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Measurement of Objective and Subjective Career Success

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1 Introduction

While traditionally a career was confined to advancing in organizational hierarchies the focus nowadays lays on objective and subjective aspects. Moreover, within boundaryless careers individuals not only strive for climbing up the ladder but rather for a life career including satisfaction within their professional and private sphere. Despite the fact that the literature on careers has not found a common ground to define and operationalize career success (Abele-Brehm and Stief, 2004; Dette, Abele and Renner, 2004), the objective/subjective dichotomy is widely accepted in the career literature (Abele-Brehm and Stief, 2004; Abele and Spurk, 2009b). While objective career measures are neutral and measurement does not highly differ across the literature, subjective success can be assessed in various ways. Thus the present discussion paper will present various valid measures of both.

2 Career Success and measurement thereof

Although the literature on careers has not found consensus how to define and operationalize career success (e.g., Abele-Brehm and Stief, 2004; Dette, Abele and Renner, 2004) the subjective/objective dichotomy is reflected common definitions of career success. Moreover, it is widely accepted that career success comprises objective and subjective elements (e.g., Abele-Brehm and Stief, 2004; Abele and Spurk, 2009b). Thus, the following chapter presents various approaches in measuring objective and subjective career success.

2.1 Objective career success

According to Dries, Pepermans, and Carlier (2008) objective career success '[...] is mostly concerned with observable, measurable and verifiable attainments such as pay, promotion and occupational status' (p. 254). Compared to subjective, i.e. perceptual and evaluative criteria they are neutral and not biased in their empirical assessment (Dette, Abele and Renner, 2004). The most widely found measurements in the literature are: monthly salary before taxes, hierarchical status (e.g., Abele and Spurk, 2009b), and salary progression (Wayne et al., 1999).

Abele and Spurk (2009b) assessed objective career success with monthly salary before taxes in thirteen steps from 'no salary (coded as 0), less than Euro 500 (coded as 0.5), less than Euro 1,000 (coded as 1), then in equal steps up to less than Euro 10,000 (coded as 10), and more than Euro 10,000 (coded as 11). Hierarchical status was assessed by Abele and Spurk (2009b) applying three dichotomous variables: (i) permission to delegate work (0=no; 1=yes); (ii) project responsibility (0=no; 1=yes); (iii) official leadership position (0=no; 1=yes). Wayne et al. (1999) used as another objective criteria salary progression,

operationalized as the percentage change in an employee's salary during an 18-month period.

2.2 Subjective career success

Compared to objective career success subjective career success is much broader and refers to all aspects relevant concerning one's individual career satisfaction (Greenhaus, Parasuraman and Wormley, 1990). The most common distinction – introduced by Heslin (2003) – is self-referent versus other-referent assessment. I.e. dependent on the comparison standard, i.e. self versus others, subjective success can be conceptualized as self-referent subjective success or as other-referent subjective success (Abele and Wiese, 2008; Dette, Abele and Renner, 2004; Heslin, 2003; Heslin, 2005). Self-referent is usually measured as career satisfaction or job satisfaction (e.g. Boudreau, Boswell and Judge, 2001; Bozionelos, 2004; Erdogan, Kraimer and Liden, 2004; Heslin, 2003; Judge et al., 1995, Ng et al., 2005; Seibert and Kraimer, 2001).

2.2.1 Self-referent subjective success

2.2.1.1 Job and career satisfaction as an indicator of subjective career success

In self-referent subjective success assessment, an individual compares his/her career relative to personal standards and aspirations. In particular subjective career success as self-referent is often operationalized as job satisfaction or career satisfaction. Although Bruggemann (1975) argued that job satisfaction refers to job-related aspects such as salary, colleagues, and working hours but does not reflect performance or success, Abele and Spurk (2009b) measured self-referent subjective career success in terms of overall job satisfaction by asking respondents 'All in all, how satisfied are you with your job at the moment?'. Participants based their responses on a five-point rating scale (1: not at all; 5: absolutely).

Concerning the differentiation between job satisfaction and career satisfaction it must be critically noted that job satisfaction might be an inadequate measure of career success. Subjective career success indicates satisfaction over a longer time frame and wider range of outcomes, such as sense of purpose and work-life balance, than mere job satisfaction, which is rather confined to the present job (Heslin, 2005). Missing consensus on whether to apply job or career satisfaction is also reflected in a recent review of career success studies by Arthur, Khapova, and Wilderom (2005). 20 out of a total of 49 studies reviewed included measures of career satisfaction and eleven studies included measures for job satisfaction.

2.2.1.2 Achievement of personal goals

According to Seibert and Kraimer (2001) definition subjective career success refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of the present achievements compared to his personal goals and expectations. Thus, career satisfaction measures the extent to which individuals believe their career progress is consistent with their own goals, values and preferences (Erdogan, Kraimer and Liden, 2004; Heslin, 2003; Seibert and Kraimer, 2001). In self-referent subjective success assessment, an individual compares his or her career relative to personal standards and aspirations, i.e. the frame of reference for career success are previously defined personal goals or a self-standard.

Concerning values, Super's (1970) work values inventory is well established. It consists of five items which are rated according to their individual importance on a five-point scale (1=not important to 5=very important). The scale is one-dimensional (54% explained item variance). The German version (Seifert and Bergmann, 1983) has good internal consistency ($\alpha=.77$).

Although Bruggemann (1975) argues that satisfaction is not concerned with career success Abele (2002) and Stief (2001) emphasize that personal career goals include satisfaction, i.e. being content with one's job and career path is success. This is supported by Brunstein, Schultheiss, and Grässmann (1998), Brunstein (2001), and Locke and Latham (1990) as success and satisfaction highly correlate when achieving one's goals. Furthermore, the differentiation between extrinsic success (i.e. objective success such as salary) and intrinsic success (i.e. subjective success such as career satisfaction) considers perception and appraisal of satisfaction as an aspect of success (e.g. Judge et al., 1995; Judge et al., 1999). Turban and Dougherty (1994) found that income and promotions are associated with perceived career success which included other-referent comparison judgments. Similarly, Kirchmeyer (1998) reported positive correlations of income and status with other referent subjective success.

Thus, in this context one must differentiate between career-advancement goals and private goals (Abele-Brehm and Stief, 2004). While career advancement goals refer to organizational goals which are mostly pre-defined according to the job task (Abele, 2002) personal and private career goals do not exclusively refer to the organizational context but also to career from a more holistic and long-term perspective, i.e. occupational satisfaction and work-life balance (Stief, 2001). Thus, Abele-Brehm and Stief (2004) assessed the professional/private dichotomy by the three items on a five-point Likert scale: (i) How important is your job in your life? (ii) I like to be absorbed in my job. (iii) Would you like to have children?

Drawing upon Greenhaus, Parasuraman, and Wormley's (1990) definition of subjective career one instrument commonly applied in measuring self-referent career success is the career satisfaction questionnaire developed by Greenhaus, Parasuraman, and Wormley (1990). The career satisfaction scale ($\alpha=.88$) assesses the individual career development against an implicit, self-set standard. The scale comprises five items (see table 1) rated on a five-point, reverse-coded Likert scale (1=not at all to 5=very much scale).

I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career.
I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my overall career goals.
I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my goals for income.
I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my goals for advancement.
I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my goals for advancement of new skills

table 1: career satisfaction scale items by Greenhaus, Parasuraman, and Wormley (1990).

As shown by Arthur, Khapova, and Wilderom (2005) out of 20 studies reviewed by 14 studies used the career satisfaction scale by Greenhaus, Parasuraman, and Wormley (1990). Dette, Abele, and Renner (2004) and Heslin (2003) however highlight that the self-referent approach has been rarely applied because usually people do not only evaluate their career success relative to their personal standards and aspirations, but also compare themselves with others. Heslin (2003) in fact empirically found that more than two-thirds of his respondents used other-referent criteria in determining their subjective success.

2.2.2 Other-referent subjective success

In other-referent assessment, an individual compares his or her career relative to an external standard, for instance a reference group, a reference person, a significant other. As mentioned before most individuals determine their subjective success according to other-referent criteria (Heslin, 2003). However, this measurement is not without liabilities. The results can be highly biased depending on the other referent. A downwards comparison will produce different results than an upwards comparison (Wills, 1981). Wheeler et al. (1982) however argues that it is common when one compares himself/herself with other that the frame of reference are similar others.

Abele and Wiese (2008) and Abele and Spurk (2009b) operationalized other-referent subjective career success as a comparison with former fellow graduates because pre-tests had shown that former fellow graduates are highly important comparison targets. Participants

based their responses ('Compared with your former fellow graduates, how successful do you think your career development has been so far?') on a five-point rating scale (1: less successful; 5: more successful).

3 Conclusion

Despite the variety of approaches in measuring career success and in particular subjective and objective career success we conclude that there are several arguments from the literature that it might be advisable to assess both aspects of career success.

As pointed out by Hall (1996) individuals do not necessarily approach their career decisions rationally. Thus, one's subjective perception might influence how one's career has and/or will proceed. In other words: objective success could have an influence on how individuals subjectively experience their career success, but subjective experiences of success might also have an influence on individual objective success (Abele and Spurk, 2009a) as subjective success could make a person self-confident or it could enhance his or her motivation and goal-striving. These motivational effects could in turn lead to more objective success over time. Alternatively, people experience objective success, consequently subjectively develop their individual understanding about what constitutes career success, then individually act upon, and eventually leading to certain (more successful) outcomes (Abele and Spurk, 2009a; Arthur, Khapova and Wilderom, 2005; Hall, 2002; Hall and Chandler, 2005). The positive relation between objective success upon job satisfaction has indeed been confirmed by empirical research (e.g., Cable and DeRue, 2002; Judge et al., 1999; Raabe, Frese and Beehr, 2007; Schneer and Reitman, 1997; Turban and Dougherty, 1994). Despite the scarcity of results of the influence of subjective success on objective success Marks and Fleming (1999) found that subjective well-being predicted income. Abele and Spurk (2009a) show that subjective success highly contributes to objective success.

Furthermore the subjective meaning of objective and subjective career success depend on gender and age. As shown by e.g. Allen and Meyer (1993) and Conway (2004) age is positively related to job satisfaction. Thus, the individual meaning of career success might also depend on one's point in life. While younger adults might still strive for objective career success changes such as marriage and children might put one's individual emphasis on subjective aspects of career success. Flexibility, autonomy, and satisfaction within the professional and private sphere might gain more importance and the traditional linear career path might be put to the side.

This is closely related the influence of gender on one's career. Huang et al. (2007) for example found that women's career development remains more complex than men's

because of their multiple family and work related roles. Additionally, results from Huang et al. (2007) and Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) suggest that men tend to have more linear, traditional career patterns placing more emphasis on monetary rewards and promotion compared to their female counterparts. This is supported by Hohner, Grote, and Hoff (2003), Igbaria and Parasuraman (1991), Kim (2004), McGovern and Hart (1992), and Watts (1993) who all reported that most women valued balance between work and personal life higher than men.

In essence we agree with Abele (2002), Brunstein, Schultheiss, and Grässmann (1998), Brunstein (2001), Locke and Latham (1990), and Stief (2001) that career satisfaction is indeed concerned with career success because from an overall perspective life-success is about being content with one's job, career path and personal life.

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