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‘Self-Fulfilling Prophecy’: A Literature Review

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Abstract

The power of positivity is one of the hottest emerging topics of the time. People today are becoming more and more aware about the power of human mind and thoughts. Psychologists and thinkers have increasingly focused on the importance of positive thinking in human life. Though it is not a new concept according to the Indian mythology. Indian sages used to say that a person’s destiny is in his/her own hands. Their intension was to make people aware about the tremendous power possessed by the human mind and the need to channelize that energy for the upliftment of the mankind. Even the modern psychologists and scientists have found a significant positive relation between a person’s mental beliefs and situations he/she encounters in life. It is said that whatever we think and spend our mental energy on, manifests itself in physical form in our lives. This phenomenon is the essence of the concept known as “self-fulfilling prophecy”. The aim of this paper is to study the meaning of this term and the implementation process. This paper also highlights the interplay of self-fulfilling prophecy with the concepts like- stereotyping and expectations. This paper intends to study the step by step implementation of this concept in real life as suggested by various researchers and talk about the factors impacting it.

Keywords: Self-fulfilling prophecy, Stereotypes, Expectancy, Behavior

Objectives of the study

1. To understand the concept of Self-fulfilling Prophecy
2. To study some of the famous models and stereotypes which explain the phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecy.
3. To find out key factors which impact self-fulfilling prophecy

Introduction

Understanding Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

The English word "prophecy" (noun) in the sense of "function of a prophet" appeared in Europe from about 1225, from Old French profecie (12th century), and from Late Latin prophetia, Greek prophetia "gift of interpreting the will of god".

By dictionary meaning, the word ‘Prophecy’ means ‘the foretelling or prediction of what is to come’.

The term ‘SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY’ was introduced by Robert Merton (1948)¹. A sociologist, Merton proposed that the self-fulfilling prophecy was capable of creating large-scale social problems such as social inequalities. The effects of self-fulfilling prophecy can become very significant through the process of accumulation.

He explained it as "a false definition . . ., evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true"(p.195). In essence, Merton (1948) believed that false expectations by people could come true or create their own reality by causing other people to change their behaviors to match and fulfill the initial expectations.(Don Pugh 1989)²

Merton's concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy emerges from the Thomas theorem, which says that "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." According to Thomas, people's reaction not only comes for the situations or circumstances they face but, often mainly, for the way they perceive those circumstances and for the meaning they relate to those perceptions. Therefore the behavior of people, up to a large extent, is determined by their perception and the meaning they attach to the circumstances they face, rather than by the circumstances themselves. This strongly shows that a person's mentality is the result of the opinions and inferences that person derives out of a circumstance which further creates impact on the person's way of doing things.

Thomas (1928)³ defined a self-fulfilling prophecy as people defining situations to be real, in which case the situations became real in their consequences because of the belief that the people themselves had placed in the chances of that situation occurring.

When people hold accurate or inaccurate beliefs about other people, there is a significant power in their beliefs to create self-fulfilling prophecies. As Watzlawick says that "A self-fulfilling prophecy is an assumption or prediction that, purely as a result of having been made, causes the expected or predicted event to occur and thus confirms its own 'accuracy'" (Watzlawick, 1984: 392)⁴.

According to Willard J. also, self-fulfilling prophecies occur when people's false beliefs about others become true through social interaction. Ethnic and racial stereotypes, when held by people in authority, may be particularly likely to create these false beliefs. (Willard J. et. al. 2008, pg. 1215)⁵

According to an article in INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES, 2ND EDITION, "The self-fulfilling prophecy is a quintessential process of this perspective because it involves people's beliefs changing social reality. A self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when one person causes her or his own false belief about another person to become true."

A self-fulfilling prophecy includes three steps:

Step 1:

One person must hold a false belief about another person.

Step 2:

The person holding the false belief must treat the other person in a manner that is consistent with it.

Step 3:

The person about whom the false belief is held must, in response to the treatment she or he receives, confirm the originally false belief.

Through this sequence of events, people have the potential to socially construct reality.

Impact of Self-Fulfilling Prophecies: Even though it is well-established that self-fulfilling prophecies have only a small influence on people's behaviors, for some people and under some conditions, the power of self-fulfilling prophecies may be large. These conditions include the favorableness of people's beliefs, individual characteristics, situational and motivational factors, and the accumulation of self-fulfilling prophecy effects.

Models and Stereotypes

In order to understand how the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy works, a lot of models have been given by thoughtful people of the society during various points of time. Therefore, we will be discussing some of the models to see how this

phenomenon takes place, what are the various important factors and some of the stereotypes seen in our day-to-day life which clearly show the unavoidable existence of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

THE EXPECTANCY-DRIVEN MODEL OF BEHAVIORAL CONFIRMATION EFFECTS

The model, given by CHEN AND BARGH (1997)⁶, emphasizes on the widely accepted steps involved in the process underlying behavioral confirmation of stereotypes.

1. The group stereotype is the source of expectancies or can be called as ‘‘provisional hypotheses’’ (Darley & Gross, 1983)⁷ about individual members of that group.
2. The observer then starts behaving toward the target as if those beliefs were true.
3. Then these (generally negative) expectancies affect the observer’s behavior toward the target person in various ways.
4. And the target responds to the observer’s behavior accordingly (e.g., with hostility and coldness generating hostility and coldness) or even actively comply with the observer’s perception rather than disrupting the interaction (e.g., playing the ‘‘stupid foreigner’’ in order to get one’s visa approved; see Jones, 1990⁸; Snyder, 1992⁹).
5. Finally, the observer finds the target’s behavior in line with the expectancy and concludes it as another instance of stereotype-consistent behavior.

Thus, it can be inferred that the behavioral confirmation model presents a strong mechanism which helps in understanding the instruments by which stereotypes, expectancies and prejudices are maintained and propagated. (CHEN AND BARGH, 1997)⁶

This model has been criticized on the following two premises as given by CHEN AND BARGH, 1997⁶:

1. Proper motivations can modify the passive social-perceptual activities of the observer regarding the target.
2. The basic assumption for the phenomenon seems to be faulty as it depends on giving participants false expectancies, whereas in real life these expectancies may be accurate.

A MODEL OF THE SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY AT WORK BY DOV EDEN 1984¹⁰

This model combines various concepts of managerial and organizational psychology. It is supported by causally categorical experiments from Pygmalion-at-work and other research findings. The model includes five variables that form a closed causal chain:

1. The first link in the chain is the **supervisor's expectancy**. Eden and Shani (1982)¹¹ found that one impact of high supervisory expectancy is better **leadership** (arrow 1).
2. Eden and Ravid (1982)¹² have shown that, for instilling higher **self-expectations** in subordinates, supervisors use differential treatment (arrow 2).
3. According to the expectancy theory of motivation, the motivation to perform is directly proportion to one’s level of self-expectancy (Campbell & Pritchard, 1976¹³; Vroom, 1964¹⁴). Eden and Shani (1979)¹⁵ have shown that overall motivation to do well rises due to high expectations. Because of the special treatment being given to the subordinates, they feel motivated and put (Eden & Ravid, 1982)¹² efforts to justify the high reward and reduce

differences by improving performance. The combination of these expectancy and equity processes aroused by high expectations increases the overall **motivation** (arrow 3).

4. The enhanced motivation encourages subordinates to put in greater effort, boosting **performance** (arrow 4).
5. The chain is completed and the loop is closed by positing causal effects of performance on the supervisor's expectancy (arrow 5).

In non-controlled situations i.e. in real life, the emergence of expectancies is a natural process. Such natural expectancies are plausibly shaped by the supervisor's knowledge of the subordinate's past performance record. Managers usually expect more in the coming future from the high performing subordinates. According to Dov, there are different factors which influence the causal chain depicted in Figure 1 at different points. Classical Pygmalion manipulates the supervisor's expectancy, whereas Eden and Ravid talk about the self-expectancy of the trainee. But Schrank (1968)¹⁶ and Crawford et al. (1980)¹⁷ manipulated simultaneously both supervisory and self-expectancy. Leadership studies typically step in by considering leadership as the starting point in the process, and on the other hand, motivation often has been the independent factor in studies designed to enhance effort and performance (Campbell & Pritchard, 1976)¹³. Whatever the entry point, the causal sequence of events is hypothesized to follow the chain in Figure 1.

This "second generation" Pygmalion effect enforces the hypothesis that, once the high performance track has been set up by supervisor's positive leadership with high expectations, subordinates sustain high performance on their own. Thus, the Pygmalion effect, which is started by manipulating supervisor expectancy and triggering the five variable causal chain in Figure 1, may be self-continuing by recycling through the three-variable loop consisting of subordinate self-expectancy, motivation, and performance (see arrow 6 in figure 1).

A Model of the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy at Work can be referred from **figure 1**.

A MODEL FOR THE OPERATION OF SELF-FILLING PROPHECY BY DON PUGH²

An overview of the operation of self-fulfilling prophecy is demonstrated below. The model is based on ideas from Snyder & Swann (1984)¹⁸ combined with Brophy (1982)¹⁹.

Stage 1.1 Social Context- The model operates within a social context. In a society, the social norms, social identity and common practices might define the attitudes, and beliefs of its people. Basically, norms are pressures upon group members to meet the group's expectations. Within this situation social norms may be understood as stereotypes, discrimination, racism and prejudice.

Stage 1.2: Interaction- During this stage the individual or actor interacts with other individuals (targets) who show clearly visible and distinctive characteristics such as gender, social class, disability, occupation or race. Grady (1977, in Deaux and Wrightsman, 1988)²⁰ has found that gender and race are always immediately noticed and remembered. The individual may also get influenced by gossips, past experiences or culturally induced stereotypical predispositions.

Stage 2: Expectations- First impressions formed by these highly visible characteristics are based on assumptions about these characteristics influenced by the individual's past experience or by conformity to group norms and stereotypes. These preconceptions are termed as schema by cognitive psychologists. These are presented as ways for simplifying decision making by modifying the perception and memory to confirm the model (Fiske & Taylor, 1984)²¹. The individual may imagine future interactions by recalling past scenarios. These beliefs represent expectations about the type of behavior given by the other person. Actually, these social beliefs are anticipated situations for the target person.

Stage 3: Behaviors Tested- Behaviors are formed based on a strategy to verify the validity of the beliefs or expectations. The individuals' behavior towards their targets is consistent with their beliefs, might be in a rigid and stereotyped manner.

Many factors influence the degree of impact of expectations on the target (Bleuse, 1983)²². Some factors include the consistency of behaviors based on expectations, their intensity, the duration for which they are held, the degree of proper communication of expectations and the number of people involved in the whole process of holding and communicating their expectations.

Stage 4: Interaction-Behaviors Communicate Expectations, Target develops Self-expectations. The individual's behavior communicates to the target expectations about how he is expected to behave or perform. If the individual is consistent in his behavior, then the intermediate outcomes include the self-image development, self-expectations, motivation, aspirations, attitudes, conduct and performance of the target. Darley and Fazio (1980)²³ note that the targets will come to expect stereotyped behavior consistent with expectations as the norm.

Stage 5: Target displays behaviors- Festinger (1954)²⁴ has explained that people try to find a balance between their behaviors and beliefs to avoid the discomfort of cognitive dissonance. In order to reduce the discomfort, it may be expected that behavior and performance should be matched with the self-expectations created by the individual's entrenched expectations. The target's beliefs are translated into appropriate and mutual behaviors.

Stage 6: Behaviors interpreted as confirming beliefs- The individual observes the behavior of the target in the light of his or her own expectations. Attribution theorists using social cognition processing models have verified the perceptual distortions or attribution biases which occur during the encoding and processing of these observations. When expectations are fulfilled in a desired way, the individual attributes confirmation to the personality of the target. Otherwise, the individual may attribute disconfirmation.

In contrast, if undesired expectations, confirmed by an out-group, are attributed to the disposition of the group. Otherwise, the attribution is to transitory factors in the situation (Pettigrew, 1979)²⁵. As Miller and Turnbull (1988)²⁶ conclude, behaviors are interpreted consistently with expectancies and the individual may believe that his or her expectancies have been confirmed even if it is not so.

THE SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY AND STEREOTYPE

Self-fulfilling prophecy can take on many forms. Stereotyping implies that the expectations from a particular group of people to act in a certain way based on race, religion, gender, age and much more, would gradually result in the said group of people imitating the stereotype. If one member of that group acts in one way then it is assumed that other members of that group share that feature. Labels can come about from certain stereotypes.

This concept explains that when a specific label is applied to a particular person, he begins to see himself in that way only and believes that he is expected to behave in a specific way. He actually starts to behave in exactly that way. And it happens because of the label given to that person. As such labelling can have positive and negative aspects, the self-fulfilling prophecy can be good as well as bad according to the type of label given.

This whole process is also known as the Pygmalion effect, based upon the play Pygmalion, whereby the strong Cockney-accented Eliza is treated like a woman, and so becomes a woman.

Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968)²⁷

Merton and social scientists have considered that self-fulfilling prophecies' possibility to have their effect in a wide variety of domains and these studies can be classified according to the unit of analysis at which the self-fulfilling dynamics are thought to take place: namely, individual, dyadic, and collective (Biggs 2008)²⁸.

The self-fulfilling prophecy and crime

As an extension to the earlier explanation, the self-fulfilling prophecy says that antisocial behavior may arise if an observer expects others to behave in antisocial ways. The stereotyped beliefs of the observer affect the way the observer interacts socially and consequently the antisocial actions are demonstrated. For example, teachers at a school may think that a new boy is going to be a trouble-maker, and so come down on him hard as soon as possible. The boy sees that he is being treated differently from the other children and so reacts badly. The teachers' initial response to him triggers his subsequent antisocial behavior. (Jahoda)²⁹

The self-fulfilling prophecy and effect of the Name

Jahoda (1954)²⁹. The study of Jahoda is a useful study for investigating the effects on behavior from labels. He studied a Ghanaian ethnic group, the Ashanti, noting boys were named according to the day on which they were born. It is traditional for the Ashanti to believe 'Monday' boys, for example, are quiet and placid, and are called Kwadwo, and 'Wednesday' boys are thought to be aggressive and short-tempered, and are called Kwadku.

The self-fulfilling prophecy and parent's expectations

Research has shown that parents have the strongest self-fulfilling effects on their children's alcohol use when both hold false and unfavorable beliefs about their child's likelihood of drinking alcohol (Madon et al. 2004)³⁰.

Aim: Madon et al. (2003)³¹ set out to look at the self-fulfilling prophecy in a natural situation outside the educational setting with naturally-occurring false expectations. Questions included whether mothers' expectations about their children's future

alcohol use would reflect actual alcohol use. The researchers also looked at whether the accuracy of the mothers' expectations would limit the self-fulfilling prophecy

The researchers also assume that the mother's expectations can also affect their children's future alcohol use due to the self-fulfilling prophecy, and by definition, only inaccurate predictions can be self-fulfilling (so not based on valid background variables) and therefore alcohol use is due to the labeling

Overall, Madon et al. concluded that 52% of the correlation between the mother's expectation and the actual alcohol use of the child is down to maternal expectations, whereas 48% of that relationship is due to the self-fulfilling effects. The relationship was stronger for children with high self-esteem than those with low self-esteem. Positive expectations (those that underestimated children's alcohol use) had stronger self-fulfilling effects than those of negative expectations.

Conclusions: Madon suggests that people with high self-esteem are more likely to be affected by their parents' predictions and she suggests that social class is not a factor in whether the parent-child relationship leads to the prophecy sociological theories link crime, labelling and the self-fulfilling prophecy – but they consider wider issues rather than labelling at an individual level. Self-fulfilling prophecies were more helpful than harmful.

The self-fulfilling prophecy and teacher's expectations

Researchers have explored the effects of teacher expectations on student outcomes (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968²⁷; Jussim and Harber 2005³²)

A study where teachers were told arbitrarily that random students were "going to blossom". Oddly, those random students actually ended the year with significantly greater improvements. Studies have shown that the expectations of teacher from Madon the students have a great impact on their learning and development process. Because of the positive expectations which teacher has, he starts to give more attention to those students and motivates them time to time. This behavior makes students feel that they are special, as a result they start working hard and eventually perform well in exams with greater signs of overall improvements.

The self-fulfilling prophecy and placebo effect

A placebo is anything that looks like a "real" medical treatment but it isn't. It could be a pill or some other type of "fake" treatment. Placebos do not contain an active substance meant to affect health.

At the level of the individual, for example, a substantial body of work has explored the placebo effect on health outcomes; that is, whether, and under what conditions, individuals experience improved health outcomes that are attributable to receiving a specific substance, but that are not due to the inherent powers of the substance itself (Stewart-Williams and Podd 2004)³³.

Study about the placebo effect focuses on the relationship of mind and body. One of the most common theories is that the placebo effect is due to a person's expectations. If a person expects a pill to do something, then it's possible that the body's own chemistry can cause effects similar to what a medication might have caused.

For instance, in one study, people were given a placebo and told it was a stimulant. After taking the pill, their pulse rate sped up, their blood pressure increased, and their reaction speeds improved. When people were given the same pill and told it was to help them get to sleep, they experienced the opposite effects.

There is a relationship between the degree of expectations of a person to have certain results and whether or not results occur. The stronger the expectations, the more likely it is that a person will experience positive effects and fulfilling the prophecy.

The self-fulfilling prophecy and the economy

Sociologists have explored the “performativity” of economic theory (Callon 1998)³⁴, including whether the predictions of economic models lead people to change their behavior in such a way as to make the original prediction come true (MacKenzie and Millo 2003)³⁵. A separate body of work by economists, meanwhile, has explored self-fulfilling prophecies with regard to financial panics (Calomiris and Mason 1997)³⁶, investment bubbles (Garber 1989)³⁷, and even business cycles (Farmer 1999)³⁸.

Let’s share an example given by Merton, in his book *Social Theory and Social Structure*.

Merton talked about a bank run at the fictional Last National Bank, by Cartwright Millingville. It was a typical bank, and Millingville had run it honestly and quite properly. Like all other banks, it had some liquid assets (cash), but most of its assets were invested in various ventures. One day, a large number of customers came to the bank at once—the exact reason was never known. Customers, finding so many others at the bank, began to worry. It led to false rumors that something was wrong with the bank and more customers rushed to the bank in order to get some of their money out whatever they could. The number of customers at the bank increased as well as their annoyance and excitement. As a result it strengthened the false rumors of the bank’s insolvency and upcoming bankruptcy, causing more customers to come and try to withdraw their money. At the beginning of that day, the bank was not insolvent. But the rumors of insolvency caused a sudden demand of withdrawal of money by too many customers, which could not be answered, causing the bank to become insolvent and declare bankruptcy.

The self-fulfilling prophecy and managers

This concept also plays a vital role when a manager or the team lead is managing his subordinates or team respectively. The expectations, a manager holds for his team is the determinant of how his team will perform in various situations. His expectations will mould his behavior towards his team mates. There can be two sides to this; one he wants his subordinates to perform well and show great results; second he just wants to take all the credit by himself.

In first case, his expectations to achieve greater results will drive his behavior to support his subordinates, provide proper guidance, appreciating them and raising their morale. He will motivate his subordinates to perform and provide all the relevant resources his subordinates would require. Such an environment will support the subordinates to grow and perform to achieve good results.

In the second case, he will abstain from sharing all the information. He will not appreciate their efforts; rather he will criticize them always and will try to take all the credit. This attitude will spread a negative energy and his subordinates will not perform.

SOME CRITICAL FINDINGS/FACTOR Shighlighted byCliff Grimes, (2009)³⁹

1. Self-fulfilling prophecy effects are also more powerful in the presence of certain situational. For example, people are more likely to create self-fulfilling prophecies when their status is high (e.g., teacher, parent, and therapist) versus low (student, child, and client) and when they are confident versus doubtful that their false beliefs are accurate.
2. The occurrence of a self-fulfilling prophecy can also depend on people's motivations. In some instances, people may be particularly motivated to have others see them as they see themselves. People with this motive are less susceptible to confirming other people's false beliefs about them.
3. Self-fulfilling prophecy effects also have the potential to become powerful through processes of accumulation. Self-fulfilling prophecies may accumulate in two ways: over time and across people.
 - a. Accumulation over time is a process in which a person's self-fulfilling influence becomes stronger over time. self-fulfilling prophecy effects can accumulate if people are repeatedly exposed to the same false belief over time
 - b. Self-fulfilling prophecy effects can also accumulate across people. In a given day, a person may interact with many different people, each of whom may hold a false belief about him or her. If these beliefs are similar (e.g., all favorable or all unfavorable), then their individual self-fulfilling effects can combine to have a large effect on the person's behavior. The effects elicited by those who hold unfavorable beliefs may become stronger as the number people holding similar beliefs increases
4. Correlation between expectations and performance
 - a. High expectations lead to higher performance; low expectations lead to lower performance.
 - b. Better performance resulting from high expectations leads us to like someone more and vice-versa.
 - c. We tend to be comfortable with people who meet our expectations, whether they're high or low and vice-versa.
 - d. Forming expectations is natural and unavoidable and once formed expectations about ourselves tend to be self-sustaining
5. Good managers produce employees who perform well and feel good about themselves. Bad managers produce employees who perform poorly and feel badly about themselves.

The best managers have confidence in themselves and in their ability to hire, develop and motivate people; largely because of the self-confidence, they communicate high expectations to others. A manager increases or decreases initiative by the frequent or infrequent use of praise, criticism, feedback information etc.

Conclusion

The concept of self-fulfilling prophecy seems to be all pervasive be it society, economy or an individual. Its impact might be either less or more but its existence cannot be denied. It basically works through the belief system of a person and converts in to reality depending upon the consistency and intensity of the belief.

It is also important to note that the self-fulfilling prophecy may result in both types of outcomes; positive as well as negative. Therefore, it becomes even more crucial for the observer to understand his/her expectations from the target.

Although the observer and the target may or may not be aware about this phenomenon taking place but it still occurs. The positive thing about this amazing concept is that it can be intelligently used to improve performance and efficiency in various fields of life like by parents, teachers, supervisors, leaders, economists and managers towards their children, students, subordinates, followers, economic institutions and team members respectively.

The occurrence and the impact of self-fulfilling prophecy depends on various factors like status difference between the observer and the target, level of motivation, duration of time-period for which the expectations exist, number of observers or targets, self-confidence of the observer.

The key take away is to realize that this concept can be used in a good way in different aspects of life in families, businesses, social setups and individual relationships. It may effectively help in improving personality, increasing performance, enhancing efficiency and creating cordial environment.

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FIGURES

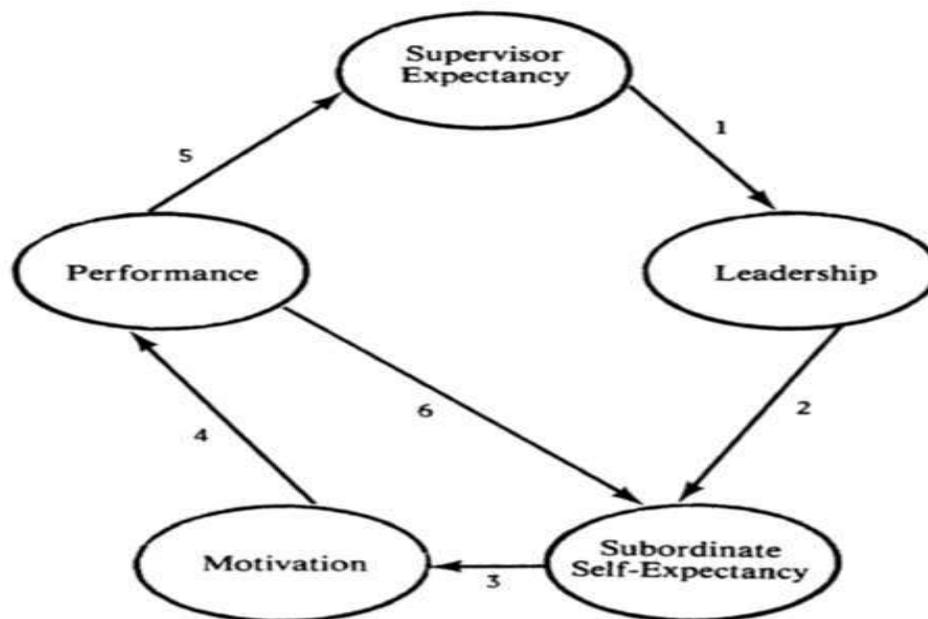


Figure 1 Taken from: Self-Fulfilling Prophecy as a Management Tool: Harnessing Pygmalion. The Academy of Management Review, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Jan., 1984), pp. 64-73 by Dov Eden (1984)¹⁰.