



Self Fulfilling Prophecy

By Dr. Lorne Foster

The term “*self-fulfilling prophecy*” was first coined by the great sociologist Robert Merton to refer to a false belief or definition of a social situation, which, because one believes it and one acts upon it, actually manifests itself as a truth, further strengthening the belief.

In the 1960s, a “covert” experiment was organized to study the impact of self-fulfilling prophecies on academic achievement. Sociologists tried out a new IQ test in grade school. They tested the children’s abilities and then told the teachers which students would probably “spurt” ahead during the year. They instructed the teachers to watch these student’s progress, but not to let the students or their parents know about the test results. At the end of the year, they tested the students again and found that the IQs of the predicted “spurters” had jumped 10 to 15 points higher than those of the other children.

In reality, the researchers had given routine IQ tests to the children and had then *randomly* chosen 20 percent of the students as “spurters.” These students were actually *no different* from the others in the classroom. What had taken place was a self-fulfilling prophecy. The teachers expected more of those particular students, and the students responded accordingly. In short, expect low achievement and you get a low achiever. Expect high achievement and you get a high achiever. People tend to perform up to public expectations, which can set them on courses of action that affect the rest of their lives.

In a wider context, consider the facts and implications for the Black community in Canada as it labours under an elaborate structure of unarticulated negative public expectations.

The facts are, as the most recent census data from Statistics Canada indicate, close to 56 per cent of Toronto Blacks under age 15 live in poverty, more than double the city's overall youth rate of 23 per cent. While, the census data on the labour market also indicate that unemployment rates are twice as high for Blacks in Toronto when compared with other non-Blacks; a Black university graduate has the same rate of unemployment as a non-Black who has not completed high school; and, Blacks are under-represented in such higher paying occupations as upper and middle-management.

The implication of these facts are, in spite of Canada’s official multiculturalism vision, society still comprises a system of “graduated privilege,” where Blacks and other people of colour do not share equally in the creation or distribution of wealth, power or social status. Instead, African Canadian life is predominately characterized by restricted occupational opportunities, limited interpersonal relations, and reduced self-concept; all based on and held together by a structure of public expectations that have not yet caught up to the society’s highest vision.

To put it another way, for Blacks, the colour-coded power gap in the external society is also the grounding for the internalization of racial stigma and alienation.

For instance, the contemporary issues that so capture public fascination of late – such as “racial profiling”, “Black-on-Black violence”, and the post-modern family pathology of “Black urban matriarchy” – are all cultural manifestations of the ways in which the structure of public expectations act to sustain society’s prevailing relationships of control, exclusion, and exploitation. Once negative expectations are internalized it can lead to a whole round of life-interactions that reinforce the expectations, and result in self-fulfilling prophecies of a diminished capacity. Here, aspects of Black consciousness and humanity are distorted to conform to stereotyped expectations associate with a particular spoiled identity, or “stigmatized Black self,” that disqualifies one from full social acceptance in the dominant White society. The result is, the relegation to and the embrace of “pariah worlds” consisting of dysfunctional, crime-prone, drug-invested, outlaw cultures.

The upshot is, to paraphrase another great sociologist Erving Goffman, the key to a meaningful life is not learning to manage the stigma of a spoiled identity, but learning to create an empowered and empowering one. This entails two key components or strategies: (1) Changing the structure of public expectations; and (2) Changing the threshold of the public expectations structure.

So we might say that the first order of business for the African Canadian community in achieving racial parity as we move into the new millennium is to confront the false prophecy of low achievement in the structure (or at the structural level) of public expectations – by publicly recognizing and celebrating the exceptional contributions of members of the Black community to Canada. So, as the upcoming Harry Jerome Awards bespeaks, giving public recognition to the high achievers in the Black community, *the illuminati*, provides a source of light to guide others’ on their path, and give radiance to the Black community in a way that is life-inspiring, in the face of a institutional world that is often life-depleting.

By the same token, though, the highest form of human illumination is to light-up the place that you are in, in a way that carries the human spirit forward, rather than holds it back. In this respect, the last order of business and greatest challenge for the African Canadian community in 21st century will be to infuse the institutional matrix of society with the true diversity of marginalized experiences and voices. This, of course, will require the challenge of rewriting public definitions of achievement such that *the marginalized* not only speak but are heard – and are not only noteworthy but also praiseworthy.

When this day comes the Jane/Finch corridor may not only signify a Black ghetto but also as Black renaissance, opening up a whole new category for awards.