible reason for the prediction-based dissonance unrelated to the self-prophecy prediction request. Prior to making the prediction request, participants were asked: "How many exams do you predict you will devote time to over the next two weeks?" This question was used to lay the groundwork for misattributing the felt-dissonance to some source (i.e., anxiety over upcoming exams) other than the self-prophecy prediction. Next, participants completed the self-prediction request. Following this were two questions that inquired about the amount of time spent studying for exams ("On average, how many hours do you spend studying for a major exam?" and "How many hours did you study for your last major

exam?"). These latter two questions served as a means for dissonance misattribution by reminding participants of the initial question regarding the number of exams they have in the next two weeks. Thus, in this condition, participants could misattribute the dissonance generated by the prediction request to their exams and the time needed to study for them.

To account for the potential effect of students answering a survey administered by other students, a final control condition was included in the design measuring normative beliefs regarding students helping other students. Similar to research by Cialdini and colleagues (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1990), the expectation was that measuring such beliefs would enhance the salience of norms about helping other students which, in turn, should reduce refusal rates for the survey. This condition was incorporated in the design to provide a point of comparison for the self-prophecy condition and to establish that *not* completing the survey is the norm operating in this context. Operationally, participants in this condition were asked three 7-point Likert-type items: "Students I know think it is a good idea to help other students with projects," "Students I know think it is important to respond to surveys from other students," and "Most students are willing to complete a survey administered by other students."

Procedures. The dependent behavioral variable for the study was completion of a telephone survey administered by members of a research methods course at the university. Approximately one week prior to administration of the telephone surveys, experimenters contacted research participants with a series of questions containing the treatments associated with one of the four experimental conditions. In the five days following this treatment, research participants were contacted to complete the telephone survey.

Measures. Refusal rates for the telephone survey served as the dependent variable for the experiment. Trained interviewers administered the telephone survey and indicated for each

participant whether they completed the survey or declined to participate. Refusal rates were expressed as the percentage of participants in each condition declining to complete the survey.

Results

As a behavior heretofore unexamined within the self-prophecy paradigm, the direction of the norm regarding completion of a telephone survey had yet to be demonstrated. The nature of a prevailing norm within a self-prophecy study has previously been established by comparing the behavior of participants in the control condition with the predictions by those in the self-prophecy condition. Such a comparison has been demonstrated in many published studies for directions of the norms associated with the behaviors studied in Experiments 1 – 3 above (i.e., recycling, cheating, donating to charity, participating in a health assessment). In Experiment 4, 36.4 percent of participants in the self-prophecy condition predicted that they would refuse to complete the survey, whereas only 19.4 percent of those in the control condition actually refused. Thus, as expected, our data indicate that the prevailing norm associated with this experimental behavior is refusal to complete telephone surveys.

Results of Experiment 4 (see Figure 2) indicate a significant effect of experimental treatment regarding survey refusal rates, χ^2 (3, N = 288) = 14.26, p = .003. Pair-wise comparisons were conducted to assess specific hypotheses regarding the dissonance-based account for self-prophecy. In particular, there was a significant self-prophecy effect such that refusal rates *were higher* in the self-prophecy prediction condition (33.8%) than in the control condition (19.4%), χ^2 (1, N = 144) = 3.74, p = .05. Supportive of a dissonance explanation, the dissonance misattribution treatment (16.9%) essentially removed the self-prophecy effect. A significant difference between the self-prophecy and misattribution conditions was evident, χ^2 (1, N = 142) = 5.19, p = .02, and there was no difference between the control and misattribution

conditions, χ^2 (1, N = 132) = 0.14, p = .71. Further, it is important to note that the percentage of participants predicting that they would not complete the survey did not differ between the self-prophecy and misattribution conditions, χ^2 (1, N = 142) = .81, p = .37.

The refusal rate in the helping norms condition (10.1%) was lower than for both the self-prophecy and control conditions. The difference in refusal rates between the control condition and the helping norms condition was directional and approached significance χ^2 (1, N = 146) = 2.53, $p < .11$, while the helping norms control condition was significantly different from the self-prophecy condition, χ^2 (1, N = 156) = 12.79, $p < .001$. This finding provides additional support for our assertion that the norm regarding survey completion is refusal.

Discussion

Experiment 4 provides compelling support for a dissonance-based explanation for self-prophecy, effectively replicating the findings of Experiment 3 in a more controlled setting. A self-prophecy prediction had the effect of increasing refusal rates on completing a telephone survey. The self-prophecy effect was eliminated when people were given the opportunity to misattribute dissonance to some other cause (in this instance, upcoming exams). Although the percentage of participants predicting that they would not complete the survey did not differ between the self-prophecy and misattribution conditions, refusal rates increased only when participants were not given the opportunity to misattribute dissonance.

General Discussion

The objective of this research was to test the hypothesis that cognitive dissonance theory underlies self-prophecy effects. Our framework proposes that making a self-prediction about performing a socially normative behavior invokes inconsistent cognitive elements. On the one

hand is the norm—what one should do. On the other hand is self-knowledge about conformity to the norm, which may take the form of memories of specific episodes or a generalization (e.g., "As a rule, I usually…"). Given that few of us act in normatively appropriate ways all of the time, most people should experience dissonance when made aware of the difference between their self-knowledge and the social norm. When subsequently confronted with the opportunity to perform the relevant behavior, this dissonance motivates norm-appropriate behavior.

Self-prophecy accords well with the conditions originally proposed for cognitive dissonance set forth by Festinger (1957): Dissonance is moderated by *magnitude* of the discrepancy, *importance* of the issue, *proportion of relevant dissonant elements* available in mind, and the *reality constraint*—knowledge that behavior cannot be undone. For self-prophecy, these conditions correspond to the extent to which self knowledge deviates from the norm (magnitude), the subjective motivation for normative compliance (importance), the salience of behavioral opportunities wherein one failed to perform normatively, and situational explanation for these occurrences (proportion of relevant dissonant elements, and the reality constraint).

Subsequent research has identified several other important conditions for cognitive dissonance, including *free choice* (when applied to counter-attitudinal behavior), *commitment* to the dissonant position, *aversive consequences* of the dissonant position, and *personal responsibility* for those consequences. Self-prophecy, again, accords well with these conditions. Obermiller, Spangenberg, & Atwood (1992) found evidence that a failed application of self-prophecy was the result of reactance, when participants had an awareness of the manipulative intent of the prediction, which presumably violated the free choice and, possibly, the personal responsibility conditions. Relatedly, Sprott et al. (2003) demonstrated that people with strongly held normative views are more likely to exhibit the effects of self-prediction than those with

weakly held norms. As with dissonance theory, a group with strongly held norms should attach more aversive consequences to violating norms and weaker commitment to a dissonant position than those with weakly held norms when confronted with a prediction request.

All of the experiments reported herein provide results consistent with the dissonance interpretation for self-prophecy. Experiment 1 found that people bias recall of past behavior after making a self-prediction as more norm-appropriate than a group of control participants—a result that can be interpreted as either a norm salience or dissonance-based result. Experiment 2 demonstrated the role of salience or self-relevance in cognitive elements as indicated by Festinger (1957). Since self-concept is relative (e.g., "I may not be perfect, but I'm better than the average."), participants made self-affirming downward biases regarding others' behavior. Experiment 3 was in accordance with previous cognitive dissonance research, showing that misattribution of dissonance eliminates the effects of self-prediction and Experiment 4 supported these findings while corresponding with a long tradition of cognitive dissonance research. In all of our experiments, both direct and indirect process measures were consistent with dissonance.

Previous theoretical speculation regarding the effects of self-prediction provides a useful reference point for a dissonance interpretation for our reported findings. A number of theories other than cognitive dissonance have been unsuccessfully associated with the self-prophecy effect, including commitment and consistency (or self-consistency) (Cialdini et al., 1990; Sherman, 1980), script evocation or norm salience (Sherman, 1980), and impression management (Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971). Similar to the self-prophecy paradigm, a number of influence principles have been identified that capitalize on motivation for commitment and consistency by using two interactions with the target. These include Foot-in-the-Door (Freedman & Fraser, 1966), labeling (Miller, Brickman, & Bolen, 1975), attaining

agreement (Howard, 1990), and lowballing (Cialdini, Cacioppo, Bassett, & Miller, 1978). Common to these techniques is an initial interaction that establishes the target's disposition with respect to an issue, followed by an issue-relevant request that is framed in such a way as to incorporate the consistency motive. Self-prophecy procedures also conform to this paradigm: The prediction request establishes a disposition; the subsequent behavior request follows up. As with dissonance theory, however, consistency (or the desire to avoid inconsistency) is essential to the self-prophecy effect, but cannot account for the findings presented in the current article. Thus, we can dismiss that general notion as sufficient explanation for self-prophecy and focus on the more specific question of how consistency occurs for this phenomenon.

Sherman (1980) favored evocation of norm-related scripts or norm salience as an explanation for what later became called the self-prophecy effect. The prediction request presumably evoked the attendant social norm and well-learned behavioral response, thereby biasing the prediction. Subsequently, when the opportunity for the behavior was encountered, the norm and scripted response were more available in memory because of their recent access. Although Sprott et al. (2003) demonstrated that strength of the subjective norm moderates the self-prophecy effect, our experiments show that merely making the norm salient does not sufficiently explain self-prophecy. In Experiment 2, a norm salience explanation would suggest that those making a self-prediction would have biased the perception of others' behavior in a socially normative direction as compared to a control condition. Consistent with the general self-prophecy finding that people show a positive bias in self-predictions for positively normed behaviors, Epley & Dunning (2000) found that people consistently estimate that they are more likely than others to do good things. Further, the overestimation is due more to an upward bias predicting their own behavior, not a downward bias with respect to others. Moreover, Epley &

Dunning's (2000) findings are consistent with the results of Experiment 2, where the observed downward bias in the estimation of others occurred *only* as a result of a prior self-prediction.

Perhaps the most convincing argument against norm salience as the theoretical process explanation for self-prediction is found in the results of Experiments 3 and 4. In these experiments, we found that self-prophecy was ameliorated when people had the opportunity to misattribute dissonance to some other cause—a pattern of effects not accounted for by norm salience. Additionally in Experiment 4, we controlled for salience of norms by including a condition in which the norm was explicitly identified but no prediction was requested; results showed that the norm was indeed present, but its mere availability did not affect behavior as did the self-prediction manipulation.

Impression management can likewise be dismissed as an explanation for the effects of self-prediction on normative behavior. The motivation to maintain a consistent image to others may sometimes play a part, but most published self-prophecy studies, in addition to our Experiment 4, have eliminated the opportunity for impression management to occur through procedures like anonymous measures of prediction (e.g., Sprott et al., 1999), unobtrusive measures of behavior (e.g., Spangenberg et al., 2003), or different parties administrating the two stages of the research over time (e.g., Greenwald et al., 1987). Thus, participants in many self-prophecy studies should have felt no need to manage impressions for others.

A dissonance-based explanation for the effects of self-prophecy is further supported by the phenomenon's consistency with the induced compliance tradition of cognitive dissonance. In particular, Aronson's (1968; 1992) characterization of cognitive changes brought about by classic induced compliance dissonance experiments accords nicely with self-prophecy. Specifically, Aronson described the typical subject as thinking, "I am a decent truthful human

being" and "I have misled a person…and I cannot set him straight." (1968, p. 24); opinion change then serves to restore consistency by providing a self-concept-preserving justification for the induced actions. In the typical self-prophecy experiment, we expect that participants think something similar—"I know what a decent human being should do. I know I have failed to do so in the past. Now that I have an opportunity, I will do the right thing." In the induced compliance situation, people are manipulated into performing a behavior that runs counter to their prior attitudes. The twist for self-prophecy is that the counter-normative behaviors have already been performed, and it is the norm that is induced (i.e., made salient by the prediction). Related theories include the self-affirmation interpretation of the induced-compliance effect (Steele & Liu, 1983) and the induced-hypocrisy paradigm (e.g., Fried & Aronson, 1995). According to Steele and colleagues (e.g., Steele & Liu, 1983), all people have a need for a certain level of self-esteem and when that level is threatened by a dissonance-arousing experience, it can be restored through a variety of self-affirming actions. Thus, in the self-prophecy paradigm, people might reduce their dissonance by engaging in other self-affirming behaviors, even, perhaps, mere thoughts, that would reduce their need to agree with the subsequent behavior request. Arguing against this likelihood is the strong tie between the prediction and the subsequent behavior. Because the prediction normally identifies the criterion behavior fairly specifically, other self-affirming tactics may not serve as adequate alternatives.

While social norms appear necessary, (Sprott et al., 2003) our work found that they are not a sufficient condition for the self-prophecy effect to hold. Further, the act of prediction has previously been shown to elicit dissonance by measures designed to measure cognitive discomfort (Spangenberg et al., 2003). Thus, while reasoning and results of earlier published self-prophecy articles are consistent with cognitive dissonance theory, the theoretical

relationships remained empirically uncertain until the current article. Through support of several theoretically hypothesized relationships, our series of experiments shows that the cognitive dissonance explanation for the self-prophecy effect suggested by Spangenberg and Greenwald (1999) is a compelling one. Our work brings together sufficient theoretical explanation and empirical evidence in a package allowing us to say that self-prophecy is an effect driven by the cognitive discomfort elicited when one makes a self-prediction consistent with social norms but inconsistent with the actions they likely would have taken absent prediction.

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Footnotes

[1] This effect was originally labeled "the self-erasing nature of errors of prediction" (Sherman, 1980) based on the observation that people's behavioral predictions are often different from normally observed actions and, thus, can be considered in error. We accept the term "self-prophecy," from Greenwald et al. (1988), in that it more parsimoniously depicts the phenomenon.

[2] This article draws on the discrepancy-from-self-concept version of cognitive dissonance theory developed by Aronson (1968). It is well known that (a) there are several alternative conceptions of dissonance motivation, (b) there are several alternative (non-dissonance and even non-motivational) conceptions of psychological response to circumstances involving cognitive inconsistencies, and (c) it is difficult if not impossible to conduct conclusive experimental tests to distinguish among these (Greenwald, 1975). Accordingly, this article could likely be successfully rewritten from the perspective of one of these other approaches. Nevertheless, the discrepancy-from-self-concept version of dissonance theory was the approach that seemed most relevant to self-prophecy phenomena and it also suggested the empirical approaches taken in this article.

Table 1

Predictions of the behavior of others

Prediction of Others	Experimental Treatment[a]	
	Control	Self-Prophecy
Experiment 1A: Recycling[b]		
Will Not Recycle	46 (54.6) 59.7%	64 (55.4) 82.1%
Will Recycle	31 (22.4) 40.3%	14 (22.6) 17.9%
Experiment 1B: Cheating[c]		
Will Not Cheat	22 (17.2) 40.7%	14 (18.8) 23.7%
Will Cheat	32 (36.8) 59.3%	45 (40.2) 76.3%

a. Cell entries include observed counts, (expected counts), and the row percentages within the self-prophecy conditions.

b. χ^2 (1, N = 155) = 9.36, p = .002.

c. χ^2 (1, N = 113) = 3.75, p = .053

Figure 1. Percent committing to health assessment as a function of self-prophecy treatment and tension about U.S. Presidential election.

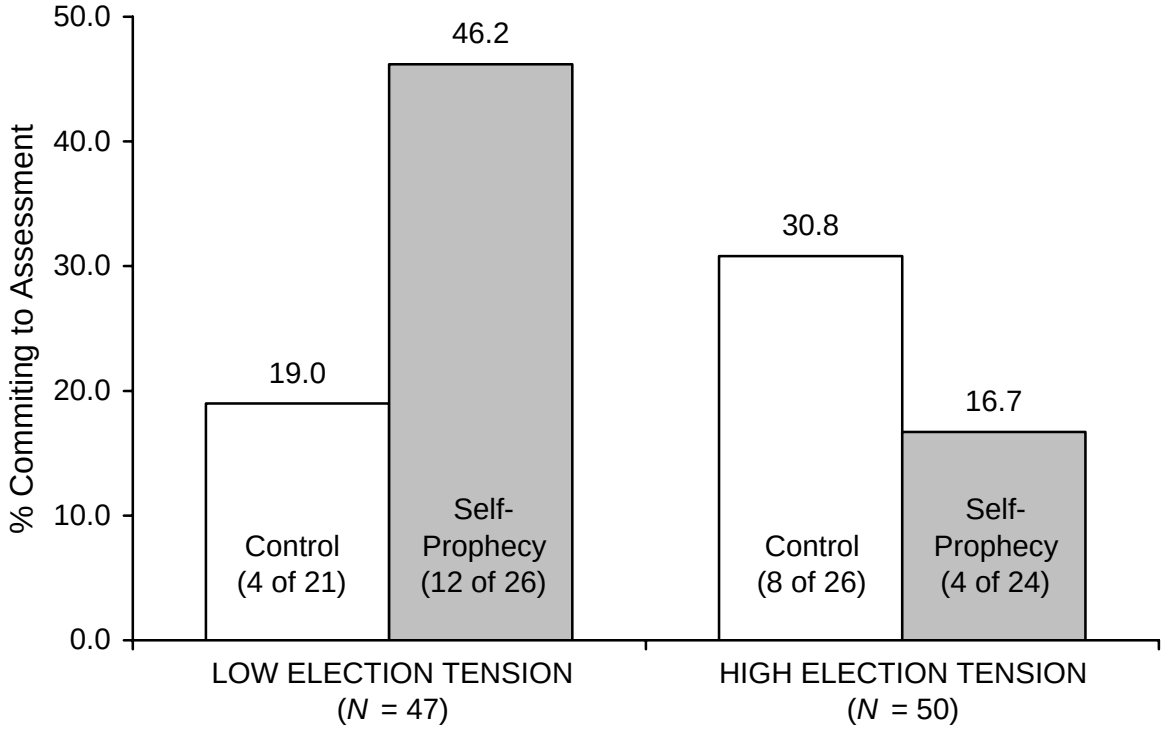

Figure 2. Survey refusal rates associated with different experimental treatments.