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The meta-narrative of self-fulfilling prophecy in the different research areas

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ABSTRACT

The self-fulfilling prophecy is a ubiquitous concept with a large amount of research to date, characterised by disciplinary diversity and thus a potential plurality in its narrative. A meta-narrative review was implemented to analyse the narratives of self-fulfilling prophecy in the different research areas. It identified 10 research areas, 22 themes and 7 subthemes where the phenomenon was adopted to describe and explain phenomena/events/outcomes. It revealed the self-fulfilling prophecy's meta-narrative in the separate areas and in overall, compared to the original notion, and with regard to the critics. And it set up methodological and research area-related boundaries to implementation. Finally, the paper provided suggestions to future researches on internal validity and on the configuration of trending topics as the self-fulfilling prophecy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The self-fulfilling prophecy (SFP) is a ubiquitous concept surrounding us in everyday life and research. We can find it in art and literature (e.g. Sophocles' Oedipus Rex; Shakespeare's Macbeth), education and work (e.g. Eder 1981; Eden 1984), sport and health (e.g. Smith 1995; Lamb – Crano 2014), finance and politics (e.g. Citron – Taffler 2001; Kautsky 1965), etc. When Merton (1948) gave a formal definition for SFP, it had already long been recognised and

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narrated, but had remained a myth until then. Its establishment in academia provided a fertile soil for various themes to grow from there, and now it can elucidate phenomena in almost any discipline. However, it is a double-edged sword that can be used to explain both the "falsity" and the "truth" of the same reality, to support and reject the same idea. Could it be this fluidity of the concept that makes it desirable for use and research?

Merton's definition (1948: 506), building on the Thomas theorem (Thomas – Thomas 1928)[1], was already enough broad:

> The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation, evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true. The specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error. For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning.

To support his idea, Merton brought examples in which he regarded SFP led by fears, causing bankruptcy, neurosis, racism/stigmatisation, warfare, etc. "in the absence of deliberate institutional controls" (Merton 1948: 521). In his view, the "tragic" and "vicious circle" of SFP can be broken by abandoning the original assumption that put the prophecy into operation, by contrasting it with a new one that shows the original to be just a lie. In the mentioned examples, that new assumption could be generated by "appropriate institutional" or "deliberate social" changes, revealing facts and the truth to people who were holding on misbeliefs based on "spurious evidence" and "self-hypnosis through one's own propaganda". And instead of considering that men can do the work, Merton (1948: 507) states that "it is the self-fulfilling prophecy that goes far toward explaining the dynamics of ethnic and racial conflict in the America of today" – which idea could take the responsibility off the people's shoulders and endow the concept with an unreal autonomy.

Early in 1961, Miller argued that SFP had to be judged by "its malicious or unfortunate use but by its inherent structure" (Miller 1961: 50), and claimed to restrict its scopes that were "disarmingly simple" and had "no place in scientific methodology as conceived by" Merton (Miller 1961: 46). He pointed out that since SFP is "by definition, false", it cannot reflect logical or scientific thinking, and highlighted that it could only be a hypothesis to label a prediction or situation as false when it is evoking without "conclusive evidence". As his last word, Miller added that SFP had to be recognised simply as "a species of hypothesis" that could appear in human discourses in general, including "natural and mathematical sciences", but most appropriately and commonly in the social sciences (Miller 1961: 50).[2] Despite the critics and warnings, scientists used Merton's definition at will, treated the definition flexibly and engaged in fruitful research. By 1982, Hensel had detected eight major areas of SFP research: deviant behaviour and social control; economics; education; models of 'human nature' as self-fulfilling; politics, law, and international relations; race and ethnic relations; religion; scientific inquiry. It was already a "major phenomenon that demands attention" (Hensel 1982: 513). For that reason, Hensel also urged a "delineation of scope and limits" which were essential for empirical investigations,

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[1] "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." (Merton 1948: 571–2).

[2] Krishna (1971: 1104) defended Merton: "He seems to assume that there is a true or false definition of the situation concerning social reality apart from what men think or believe about it and that it can be independently known or determined without a reference to this thought or belief. Also, that in this respect there is no essential difference between the social and the natural sciences."

particularly in natural science, and outlined its boundaries by a set of social phenomena that were "impervious to the SFP" (Hensel 1982: 517–8).[3] In parallel, scholars disputed the "methodological pitfalls" and ethical questions of experiments investigating SFP from the beginning (e.g. Umiker-Sebeok – Sebeok 1981).

Ironically, from that time, the amount of research focusing on SFP has increased. The concept and its branches (e.g. Galatea, Golem and Pygmalion effect) have infiltrated into academia, including both natural and social sciences. Originating from the latter, SFP is mainly used to highlight the human–social aspects of phenomena/events/outcomes. It is known to explain intra- and interpersonal processes (i.e. one's expectations for their own or for another's failure/success), as well as to describe impersonal, objectified things (e.g. organisational/market/country expectations for failure/success, etc.) – that can be still traced back to persons. While it is the most explored at individual level (see intra-, interpersonal explanation); according to Madon et al. (2011), it should not be forgotten that Merton used it to explain social-scale problems, where the crowd's beliefs and assumptions could lead to widespread racism or complete bankruptcy; thus, group phenomena are also experimented (i.e. one's/a group's expectations for an entire, same or different, group's performance).

Through these levels, SFP is therefore always ready to be investigated for trending phenomena. However, in order to properly examine it and conduct valid research (preferably with regard to previous criticism), a comprehensive review is needed that takes into account the large amount of research to date, the disciplinary diversity, and thus the potential plurality in the narrative of the topic. Hence, a meta-narrative review is applied in this paper to analyse the narratives of SFP in the different research areas. It raises the following questions: (1) In which research areas and themes, was the SFP adopted to describe/explain a phenomenon/event/outcome? (2) What is the meta-narrative of the SFP in the separate areas and overall, compared to Merton's notion, and with regard to Miller's critics? (3) Could there be any boundaries to implementation, such as the ones claimed by Hensel?

2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

Meta-narrative can be interpreted as "a narrative about narrative or as a narrative above narrative" (Given 2008) – herein, the first case prevails. A narrative is a story, an account that is written about a particular event or sequence of events with particular participants in a particular context (Saunders et al. 2016). Narratives can be used to make a point, support views and facilitate understanding; their analysis generates meta-narratives (Given 2008). Meta-narratives are used to show how the different narratives, that claim to be able to explain all – like the SFP – were developed (Lyotard 1979/1984; Dean et al. 2019).

Among historical, theoretical, methodological, integrative and systematic reviews (University of Southern California 2014), the latter was chosen since it can specifically deal with

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[3]"Alterations requiring unlikely (a) skills (prediction incorporating unknown magnitudes of variables, employing higher mathematics/esoteric conceptualisation); (b) collusion (prediction about cross-cultural regularities, competition/conflict); (c) communication (prediction hostile to gate-keeper interests, about social isolates/persons with limited comprehension; (d) flaunting of interpretations (prediction interpreted as 'unimportant'/'unbelievable'/'unalterable')" (Hensel 1982: 517–8).

meta-narratives (i.e. meta-narrative review; see Gough 2013). It looks at the evolution of research traditions, questions, and methods in the separate meta-narratives; examines their approaches; interprets them and outlines their development to finally create a comprehensive summary/synthesis (Greenhalgh et al. 2004; Sandelowski et al. 2012). The emphasis is rather on showing how research happened – i.e. how the SFP was adopted to different areas – than on revealing findings: these narratives provide "a story about the constructing of stories, a normative framework for considering the merits of particular stories" (Weintraub 1989: 478).

The meta-narrative review's scopes and components somewhat vary in the research process. E.g. Gough's (2013) approach includes the following steps: (1) "iterative configuring map" of research traditions; (2) their "iterative configuring and/or aggregative analysis"; (3) comparison/contrast of meta-narratives for a summary/synthesis. McKillop et al. (2017) list the following: (1) search–selection; (2) comparison of research traditions; (3) identification and analysis of meta-narratives; (4) synthesis. Dean et al. (2019) include: (1) philosophical stand; (2) planning–search–screening; (3) extraction and synthesis of research areas/themes; (4) discussion of themes.

With regard to the paper's topic and research objective, we proceed as follows: (1) search–selection–extraction; (2) overview of research traditions; (3) comparative analysis of the SFP meta-narratives in different research areas; (4) synthesis of the SFP meta-narratives.
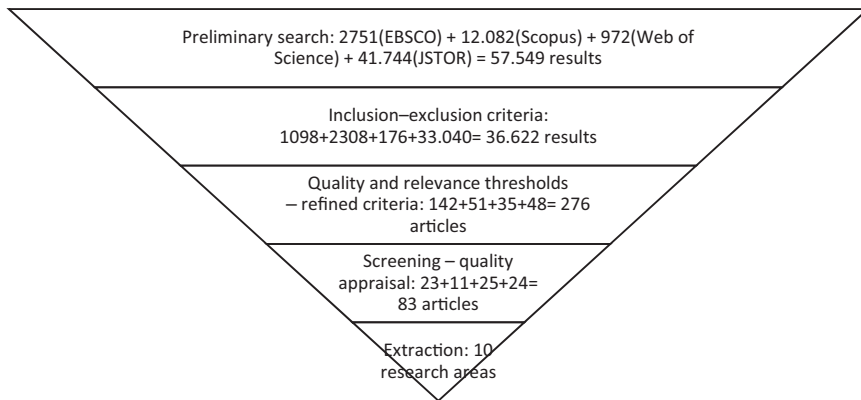
3. SEARCH–SELECTION–EXTRACTION

The search strategy included: (1) choosing major academic databases: EBSCO, Scopus, Web of Science (Dean et al. 2019, McKillop et al. 2017), and adding JSTOR for a broader pool of sources; (2) preliminary search with term "self-fulfilling prophecy", which gave $2751 + 12.082 + 972 + 41.744 = 57.549$ results; (3) inclusion–exclusion criteria: limiting the type of documents to "journals" and "books", the language to "English", the material to "full text"/ "content I can access"/"Open access"; (4) quality and relevance thresholds: where the title/ keywords did not include the search term, the material's extent of fit to/alignment with the research objective was dissatisfactory (based on full text-examination of 10-10 materials in all databases; e.g. Powell 1993); (5) refined criteria: pinning our search term to "title" and "keyword" (instead of "all fields"), eliminating "exact duplicates" within the databases, and arriving to 276 results.

At screening, a full text-based quality appraisal was implemented, driven by the question (as in Dean et al. 2019): Was the concept of the SFP adopted to describe/explain a phenomenon/ event/outcome? Where the answer was no, the article was eliminated from the shortlist. Besides, the high level of overlapping of content among the databases significantly narrowed our choices. Finally, 83 sources were screened and exported to Excel for extraction – which falls within the sample size of reviewed meta-narratives in other papers ($n = 150$ for Dean et al. 2019; $n = 35$ for McKillop et al. 2017).

Extraction meant identifying and standardising research areas and themes, where the SFP was applied to. To minimise researcher bias, researcher judgment was involved where necessary: research areas were identified after the name/category of journals, themes were identified using the keywords. Where these could not emerge automatically, they were retrieved from the title

Fig. 1. Search–selection–extraction
Source: author.

and abstract. At standardisation, initial research areas and themes were classified into broader areas (disciplines)/themes. Ten research areas were determined (Fig. 1): Accounting and Finance–Mathematics; Archaeology and History; Business and Economics; Education; Ethics; Management; Medicine and Health; Politics, Law and International Relations; Psychology; Sociology. 22 core and 7 subthemes were identified.

4. OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH TRADITIONS

The overview presents the year of publishing of the exported materials, and connects study type–method to SFP type–level. The study type is theoretical if no measurement was taken; empirical if data collection/analysis was implemented. The method is strictly the method(s) stated by the author(s), no complementary information was provided by the current review. The SFP type–level had to be based on researcher judgement. Following Dean et al. (2019), a researcher and an assistant were involved and used a coded scoring system for the SFP type: Impersonal (0), Intrapersonal (1), Interpersonal (2), Personal – both intra- and interpersonal (3). SFP level was either Individual (1), Group (2), Society (3). Where scores did not match, researcher and the assistant engaged in a scientific discussion, and if they could not get to an agreement or the result became ambiguous, both scores remained.

The year of publishing falls between 1965 and 2021, where 2000 is a watershed: after a low publication rate in 1960s-70s–80s ($n = 3$–4–4), the interest towards the topic doubled in the 1990s ($n = 9$), and even accelerated in our century (2000s: 24, 2010s: 32). The concept's exploration in the different areas cannot be associated with any eras, the SFP was adopted to explain e.g. the East-West conflict in 1965 (Kautsky 1965), pot-hunting in 1972 (Nickerson 1972), dental praxis in 1987 (Heidmann – Birn 1987), etc. Similarly, no time pattern could be recognised on the use of study types–methods or SFP types–levels. Seemingly, the concept

was just waiting for its establishment in academia, to provide a fertile soil to the various themes.

The materials mainly targeted a personal SFP ($n = 63$; intrapersonal: 11; interpersonal: 42; personal – both: 10), one-quarter dealt with an impersonal one ($n = 20$). The latter focused equally on social-scale ($n = 10$) and individual-group problems (6–4). The intrapersonal logically appeared at the individual level ($n = 10$), and in one case, at group. The interpersonal and personal concerned all levels (individual: 36; group: 2; society 6); in eight cases, these could be interpreted at two levels at the same time. Hence, the papers in the dataset rather applied SFP for introducing a (mainly inter)personal process, interpreted at individual-level ($n = 45$; group: 3; society: 10; two-level: 8), and – in a not negligible proportion – they focused on an impersonal SFP.

More studies are empirical ($n = 49$) than theoretical ($n = 34$). The latter overwhelmingly consisted of materials without any methodological clues, the former contained such specifications – however, those were not always an accurate or rigorous account. Interestingly, many papers failed to name the obviously implemented measurements. The methodological spectrum stretched from primary/secondary data collection (mainly questionnaires as the sole method or part of an experiment/survey), to descriptive/inferential statistics (mainly mean, standard deviation, regression, or ANOVA).

The impersonal ($n = 16$) and personal SFPs ($n = 18$) was almost equally shared among the theoretical papers, whose authors projected/conceptualised the SFP on objects as much as on persons, flexibly applied it without methodological considerations or the use of actual data. Hence, in theory, the SFP could be universally adapted. Empirical papers predominantly focused on personal SFPs ($n = 45$), only a tiny proportion on impersonal ones ($n = 4$). That could refer either to the authors' inclination to measure persons, or to the incapability/difficulty to go beyond theory in certain themes.

5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SFP META-NARRATIVES IN DIFFERENT RESEARCH AREAS

The studies are analysed for their use of the SFP term (i.e. number of occurrence in the body of the text, definition/interpretation within themes) contrasted to the original notion, and for their meta-narrative, which may be supported by notes on study types and methods. In accordance with the kind of review, the results and outcomes of the studies are disregarded.

5.1. Accounting and Finance–Mathematics

The type of papers clearly pulled a borderline between the interrelated areas of accounting and finance–mathematics (e.g. accounting finance) that mostly built on Merton's bankruptcy example. The empirical papers proved to be uniform: driven by similar understandings of the SFP and similar methodology, acknowledging Merton's original notion but abstracting from it, and inclining to regard the SFP simply as a fear/expectation that later comes true, disregarding the conception of "false". Hence, the meta-narrative was streamlined, for example to auditors' fears/expectations about company disclosures could result in bankruptcy (Shinde et al. 2013;

Citron – Taffler 2001). Theoretical papers had more diverse assumptions, no declared methodology, and were concerned about beliefs, measures and predictions on financial markets that fulfilled themselves. Examples include when traders' technical advice impacted selling/buying activity (Jordan 2014), monetary institutions', such as Federal Reserves' measures which led to difficulty in controlling money supply (Kaufman 1972), organisations', such as British Energy's (false) financial forecasts which supervened and resulted in bankruptcy (Meeks – Meeks 2019), and when fears from liquidity/recession launched the exact market-affecting behaviour (of individuals or an asset) that made the fear come true (Lions – Lasry 2007; Powell – Treepongkaruna 2012).

5.2. Archaeology and History

Despite the potential that the SFP's concept holds for research in any area, this category is thin and undeveloped: the two papers assigned here provided no clear explanation for how they understood/interpreted the SFP, the expectations and fulfilment are lost in the lines. E.g. Nickerson (1972) claimed that archaeologists had a "fatalistic approach to pot-hunting", when they said that nothing more could be done about the destruction of sites but penalise the destructors; which approach became an SFP. The fact that a few authors expected the readers to make the connection between the SFP in the title and the chosen topic just did not fulfil itself, and the meta-narrative could not emerge (That phenomenon is not unique and concerns more areas.) Themes under these disciplines include pot-hunting and (counter) terrorism.

5.3. Business and Economics

Albeit various methods have been applied in the area, the themes of (in)stability, equilibrium and bankruptcy peaked in an undivided meta-narrative, where economic expectations, fears and forecasts led to such individual behaviours that fulfilled those. Economic or market (in)stability was generated by fears for (in)stability in sovereign ratings (Schumacher 2014), or expectations for price changes (Kroszner 2007). Economic equilibrium models specifically dealt with psychological factors like human motivations and sentiments that manifested in behaviours which affected the economy and caused fluctuations (while they were unrelated to economic fundamentals such as preferences, technology, production possibilities) – herein, the SFP was also called sunspots or animal spirits (Matheny 1995; Rivard 1994). Bankruptcy – see Merton's example – was a result of individuals' decision-making based on economic forecasts and predictions (Petalas et al. 2017).

5.4. Education

Education has probably the longest history and tradition in confirmed empirical SFP research, originating in Psychology–Sociology and providing capacities for further fields (e.g. Management). Its meta-narrative is that teacher expectations for student performance lead to actual performance, through teacher behaviour and student self-expectation, motivation and efforts. It relies on empirical and theoretical methods alike, from discussions and arguments to (quasi) experiments. The general narrative is usually confirmed by special featurettes. For example Riley and Ungerleider (2012) focused on Aboriginal, Gentrup et al. (2000) on German, Mocan and Yu (2021) on Dragon-zodiac students, Christ (1969) on writing Haiku; Eder (1981) on learning

environments; Hayman (1981) on cultural determination of expectations. Its themes include teacher expectations and student performance (that are its main independent and dependent variables in measurement).

5.5. Ethics

Although this area functioned complementarily, it filled an important gap in the palette of meta-narratives by emphasising the theories' ethical–normative dilemmas. Gonin (2007), Felin and Foss (2009) and Kuźniarz (2020) discussed how (even false) business/economic theories represented norms of behaviour which involuntarily affected people's behaviour to an extent that they persistently fulfilled the models – which although was an attribution error (false SFP assumption), regarded commonly as the definition of human nature. Hence, these theories cannot be neutral/value-free and "the more their assumptions, premises, inferences and conclusions are received as unquestioned fact, the more their predictions appear confirmed by" practice (Hay 2004: 59, on rational choice models).

5.6. Management

Two themes and meta-narratives were outlined: managing people and organisations. Human (resource) management as SFP examined when managerial expectations for certain people's performance (e.g. disabled, Chen 2015; minorities, Glover et al. 2017) in a certain context (e.g. military–training, Eden 1984); or for their recruitment practices in general (Caldwell 2014) or specifically (e.g. ethnocentrically, Banai 1992; in high-flyer development programs, Larsen et al. 1998) arose and led to matching outcomes through the behaviours noted in the narrative of educational SFP, by mostly empirical methods (i.e. questionnaires, descriptive statistics, and regression analyses). Chen (2015: 100) pointed out that "I intended to use the self-fulfilling prophecy to explain how [...]" – referring to how the paper did not build an SFP model, where a context was delegated to explain/specify an SFP, but the reverse. That could be the reason for not using Merton's original full notion in most of the studies which's title places SFP in the focus. Their means is using the SFP concept to support an idea. That was confirmed by the other narrative. Organisation management focused on the SFP's role in organisational decline: where enactment was caused unintentionally by predictions of organisational managers or external constituencies. Edwards et al. (2002: 56) stated in their study that "[d]ecline is anticipated but unwanted and unintended", hence evidence was for it – which was claimed by Miller (1961) for SFP studies to prove an assumption being false or true. Since here it was true, this cannot align Merton's original full concept.

5.7. Medicine and Health

Herein, three themes guide three narratives: treatments (psychological research in medical context), health (combination of psychology and medicine – psychological factors contributing to health), and medicine (purely medicine/medical research). The first covers mostly experiments, where doctors' or relatives' beliefs and expectations for patients' health impacted the treatment, which could confirm the initial belief or expectation (e.g. in dental praxis, where patients were labelled good and bad, Heidmann – Birn 1987; in paediatrics, where families' concerns about illnesses impacted children's prescriptions, André et al. 2007;

in psychiatrics, where doctors' belief in an SFP made them reluctant to engage in pessimistic predictions, Benoita et al. 2019). The second covered mostly longitudinal studies, where individuals' and patients' beliefs of their own health could result in actual health (e.g. in neuropsychology, concerning Mild Cognitive Impairment, Klekociuk – Summers 2013; postoperative pain, Logan – Rose 2005; in examining loneliness, Pikhartova et al. 2016, walking speed while aging, Robertson et al. 2015). The third is an emerging theme, where the SFP was suspected by researchers, but never confirmed. This was usually reflected by a title or conclusion that questioned whether the research fit the concept (e.g. see Preis et al. 2018's title; Rackow et al. 2020's "unchecked" SFP). However, there were also trials to introduce the SFP in a more comprehensive way that failed e.g. in neuroscience (Bleker et al. 2019). Hence, these can either reflect a boundary for SFP research or a challenging future direction.

5.8. Politics, Law and International Relations

This area fell to mostly fear-driven narratives and themes: politics (political parties/groups), law (crime), international relations (foreign affairs). While the meta-narrative in politics is two-folded, its core concept connecting the "two folds" together is as much extremism as politics. First, voting at elections could be driven or discouraged by prior opinion poll results or displayed narratives (e.g. news, speeches), where people finally conformed to forecasted majority (Rothschild – Malhotra 2014) or narrated "reality" (e.g. party weakness/extremism) (Martínez 2017). Second, extremism occurred where group expectations/fears, in amplified historical contexts, led to massive injustice or violence that transformed "moderate believers into extremists" (Hertog 2005: 239; Hagan et al. 2015). The narrative in law was concerned with the crimes of individuals, groups or societies, whose current behaviour confirmed a formerly registered low expectation by e.g. published corruption indices (Warren – Laufer 2009) or offense records (Farrell – Swigert 1978), or a belief (Corbacho et al. 2016) of those. The third narrative argued that national fears from failures had come true in determining events in foreign affairs, e.g. in regional cooperation amidst COVID-19 (Kliem 2021), East–West conflict, between the Bolsheviks and Western governments (Kautsky 1965), domino theory about Vietnam (Silverman 1975) – the two latter exceptionally incorporated Merton's "false" conception.

5.9. Psychology

Psychology is the most immense area of SFP research embracing five themes: (a) decision-making, (b) social interactions, (c) traits and behaviour, (d) sport and health, (e) the Galatea–Golem–Pygmalion effect. (a) The first meta-narrative is that decision-makers' initial or favoured choice option could lead them to bias or distort the information necessary for decision-making in a way that they are likely to choose the initially favoured option, in general (DeKay 2015) or in specific cases (e.g. on cultural markets, Salganik – Watts 2008). (b) The outcome of social interactions is highly dependent on the expectations or fears for acceptance or rejection by individuals or groups that could result in behaviours confirming those expectations or fears. Since many researchers are concerned about negative SFPs (e.g. Loeb et al. 2016), an important recognition was that those were not immutable (Stinson et al. 2009, 2011): self-affirmation could improve (especially insecure) individuals' social behaviour

to result in a positive SFP. (c) These shed light on the individuals' perceived distinct inner/outer traits (e.g. diligence, laziness, height, weight, etc.) that created a self-fulfilling expectation for behaviour (Nelson – Klutas 2000; Hebl – King 2004; Haselhuhn et al. 2013). (d) This has two dimensions: one, similarly to education and work, focused on sport expectations (Weaver et al. 2016; Smith 1995); the other detected how athletes' beliefs about their peers' doping (Moston et al. 2015) or parents' beliefs about their children's drinking behaviour (Madon et al. 2004, 2013) or drug-use (Lamb – Crano 2014) could become SFPs. (e) Experiments with the Galatea, Golem, and Pygmalion effects (leader- and self-initiated SFPs) for potentially seasick cadets (Eden – Zuk 1995) and different sex groups (Dvir et al. 1995). Where women were manipulated to believe in leading high achievers, while actually leading disadvantaged women, experimenters successfully incorporated the "false" assumption in an empirical investigation (Davidson – Eden 2000). Eden (1990) also hypothesised industrialisation as an SFP that was expected by a developing nation's citizens to happen rapidly and successfully.

5.10. Sociology

The core theme of stereotypes and stigmatisation clearly built on Merton's example of these, undeniably considering that these are "false" constructs representing a social "threat" – and disregarded how they could be "true" or mean opportunities. Within that, focusing on cultures, ethnicities and race, it solely examined Latinos' situation in American education quite contradictorily: Guyll et al. (2010) was convinced that Latinos' relatively low educational outcomes were linked to stereotypes and stigmas boosting negative SFPs; Hayes et al. (2013) believed that Latinos resisted to fall as victims of expectations for their performance (which is not a self-fulfilling but a self-defeating prophecy[4]). Since both provided evidence for their assumption through rigorous empirics, the question arises: do Latinos meet or fail to meet stigmas-signalled expectations? This reflects the fluidity of the use of prophecies and easily undermines the validity of research, in any areas. The other focal point, inequality, appeared at group and society levels. At the latter, people's belief in the impossibility of changing global inequality made them politically so passive that this conserved poverty (Räikkä 2004). At group level, individual interactions and intergroup contact could drive stigmatisation (Heinke et al. 2013), or stereotypes could be accumulated across perceivers (Madon et al. 2018). Hence, when the same impressions and expectations are generated in many people about a person, group, or society, individually or as a group, it is false stigmatisation.

6. SYNTHESIS OF SFP META-NARRATIVES

An overview of the meta-narratives' key featurettes can be seen in Table 1. According to that, among the ten research areas, Psychology provided the most (20), Archaeology and History the least (2) number of SFP papers. Medicine and Health was discovered as an emerging area, confirmed by its above-the-average number of publications (13). Some areas, like Politics, Law

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[4]When a true or false definition of the situation (prophecy) leads to opposite outcomes (Hensel 1982).

Table 1. Overview of Meta-Narratives' Key Featurettes

Research area (No. of papers)	Core themes (subthemes)	Use of SFP in the body of the text (Mean of area; No.)	Interpretation of Merton's notion (0: Not at all, 1: Partly, 2: Completely; No.)	Study type (1: Theoretical, 2: Empirical; No.)	SFP type (0: Impersonal, 1: Intrapersonal, 2: Interpersonal, 3: Personal – both; No.)	SFP level (1: Individual, 2: Group, 3: Society; No.)
Accounting and Finance–Mathematics (7)	Bankruptcy, Financial market (control, liquidity, recession)	10	0:1; 1:4, 2:2	1:4, 2:3	0:4, 1:2, 2:1	1:2, 3:4, 1,3:1
Archaeology and History (2)	Pot-hunting, Counterterrorism	3	0:2	1:2	2:2	1:1, 3:1
Business and Economics (5)	Bankruptcy, Equilibrium, (In)stability	10	0:2, 1:2, 2:1	1:3, 2:2	0:4, 2:1	2:1, 3:3, 1,3:1
Education (7)	Student performance, Teacher expectations	12	0:1, 1:5, 2:1	1:2, 2:5	2:6, 3:1	1:5, 2:1, 1,2:1
Ethics (5)	Theories	23	0:1, 1:2, 2:2	1:5	0:4, 1:1	2:3, 3:2
Management (7)	Managing people, Managing organisations	15	1:7	1:3, 2:4	0:3, 1:1, 2:3	1:6, 2:1
Medicine and Health (13)	Health/State, Medicine, Treatments	3	0:8, 1:4, 2:1	1:3, 2:10	0:3, 1:2, 2:5, 3:3	1:13

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Research area (No. of papers)	Core themes (subthemes)	Use of SFP in the body of the text (Mean of area; No.)	Interpretation of Merton's notion (0: Not at all, 1: Partly, 2: Completely; No.)	Study type (1: Theoretical, 2: Empirical; No.)	SFP type (0: Impersonal, 1: Intrapersonal, 2: Interpersonal, 3: Personal – both; No.)	SFP level (1: Individual, 2: Group, 3: Society; No.)
Politics, Law and International Relations (10)	Crimes (corruption and offense), Foreign affairs, Political parties/ groups (extremism)	8	0:1, 1:7, 2:2	1:4, 2:6	0:1, 1:1, 2:6, 3:2	1:3, 3:4, 1,2:2, 2,3:1
Psychology (20)	Decision-making, Galatea-Golem-Pygmalion effect, Social interactions, Sport and health, Traits and behaviour	19	0:1, 1:15, 2:4	1:5, 2:15	0:1, 1:4, 2:15	1:18, 3:2
Sociology (7)	Stereotypes-stigmatisation (inequality, Latino/a)	31	1:5, 2:2	1:3, 2:4	2:3, 3:4	1:2, 2:1, 3: 2, 1,2:2

Source: author.

and International Relations, although complex, the number of papers stayed around the mean of sample (8). The number of core themes per areas ranged between one (Ethics) and five (Psychology). The kinship between the areas and the complexity of research led to overlapping among themes (e.g. bankruptcy in two areas). The use of the SFP term or its abbreviation proved to be deplorable: approximately 10 per paper, which questions to what extent the papers actually dealt with the concept, even though their title centred it. The most, Sociology and Psychology (31–19), Ethics (23), the least Archaeology and History (3), Medicine and Health (3). These also reflect which areas actually constructed SFPs and treat them as a core subject (i.e. investigate it in different contexts, using different themes and methods); and which had only come across it in their flow of research (delegate SFP to support ideas/findings), engaging in taciturnity that lacked clarity in explanation. These two approaches divided and dominated the narratives.

Troublesome fact that 20% of papers did not interpret the concept of the SFP, neither alone, nor in their research context (typically in Medicine and Health, Archaeology and History, but sporadically in other areas as well), neither drew a brief conclusion which noted/questioned the occurrence of the SFP, or expected the readers to puzzle the connection between the topic and the SFP-indicated title – mainly theoretical approaches (65%). Only 18% comprehended and applied Merton's original, complete notion of "false" initial assumptions, these almost equally relied on theoretical–empirical papers (47%–53%). 62% apprehended the SFP as a (positive/negative) expectation of any sort (e.g. forecast, fear, hope etc.) that (predominantly unwittingly/subconsciously) induced such (human or other, e.g. value asset) behaviours and processes that resulted in the initial expectation coming true (typically in Management, where all papers followed that comprehension). Interestingly, the papers inclined to regard the concept mostly as driven by fears and expectations of failures, recessions, etc. that coincides with (and probably originates from) Merton's "tragic" and "vicious circle" narrative. The streamlined original notion now has three factors: (1) initial expectation, (2) transmitting behaviours, (3) outcome confirming initial expectation. In this lineup: (1) is the independent variable (e.g. teacher expectation for student performance) manipulated to result in (3) as dependent variable (e.g. student performance), (2) is the mediator (e.g. teacher behaviour toward the student which reflects expectations). These relationships were exploited mainly by empirical papers (73%) (e.g. by correlations, regressions, analyses of variance).

In theory, the adoption of SFP seemed to be borderless, in empirics it rather seemed to be ambiguous. Concerning the latter, Madon et al. (2018: 826) highlighted that in any correlational study, data could not exclude the possibility that the initial expectations were true or accurate from certain views (an exception could be the disadvantaged women experiment by Davidson and Eden 2000). Therefore, there was no a conclusive evidence for supporting Merton's original notion of initially false assumptions. This could be the reason why the SFP was measured as the phenomenon explaining how Latinos fall and also do not fall as victims to stigmatisation. Obviously, that ambiguity is already a border to implementation. Nonetheless, the theme of medicine (within Medicine and Health), where the SFP could not be found/ measured empirically, is limiting the scope of implementation – unless future research grounds a solid base for SFP research in the field, like it happened in case of equilibrium models in Economics.

7. CONCLUSION

The paper comprehensively reviewed the adoption of the SFP, analysed its meta-narrative and revealed its possible borders to implementation. The adoption of the SFP, to describe and explain a phenomenon, event, or outcome, was found indeed ubiquitous: in ten research areas (Accounting and Finance–Mathematics; Archaeology and History; Business and Economics; Education; Ethics; Management; Medicine and Health; Politics, Law and International Relations; Psychology; Sociology), 22 core and 7 subthemes. A few of these can explicitly be found in Hensel's list (1982), another few could be interpreted as fitting to areas there, but Medicine and Health, particularly its theme medicine is definitely a new area of investigation. The difference between our and Hensel's areas can be due to the recently increased number of papers extending research, and to the clear breakdown by discipline herein.

According to the analysis, the overall meta-narrative of the SFP is a (positive/negative) expectation of any sort (e.g. forecast, fear, hope etc.) that (predominantly unwittingly/subconsciously) induces such (human or other e.g. value asset) behaviours and processes that result in the initial expectation coming true. Hence, the definition or interpretation of the SFP – in contrast to the vast amount of research expected to bring specificity – has been streamlined from Merton's "disarmingly simple" version (Miller 1961) to be based on only three factors (i.e. initial expectation, transmitting behaviours, outcome confirming initial expectation). Controversially, the authors not incorporating the "falsity" of assumptions into their research, made Merton's definition simpler, but also made the SFP more scientific, in line with Miller's critics, because in their understanding the SFP was not false by definition. The SFP is mostly narrated as driven by negative expectations/fears – that coincides with Merton's vicious circle idea.

The possible borders to implementation are methodological and research area-related. The former is referring to the incapability of providing "conclusive evidence" for the "falsity of initial assumptions" – based on Merton's original notion. With an exception we found in Davidson and Eden (2000), data in correlational studies could not exclude the possibility that the initial expectation were true or accurate from certain views (Madon et al. 2018). This issue caused ambiguities among the results of the different researchers. The latter boundary was set up by the theme of medicine (Medicine and Health), where the SFP could not be found or measured empirically.

Future research should follow Merton's original notion, particularly the "falsity of initial assumptions", and find methodological solutions to provide evidence for those. Missing out these steps undermines the internal validity (precision of measure) of research – we could see that in case of the papers related to Latinos. Furthermore, scientists should dive deeper in SFP research within their respective area or theme, and build specific vocabulary and methodology around the topic. These could increase the internal validity – like it happened in case of the theme equilibrium (Economics). Trending topics currently like gender (see e.g. Szilvay, 2021) or digitalisation (see e.g. Endrődi-Kovács – Stukovszky 2021) could be configured as SFPs based on precedents: alike type, level and subject of the SFP, and on the conclusions of this paper. However, with regard to the normative influence of SFP in everyday life and research, we can quote Gonin (2007), who says that such an influence "does not necessarily depend on the original empirical validity of the theory".

For the limitations of the present paper, it has to be noted that undertaking philosophies would have influenced the examination. Furthermore, not all areas/themes could be obviously delineated in the analysis, therefore overlapping can be a limitation.

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