skull face and the self-fulfilling stereotype

by lisa wade and gwen sharp

Consider for a moment the experience of a man known as Zombie, interviewed at *Bizarre* magazine and photographed by Neville Elder. Zombie, who lives in Montreal, spent about $4,000 and 24 hours having his body tattooed to look like a rotting corpse. Asked why he decided to decorate his body this way, he replied:

"I hated pretty much everything and everybody. I just wanted to pass out in the gutter and swear at cars as they went by, shit like that. I wasn't a happy person at all. That's why I got the skull tattooed on my face in the first place, I suppose—I wanted to fucking kill everybody."

Zombie's tattoos were a way for him to tell off the world. But the world didn't get the message. Instead of shunning or fearing him, people were drawn to him. His tattoos were so dramatic and unique that they inspired people to *compliment* him. He became *interesting*. People wanted to say "hello," to know him, to have him at their parties. And that made him… happy.

"…Since having [my tattoos] done I've become a much happier and nicer person… I started getting all this positive feedback—people would come up to me and say how cool they thought it looked. I started getting invited to parties and bars all the time. Strangers ask to have pictures taken with me. I've been having so much fun with it that life has definitely changed for the better."

Zombie's life-changing experience beautifully illustrates the power that others have to influence our attitudes and behavior.

In their 1977 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* article "Self Perception and Interpersonal Behavior," psychologists Mark Snyder, Elizabeth Tanke, and Ellen Berscheid asked how this influence might link social biases and the disadvantages suffered by targets of such biases. How often was people's treatment of others based on stereotypes, Snyder and his colleagues wondered, such that certain people would *routinely* experience bad treatment and low expectations? This might, they thought, contribute to widespread social patterns of disadvantage for those already suffering from biased perceptions or cause unhappiness and self-doubt among negatively stereotyped individuals. Finally, they questioned whether some types of individuals routinely experienced *good* treatment and *high* expectations, leading them to be happier and more successful than they would have been otherwise.

They decided to first study attractiveness. Previous research had shown that women judged conventionally "attractive" were believed to be nicer, friendlier, funnier, and more social than women judged "unattractive." The authors wondered: if men treated pretty women as *if* they were all of these things, would

they thereby draw out exactly those characteristics? In fact, they did.

Snyder and his colleagues designed a study in which men interacted with women over the phone. The men were randomly given a photograph of a conventionally attractive or unattractive woman and were told they'd be talking to her. Before they made the call, Snyder asked how the men expected their conversation would go. Confirming prior studies, the men with a picture of a pretty woman said that they expected her to be "sociable, poised, humorous, and socially adept." Men holding a picture of a woman who did not meet feminine beauty standards, in contrast, expected them to be "unsociable, awkward, serious, and socially inept."

Just as the research team suspected, when the men called the women, their behavior reflected their pre-conceived notions. Men who thought the woman they were speaking to was attractive were more confident, animated, and expressed more pleasure in their interaction than those men who thought they were speaking to a less attractive woman. And the women responded in kind. Women who were treated with warmth responded with warmth, and women who were treated coldly allowed the conversation to languish frigidly. The men's preconceptions elicited stereotype-consistent behavior. Importantly, these findings indicate that we may leave interactions confident that our prejudices are valid, even though we elicited the behavior we expected to see.

In later studies, Snyder and other scholars would show that the self-fulfilling stereotype applies to other stigmatized groups, including people of color, women, the elderly, and people with mental illnesses. The phenomenon, then, is a generalizable one. Our stereotypes of the intelligence, work ethic, strength, speed, creativity, or wisdom of groups may actually be produced among individuals in interaction and then replicated over time as our expectations lead to the fulfillment of the stereotypes we endorse. The more often we believe our prejudices have been validated, the more they shape our behavior and attitudes in patterned ways that reflect those stereotypes. The self-fulfilling nature of stereotypes, then, brings stereotypical behavior into existence at the same time that it justifies the very prejudices that drove our interactions.

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In sum, Zombie got tattoos he thought would disgust other people, using his body to express his anger and social alienation. But instead of pushing others away, his tattoos drew them to him. As a result, his perception of himself changed. Not only was he invited to parties, he *became* the friendly, outgoing person you might want to invite to parties. The sociological insight here is that this social psychological phenomenon—the self-fulfilling stereotype—doesn't only shape individual lives in random ways. It also shapes societies in patterned ways that enhance the lives of some (like Zombie), but strongly disadvantage others.

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All photos by Neville Elder, www.nevilleelder.com.