

# Conceptualizing and evaluating career success

PETER A. HESLIN\*

*Cox School of Business, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, U.S.A.*

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## Summary

Within the vast literature on the antecedents of career success, the success criterion has generally been operationalized in a rather deficient manner. Several avenues for improving the conceptualization and measurement of both objective and subjective career success are identified. Paramount among these is the need for greater sensitivity to the criteria that study participants, in different contexts, use to construe and judge their career success. This paper illustrates that contextual and individual factors are likely to be associated with the relative salience of objective and subjective criteria of career success. Drawing on social comparison theory, propositions are also offered about when self- and other-referent success criteria are likely to be most salient. A broader research agenda addresses career success referent choice, organizational interventions, and potential cultural differences. This article maps out how future research can be more sensitive to how people actually do conceptualize and evaluate their own career success. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

## Introduction

Career success has long been a construct of considerable interest to career scholars (e.g., Parsons, 1909; Hughes, 1958) and practitioners (e.g., Robbins, 2003; Ziglar, 1997), not to mention the multitude of individuals engaged in a career (Hall, 1976, 2002). The career literature is replete with theories (e.g., Krumboltz, 1994), models (e.g., Holland, 1997), and accounts of career intervention programs (e.g., Chartrand & Rose, 1996) aimed at predicting and ultimately facilitating career success. It is also an important outcome in many areas of career scholarship, such as those pertaining to career exploration (Blustein, 1997) and decision making (Hartung & Blustein, 2002). In addition, a multitude of studies have investigated how variables such as gender (e.g., Lyness & Thompson, 2000), personality (e.g., Seibert & Kraimer, 2001), education (e.g., Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995), mentoring relationships (e.g., Peluchette & Jeanquart, 2000), and career tactics (Judge & Bretz, 1994) are empirically related to subsequent ‘career success.’

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\* Correspondence to: Peter A. Heslin, Cox School of Business, Southern Methodist University, Box 750333, Dallas, TX 75275-0333, U.S.A. E-mail: heslin@cox.smu.edu

By contrast, curiously little scholarly attention has been devoted to analyzing the nature of career success (Greenhaus, 2003; Heslin, 2003a; Sturges, 1999). One framework for categorizing how career success has been operationalized is Everett Hughes' (1937, 1958) theoretical distinction between the *objective* and the *subjective* career. Specifically, Hughes defined the objective career as directly observable, measurable, and verifiable by an impartial third party, while the subjective career is only experienced directly by the person engaged in her or his career. Thus, objective career success is defined by verifiable attainments, such as pay, promotions, and occupational status, which have long been considered the hallmarks of career success across a wide range of societies (Nicholson, 2000). Indeed, Arthur and Rousseau (1996) found that more than 75 per cent of the career-related articles published in major interdisciplinary journals between 1980 and 1994 focused on objective perspectives.

Subjective career success is defined by an individual's reactions to his or her unfolding career experiences (Hughes, 1937, 1958). Recognition of the importance of subjective success dates back at least to Thorndike's (1934) operationalization of career success as job satisfaction, as well as the objective criteria of earnings and job status. Although objective criteria have dominated much of the subsequent career success literature, subjective criteria have increasingly been adopted within career success research over the last decade (Greenhaus, 2003; Hall, 2002). However, the validity of these subjective career success measurements has ultimately been bounded by the extent to which they capture the phenomenological meaning of career success to those surveyed.

This paper begins by briefly reviewing the most common approaches to assessing both objective and subjective career success. Rather than attempting an exhaustive survey of the career success literature, we provide exemplars that direct attention to some strengths and limitations in the way that objective and subjective success have been operationalized, together with some suggestions for improved measurement.

Four implicit assumptions that are prevalent in much of the career success literature are identified. The first is that objective outcomes (e.g., pay and promotions) are adequate proxies for success, presumably even beyond the managerial and professional contexts in which most career success research has been conducted (Greenhaus, 2003; Sullivan, 1999). The second related presumption is that job and career satisfaction (i.e., Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990) adequately capture the breadth of dimensions upon which people react to their careers. Third is the inherent assumption that people are similar in their concern about the success they attain in the objective, compared to subjective domain. Finally, the career success literature largely presumes that people conceptualize and evaluate their career success only relative to self-referent criteria, such as their career aspirations.

This paper strives to encourage career scholars to transcend each of these four assumptions. This is done by first highlighting the importance of discovering objective metrics that are meaningful within particular career contexts beyond the managerial and professional spheres. Second, we show that people conceptualize and evaluate their career success in realms (e.g., work-life balance, contribution, fulfillment) that go beyond how subjective career success has typically been conceptualized and measured. Third, in an attempt to address the paucity of theory about how different people conceptualize their career success, we identify some potential correlates of when objective versus subjective criteria of success are likely to be most salient. Fourth, drawing on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), we demonstrate that people use other-referent as well as self-referent criteria to evaluate their career success. Other-referent success explains unique variance in overall subjective career success (Heslin, 2003a). Thus, we use relevant theory and research to suggest when self- and other-referent success criteria are each most likely to be salient. Empirical tests of these propositions may ultimately lead to improvements in the way career success is typically conceptualized and measured in the extant literature, as reviewed next.

## Operationalizations of Objective and Subjective Success

### *Objective criteria*

Salary (Thorndike, 1934), salary growth (Hilton & Dill, 1962) and promotions (Thorndike, 1963) are the most widely used and readily accessible indicators of career success (Hall, 1976, 2002). These objective measures can have the substantial benefits of being readily available from existing records, standardized (at least within firms), and efficient to collect. They are free from self-serving and common-method variance, if collected by means other than self-report. They are valued by many people, as anecdotally reflected by Zig Ziglar's (1997) quip that: 'Folks who say they don't care about money will probably lie about other things too!' Finally, both Hall and Chandler (this issue), as well as Nicholson and de Waal Andrews (this issue), discuss how objective attainments can, under certain circumstances, lead to subjective career success.

Organizational changes over the last two decades have, however, reduced the relevance of some traditional objective indicants of career success. For instance, trends such as organizational delayering, downsizing, and outsourcing have lessened the scope (Evans, Gunz, & Jalland, 1997) and relative desirability (Hall, 2002; Reitman & Schneer, 2003) of hierarchical progression through promotion. This applies even to MBA graduates; those who have earned the degree widely promoted as *the* credential for access to a 'successful' managerial career, characterized by upward mobility on a corporate ladder (Brousseau, Driver, Eneroth, & Larsson, 1996). For instance, a recent survey of the managerial careers of 116 MBA graduates over a 13-year period revealed that two-thirds of them had not followed this prototypical managerial career path (Reitman & Schneer, 2003). This study also found that those who had pursued a more protean managerial career had not paid a price in terms of their income, career satisfaction, or job security. In general, an increasing number of former professionals, managers, and even senior corporate officers are choosing to become *contractors* and *consultants* (Cappelli, 1999; Inkson, Heising, & Rousseau, 2001): generic titles that lack the clear occupational status and rank that pertained to their previous organizational positions.

Objective criteria of career success are also liable to being both *contaminated*, in that they are affected by factors that are beyond an individual's control, as well as *deficient* (Campbell, Dunnette, Lawler, & Weick, 1970), in that they do not capture relevant facets of the focal construct. Sources of *contamination* in the objective success of global managers, for instance, are illustrated by Hollenbeck and McCall's (2003) observation that countries differ substantially in their power structures, taxation systems, economic and social stratification, markers of status, and norms of saving. Even within societies, the objective success experienced by those such as nurses, plumbers and taxi drivers will similarly be strongly affected by factors such as occupational pay norms, labor market conditions, and competition: factors which change independently of the actions of an individual engaged in one of these occupations. Moreover, as Thorndike (1963) observed, objective criteria of career success have limited meaning in the many jobs where pay and promotions are institutionalized, such as in the civil service and the military.

The *deficiency* of traditional objective criteria, such as pay and promotions, stems from the fact that these are not the only objective outcomes that people seek from their careers. For instance, both school teachers (Parsons, 2002) and academic mentors (e.g., McGrath, 2003) often frame their career success in terms of hard data on the learning and other attainments of their students and protégés. Similarly, bus and taxi drivers conceivably base their career success on their years of driving without an accident, industrial designers on e-mails of peer recognition for their creativity, and doctors on the proportion of emergency patients' lives they save. Even when continual attainment of such objective outcomes does not lead to an increase in pay, promotions, occupational status, or rank, their value as objective indicants of career success is not necessarily diminished.

Many people also desire less tangible, subjective outcomes such as work-life balance (Finegold & Mohrman, 2001), as well as a sense of meaning (Wrzesniewski, 2002), purpose (Cochran, 1990), transcendence (Dobrow, 2003), and contribution (Hall & Chandler, this issue) from their work. Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) had more than 800 business professionals indicate the relative importance of 15 potential indicators of their career success. A factor analysis revealed five dimensions of the meaning of career success: status, time for self, challenge, security, and social. With the exception of status, these results reveal a considerable emphasis on subjective career success criteria that go beyond the objective outcomes of prestige, power, money, and advancement.

Receiving high pay and promotions also do not necessarily make people feel proud or successful (Hall, 2002; Korman, Wittig-Berman, & Lang, 1981; Schein, 1978). In fact, they can cause work and personal alienation (Burke, 1999), as well as depressive reactions. Bandura (1997) described how newly appointed managers who do not delegate adequately can soon become overwhelmed and depressed, potentially leading to both subjective and objective career failure. Such evidence that subjective success is not necessarily a function of objective attainments highlights the importance of learning more about the nature of subjective career success, as well as the causal relationship between different objective and subjective career outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the potential deficiency of objective success criteria has long been recognized. For example, 40 years ago Hilton and Dill (1962, p. 163) observed that 'the shortcomings of salary as a measure of man's progress are well known.' Thus, it is puzzling that salary and promotions continue to be applied as the *sole* criteria of career success in many studies (e.g., Chênevert & Tremblay, 2002; Hurley & Sonnenfeld, 1998; Judiesch & Lyness, 1999; Lyness & Thompson, 2000). The potential deficiencies in objective success measurement may be reduced by future research that conceptualizes and assesses objective success in a manner that is guided by the career concerns and status hierarchies that characterize particular career contexts. Another more commonly adopted method of dealing with the deficiency of objective criteria is to measure subjective career success, in conjunction with objective attainments.

### *Subjective criteria*

Schein (1978) argues that it is important to determine if people considered to have hierarchical and financial success are also satisfied with their career. Unlike objective success criteria, subjective measures may detect important career outcomes that are not readily assessable from personnel records or by expert raters (Gattiker & Larwood, 1988).

Subjective career success is most commonly operationalized as either job or career satisfaction. Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, and Barrick (1999) argue that as individuals who are dissatisfied with many aspects of their jobs are unlikely to consider their careers to be successful, job satisfaction is the most salient aspect of subjective career success. Many other studies (e.g., Boudreau, Boswell, & Judge, 2001; Judge & Bretz, 1994; Judge et al., 1995; Murrell, Frieze, & Olson, 1996; Tsui & Gutek, 1984) have also used job satisfaction as a proxy for subjective career success.

One limitation of doing so is that a person who thinks they have a highly successful career does not necessarily consider it to be less successful if they begin a job that they find dissatisfying. Second, a person could be highly satisfied with their current job, though dissatisfied with the career attainments which preceded it. Third, a gratifying job with limited prospects for future career opportunities could invoke minimal feelings of career success. Fourth, a person may conversely hate what they are doing

<sup>1</sup>Discussion of this latter issue is beyond the scope of the present paper, though is taken up from several different perspectives by Arthur et al. (this issue), Hall and Chandler (this issue), and Nicholson and de Waal Andrews (this issue).

but be happy with the state of their career because of the prospects it brings (Heslin, 2003a). For instance, Wilensky (1960) described how graduate students defer gratification by working long hours for little direct compensation, in the hope of being well rewarded following graduation. Finally, high job satisfaction does not necessarily lead to subjective career success when it exacts a high toll in terms of health, family relationships, or other salient personal values.

Subjective career success thus includes reactions to actual and anticipated career-related attainments across (a) a broader time frame than one's immediate job satisfaction (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2000), as well as (b) a wider range of outcomes, such as a sense of identity (Law, Meijers, & Wijers, 2002), purpose (Cochran, 1990), and work-life balance (Finegold & Mohrman, 2001). Although job satisfaction may contribute to subjective career success, they are conceptually distinct constructs that are not necessarily related. It follows that future research should avoid adopting job satisfaction as a sole proxy for subjective career success.

Career satisfaction is most often assessed using the widely adopted (e.g., Boudreau et al., 2001; Judge et al., 1995; Seibert & Kraimer, 2001) career satisfaction scale developed by Greenhaus et al. (1990). Although such standardized measures generally have acceptable levels of internal consistency, such characteristics are not necessarily sufficient to validly assess each respondent's subjective career success. For example, standardized scales with items measuring satisfaction with *hierarchical success* (e.g., Peluchette & Jeanquart, 2000) or *advancement* (e.g., Greenhaus et al., 1990) are likely to be of limited relevance to the increasing number of people who work on a contract basis (Inkson et al., 2001), run their own small business (Tullar, 2001), value other features of their career (e.g., service and companionship) much more highly (Aronsson, Bejerot, & Haerenstam, 1999), or are contentedly career plateaued (Slocum, Cron, Hansen, & Rawlings, 1985). Assessing superfluous, irrelevant constructs is problematic owing to the inflation of the error within the resulting measurements of subjective career success. Thus, more needs to be understood about how to balance the imperatives to assess *only* what really matters to the person being surveyed, while also making efficient and comparable measurements.

### *Improving subjective career success measurement*

Three avenues for improving the conceptualization and measurement of subjective career success are (a) drawing upon research into *what employees want*, (b) paying greater attention to how people in different career contexts conceptualize their career success, and (c) adopting more qualitative methods. One source of insight for the first avenue is Cangemi and Guttschalk's (1986) discovery that, based on a survey of 35 000 employees, what employees *most* wanted (i.e., full appreciation for work done, feeling *in on things*, and sympathetic understanding of personal problems) differed substantially from what supervisors discerned that their employees' most desired (i.e., money). Another example of research on what people want is Finegold and Mohrman's (2001) finding that among 4500 knowledge workers and managers from eight countries, work-life balance was rated as the most important out of the many facets of a career. The failure of most career success studies to include even a single item assessing work-life balance highlights how considering research on what people want could potentially alter the extant evidence about the antecedents of subjective career success.

The second, contextual avenue is foreshadowed by a recent program of theorizing, research and symposia presentations, regarding how career success is conceptualized by different populations. These include professionals transitioning to working part-time (Lee & Dohring, 2003), people with a *global* career (Hollenbeck & McCall, 2003), young classical musicians (Dobrow, 2003), people working in not-for-profit organizations (Steinbereithner, 2003), and CEOs (Heslin, 2003b). An example of how career context can be associated with subtle differences in the criteria people use to evaluate

their career success is illustrated by a survey of 1481 industrial/organizational (I/O) psychologists by Brooks, Grauer, Thornbury, and Highhouse (2003). This study found that compared to I/O psychology 'academics' (i.e., those working in universities), I/O psychological practitioners reported valuing affiliation, structure, and money significantly more, though autonomy and science to a lesser extent than their academic counterparts. This systematic within-profession variation in relative concern with the objective criteria of money highlights the importance of sensitivity to sub-population differences in the criteria adopted for judging career success.

Third, Arthur et al. (this issue) observed a paucity of qualitative career success research within the leading management and psychological journals over the last decade. Thus, there appears to be plenty of scope for more systematic, qualitative studies of how people making their careers in different contexts conceptualize their career success. This approach to improving the measurement of career success is exemplified by Juntunen et al.'s (2001) in-depth interviews regarding the meaning of career success to 18 Northern Plains American Indians. Evidence of the communitarian construal of career success among this population, in which success is largely measured in terms of contribution to the well-being of others, is exemplified by the following two statements by study participants:

To be successful, I believe, is going back to where you were raised to help the people that are there. (p. 278)

I make flutes for [the young kids] so they can learn. I did 250 last year for the kids. . . . Out of all them kids, maybe one will be a flute player and carry on a tradition. If I can get this tradition going with some of the young people . . . then I'm happy it's a success. (p. 279)

Such findings illustrate how qualitative research may reveal hitherto largely neglected facets (e.g., societal contribution) of subjective career success (see also Hall & Chandler, this issue).

In summary, several options for improving the measurement of objective and subjective success have been suggested. It has been shown that some people construe their career success in subjective ways that transcend the objective criteria that have dominated the extant literature (Greenhaus, 2003; Hall, 2002). Indeed, the wide range of success criteria that different people use highlights an opportunity to explore how theory and research may suggest when particular types of success criteria are likely to be most salient. The potential utility of doing so is underscored by the observation that the widespread uncritical and atheoretical use of narrow measures of career success has probably constrained the scope and validity of career success research (Arthur et al., this issue). One potential option for addressing this theoretical gap in the literature is to investigate when salient others' expectations and outcomes are likely to influence how people conceptualize their career success.

## Self- and Other-Referent Career Success

Whether career attainments lead people to experience career success is likely to depend upon the standards against which they are evaluated. Career outcomes may be evaluated relative to personal standards (i.e., self-referent criteria), or the attainments and expectations of others (i.e., other-referent criteria).

Self-referent success criteria generally reflect an individual's career-related standards and aspirations. By contrast, other-referent criteria involve comparisons with others, such as whether one is paid more or less than the industry average or a colleague who performs a similar role in the same or another organization (Goodman, 1974). In those commonly encountered cases in which there is a range of

potential referents, career success judgments may vary substantially depending upon which are chosen as the basis for comparison (Bandura, 1986; Heath, Larrick, & Wen, 1999; Wood, 1989).

### *Self-referent success criteria*

Gattiker and Larwood (1988) argue that subjective career success criteria reflect personal standards and preferences, such as whether an individual most prefers to have solitude or social stimulation. Self-referent criteria may also pertain to objective criteria, such as a career goal to earn a salary of at least \$100k per annum by the age of 30. Regardless of what other people achieve, a person who is highly committed to such an aspiration is liable to experience career success if it is realized, while potentially feeling that their career is not successful if this goal is not attained. Instances when people value self-satisfaction from acting in accordance with their personal standards even more highly than material rewards (Bandura, 1997; Hall, 2002) further highlight the importance of considering self-referent subjective success.

Self-report outcome measures in the career success literature have been almost exclusively self-referential, with two identified notable exceptions. One is Lawrence's (1984) measure of the extent to which respondents feel that their careers are on schedule, ahead of schedule, or behind schedule, relative to their peers. The other exception is two items in Turban and Dougherty's (1994) 4-item measure that assesses perceived career success relative to the other-referent criteria of 'your co-workers?', and 'the feelings of "significant others"?' Aside from these studies, does the relative absence of other-referent criteria in the career success literature mean that people rarely evaluate their career with reference to the expectations and attainments of other people?

### *Other-referent success criteria*

If you compare yourself with others you may become vain or bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself. (*Desiderata*)

The motivational and affective perils of comparing oneself to others have been well documented (e.g., see Dweck, 1999). Theory and research suggest, however, that people nonetheless often evaluate their career success relative to the outcomes achieved by other people. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) states that (a) individuals are motivated to evaluate the outcomes they attain, and (b) when objective information concerning the adequacy of their actions and outcomes is not available, they will attempt to obtain such information by comparing their actions and outcomes to those of other similar people. Several hundred studies have validated and extended these basic premises of social comparison theory (Suls & Wheeler, 2000). Within organizational settings, Mumford (1983) argues that reinforcement contingencies, such as promotions or raises, provide a powerful incentive for individuals to regularly engage in social comparisons with their peers, especially when vague criteria are used for allocating them. Similarly, the substantial evidence that people often act in the manner predicted by Adams' (1965) equity theory (e.g., Griffeth & Gaertner, 2001; Janssen, 2001) further shows that individuals use the outcomes of other people as referent points when evaluating their work-related outcomes.

Schein (1990) provides two anecdotes of how social comparisons operate in evaluating career success. In the first, an entrepreneur who made two million dollars felt like a failure because his friends all owned 300-million-dollar companies. In the second example, another person who leveled off in middle management felt very successful because he went so far beyond the level his father attained. While there is a literature on the use of other referents when evaluating pay satisfaction (e.g., Goodman, 1974; Toh & DeNisi, 2003), it has generally neither ventured beyond satisfaction with the fiscal aspect of career success, nor substantially influenced the literature in which 'career success' is the criterion

measure. Thus, greater scholarly attention appears warranted to the potentially social comparative nature of how people construe and assess their overall career success.

Heslin (2003a) explored the use of other-referent criteria by 71 part-time MBA students at a Canadian university. Participants were asked to evaluate their career success and to be specific about how they know the extent to which their career is successful. Independent ratings of their written responses revealed that 68 per cent of participants used other-referent criteria, such as: 'I am paid relatively well for my peer group,' 'Others younger than me have done better career-wise,' and 'My supervisors don't appreciate my above-average performance!' A majority of participants used some other-referent criteria, and 39 per cent of all the criteria generated were other-referent. This study also examined the relationship between career success relative to both self-referent and other-referent criteria. Self-referent success was measured using a slightly modified version of Greenhaus et al.'s (1990) widely used career satisfaction scale (e.g., 'How satisfied are you with the income you have attained, relative to your career aspirations?'; 'How satisfied are you with the autonomy you have attained, relative to your career aspirations?'). Other-referent success was measured with items that were identical, except each item surveyed perceived success 'relative to your peers' rather than 'relative to your career aspirations.' The results were that ratings of other-referent success accounted for an additional 12 per cent of variance in ratings of overall subjective career success, when career success relative to self-referent criteria was held constant. Thus, other-referent success appears to be a potentially important, albeit largely neglected facet of subjective career success.

Objective other-referent success criteria are exemplified by salary surveys, mean time to promotion data, and descriptions of 'successful' career behaviors (e.g., Inkson et al., 2001; Zabusky & Barley, 1996). Such criteria provide referent points for assessing whether one's career is *on schedule* relative to one's age-peers, which might be a facet of other-referent career success. For instance, based on the self-reports of 245 managers (aged 22–66 years) from a large corporation, Lawrence (1984) found that perceptions of being behind, on, or ahead of schedule were related to career satisfaction, even when their perceptions of being ahead or behind time were incorrect.

Other-referent career success criteria include, but extend beyond, comparing oneself to the attainments of others. They can also encompass our internalization of other people's expectations. For instance, Gattiker and Larwood (1988) note that: 'what we *think* that our families think can determine how satisfied we are with our careers' (p. 572, italics in original). Instances in which people choose to follow a long-standing family tradition of working in a particular profession (e.g., law, medicine, or plumbing), from among the wide range of options available to them, may reflect a combination of social learning and adopting the expectations of salient others as a criterion of career success (Krumboltz, 1994).

In summary, there is substantial theoretical and empirical reason to believe that people evaluate their objective and subjective career outcomes relative to other-referent, as well as self-referent criteria. In addition, there is preliminary evidence that evaluating other-referent career success provides unique information about subjective career success that has probably not been captured by most measures of this construct within the extant literature. These observations provide a basis for beginning to theorize about when different types of subjective career success criteria will be most salient.

## Types of Subjective Career Success Criteria

Our argument that people evaluate their career success using self-referent and other-referent criteria, drawn from both the objective and subjective domains, is illustrated in Table 1. This table makes



Table 1. Four types of subjective success criteria

	Objective domain	Subjective domain
Self-referent domain	<p><b>1. Objective/self-referent</b>  <i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My financial and promotion aspirations</li> </ul> <p><i>Potential correlate:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A market culture</li> </ul>	<p><b>2. Subjective/self-referent</b>  <i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My goals for work-life balance and fulfilment</li> </ul> <p><i>Potential correlates:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A calling orientation</li> <li>• A non-linear career</li> </ul>
Other-referent domain	<p><b>3. Objective/other-referent</b>  <i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My colleagues pay and my social standing</li> </ul> <p><i>Potential correlates:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A winner-take-all market</li> <li>• A job or career orientation</li> </ul>	<p><b>4. Subjective/other-referent</b>  <i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My stimulation and fun, relative to my peers</li> </ul> <p><i>Potential correlate:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A clan culture</li> </ul>

explicit that subjective career success encompasses reactions to both the objective (e.g., pay) and subjective (e.g., fulfillment) facets of one’s career. It also highlights how, at any given point in the unfolding of a career, self- and other-referent criteria can be rather different. Instances when a person’s satisfaction with her bonus changes dramatically upon hearing about the bonus received by her peers, as well as when an individual feels diminished upon discovering his parents’ attitude toward his career, exemplify the potential difference between self- and other-referent criteria of success.

Table 1 also illustrates some potential correlates of when each of these four types of success criteria is likely to be most salient. The variables suggested are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather merely indicative of when different types of criteria may figure most prominently in how people evaluate their career success. Future research may identify and explore many others.

As the standards people use to evaluate their experiences and attainments reflect the reciprocal influence of both contextual and individual factors (Bandura, 1986, 1997), we first theorize about the potential role of two contextual factors: whether the career is being pursued in a *winner-take-all* market (Frank & Cook, 1995), as well as the *organizational culture* (Kerr & Slocum, 1987) in which a person is working. Two individual factors we discuss are *work orientation* (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997) and *goal orientation* (Dweck & Elliott, 1983). Finally, we suggest that whether a person has a linear or non-linear *career type* (Brousseau et al., 1996)—a variable that embodies the inherent interaction between individual and contextual exigencies—may influence when the different types of criteria outlined in Table 1 are most salient.

### Winner-take-all markets

Frank and Cook (1995) argue that more and more individuals are being drawn to the pursuit of a limited number of superstar positions in *winner-take-all* markets. These markets are characterized by huge rewards for high performance, *relative to* the performance exhibited by other people. For instance, Olympic gold medals are awarded for outperforming other contenders, rather than based on absolute achievements. The other defining characteristic of winner-take-all markets is that prizes tend to be allocated to a few top performers, with small differences in talent or effort resulting in massive differences in income and other rewards. For instance, gold medal winners (e.g., Mary Lou Retton

and Carl Lewis) often receive millions of dollars in product endorsements, while silver and bronze medalists commonly receive few, if any endorsements, and their almost identical athletic performances are soon forgotten.

Information technologies enabling millions of people to listen and watch only *star* artists and athletes have, for many years, made the performing arts and professional sports winner-take-all markets. However, intense global competition is substantially increasing the stakes of *winning*, relative to being in *second place*, within many industries (e.g., software development, movie making, fashion, book publishing, academe, consulting, law). Organizational fortunes in these markets are widely thought to depend heavily on the performance of those occupying a few pivotal positions, such as the CEO, chief counsel, or movie director. The rewards offered to the incumbents of such roles tend to be enormous and far in excess of the rewards received by those who just miss out on such roles. Besides increasing the already substantial disparity between the rich and the poor, Frank and Cook (1995) argue that the slim prospect of becoming a wealthy star in one of these emerging winner-take-all markets is decreasing the number and talent of those interested in making a career in other less glamorous, though socially important sectors, such as engineering, manufacturing, civil service, child care, and teaching.

Despite these societal costs, Frank and Cook identify a range of psychological and social processes likely to attract and retain participants in winner-take-all markets. Aspirants consistently and notoriously overestimate their chances of winning contests for highly prized occupational roles, such as being a supermodel, a CEO, a pro-basketball player, or a Wall Street banker (Arnett, 2000; Weinstein, 1980). Cognitive limitations generally prevent people from learning about, remembering, and thus aspiring to emulate any more than the few leading stars in any field of endeavor. Finally, people can feel entrapped in winner-take-all markets. Failure to continually invest heavily in things they believe will improve their chances of success (e.g., expensive clothes, luxury cars, cosmetic surgery, steroid consumption, coaching) can seem tantamount to forgoing all they have already invested in striving to become successful.

Social inducements to participate in winner-take-all markets include the conspicuously reported massive financial rewards received by 'winners' in their respective fields. Moreover, popular publications and television programs such as *People* magazine, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* appear devoted to celebrating and propagating materialism, conspicuous consumption, and exclusivity as criteria of success. Through social learning processes, such as role modeling and symbolic encoding of desired career outcomes, people tend to personally adopt the values and standards of those with whom they identify (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Thus, consumption of such star-oriented media is liable to increase the salience of objective and other-referent criteria of career success (e.g., one's income and status relative to one's referent group).

Even stronger inducements to value objective and other-referent success are likely to come from personally participating in a winner-take-all market, via the mutually reinforcing mechanisms of the attraction–selection–attrition (ASA) cycle (Schneider, 1987; Schneider, Smith, & Paul, 2001), and socialization (Trice & Beyer, 1993). Schneider's ASA model states that organizational members are likely to be relatively homogeneous, insofar as they are the ones who were attracted to, chosen by, and choose to remain with an organization, given its characteristic strategy, structure, culture, and reward system. There is evidence that people choose organizations that fit their need structure. For instance, Turban and Keon (1993) found that people with a high need for achievement choose to work in organizations with individual incentive systems, rather than rewards based on seniority.

Following selection, organizations adopt socialization tactics to imbue newcomers with the values and perspectives of the organization. Finally, newcomers who are not effectively socialized tend to be dissatisfied and are unlikely to remain with an organization or within an industry (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Thus, conspicuous rewards allocated for excelling one's

peers, which are the hallmark of winner-take-all markets, are likely to be particularly salient to those working within such markets.

*Proposition 1:* People working in *winner-take-all* markets use more objective and other-referent criteria of career success than those who work in fields where rewards are more evenly distributed, based on absolute rather than relative performance (see Table 1, quadrant 3).

### *Organizational culture*

Even within industries and markets, differences in organizational culture may be associated with variation in how people conceptualize their career success. This potential dynamic can be illustrated by consideration of the prototypical *market* and *clan* organizational cultures studied by Kerr and Slocum (1987).

Within a *market culture*, the relationship between the individual and the organization is contractual. Mutual obligations are explicitly specified: in return for some level of quantifiable performance, individuals are given a commensurable and agreed level of financial reward. The other opportunities available to both individuals and organizations determine whether and under what terms periodic employment contracts are renewed. Symbols of status and rank are not emphasized. Rather, a performance-based reward system pays large bonuses for meeting or exceeding quantified performance targets. Little consideration is given to the qualitative aspects of performance, such as the long-term consequences of the manner in which short-term results are achieved. Kerr and Slocum observed that 'rather than promoting a feeling of membership in a social system, the market culture encourages a strong sense of independence and individuality in which everyone pursues his or her own interests' (p. 103).

*Clan cultures*, by contrast, are characterized by a more fraternal and committed relationship between the individual and the organization. Socialization and internalized values emphasize mutual interests and the tacit understanding that required contributions to the organization may exceed contractual agreements. In exchange for loyalty, senior managers in clan cultures show a greater concern for individuals' employment security and career development than is typical of market cultures. For instance, promotion from within is much more common in clan cultures than in market cultures. Consideration of qualitative facets of performance, such as how results are achieved, introduces a degree of vagueness into the appraisal system. Compared to market cultures, financial bonuses are a small part of total compensation, while rituals and patterns of interaction that signify and cultivate a person's sense of belonging and status play an important role in clan cultures. For instance, the extensive collegial network within clan cultures tends to generate a sense of interdependence between organizational members, leading them to identify strongly with their peers, as well as 'their' organization (Kerr & Slocum, 1987).

Through the mutually reinforcing mechanisms of the ASA cycle and socialization, the quantitative and financially oriented nature of market cultures means that they are likely to be inhabited by people who primarily use objective criteria, especially pay, to evaluate their career success. By contrast, a relatively greater concern with subjective criteria of career success could be expected in clan organizational cultures. This is because within such cultures rich patterns of socialization and rituals cultivate the importance of non-pecuniary career outcomes such as the sense of fraternity, meaning, and belonging to an organization with a proud tradition and/or an important mission.

Organizational culture may also be associated with differences in the salience attached to self-referent versus other-referent criteria of career success. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) emphasizes that when clear performance metrics are not available to help individuals evaluate their accomplishments, they tend to evaluate themselves relative to the achievements of other people. A

corollary is that social comparisons are fostered by the availability of accessible, salient bases for peer comparison (Festinger, 1954; Klein, 1997). Finally, in self-relevant domains, such as regarding one's career status, close relationships with potential referents tend to foster social comparisons (Pemberton & Sedikides, 2001; Tesser, 1980; Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988). Thus, the relatively vague performance criteria, the clear symbols of relative rank and status, and the closeness between organizational members within clan cultures is expected to foster a greater use of other-referent criteria of career success than typically occurs within market cultures. By contrast, the explicit linkage of rewards to quantifiable performance and the independence of organizational members within market cultures are both expected to increase the emphasis individuals give to self-referent criteria when evaluating their career success.

*Proposition 2:* In clan cultures, subjective and other-referent criteria are relatively salient, compared to the objective and self-referent success criteria that are more salient in market cultures (see Table 1, quadrants 1 and 4).

### *Work orientation*

People appear to differ in their prime reason for working and what they most seek from the work (Schein, 1990). For instance, research by both sociologists (e.g., Bellah et al., 1985) and psychologists (e.g., Schwartz, 1986, 1994; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997) has shown that most people have one of three distinct orientations to their work: seeing it primarily as either a job, a career, or a calling. The fundamental distinctions between these three types of work orientation are as follows.

People with a *job* orientation focus mainly on the financial rewards they receive for working, rather than pleasure or fulfillment. Work is viewed as a means for acquiring the resources needed to enjoy time away from the job, rather than as an end in itself. As the main goal of those with a job orientation is to make an income, they do not seek many other rewards from their work (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997).

People with a *career* orientation exhibit a deeper personal investment in their work. They mark their achievements not only through monetary gain, but also through upward advancement within the occupational structure where they work. Wrzesniewski (2002) observed that 'the overarching goal of those who view their work as a career is to maximize their income, social status, power and prestige within their occupation' (p. 232).

Finally, people with a *calling* orientation strive to experience fulfillment as a result of performing their work. Work is seen as an inherent part of life and as an end in itself, rather than merely as a means to income or advancement. Those with a calling often feel that their work helps to make the world a better place. For instance, hospital cleaners who view their work as the meaningful task of facilitating the comfort and health of all who enter 'their' hospital would probably exemplify a calling orientation (Dutton, Debebe, & Wrzesniewski, 2000).

The usefulness of this tripartite work orientation concept has been established in several ways. Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) demonstrated that employees in a wide range of occupations, from clerical to professional, were unambiguous in construing their work primarily in terms of one of these three work orientations. In addition, empirical evidence of the predicted relationship with other work-related variables supports the construct validity of work orientation. Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) found that having a calling was associated with the highest life and job satisfaction, and with missing the fewest days of work. Work orientation has also been associated with how people engage in their work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), the goals people pursue in job search, as well as the nature and occupational level of their new job (Wrzesniewski, 2002).

In summary, the objective outcomes of pay and advancement are respectively the prime concern of those with either a job or a career orientation. By contrast, people with a calling are much more concerned with subjective outcomes that matter most to them, such as the sense of meaning and fulfillment they derive from their work. Rather than adopting standards of success that are guided by an organization in which they have a job or career, those with a calling are more likely to have self-set standards for evaluating their career. The multiple methods of assessing work orientation used by Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) may be useful in empirical tests of:

*Proposition 3:* For those with a *calling*, subjective and self-referent criteria are more salient than objective and other-referent criteria of career success, compared to people with either a *job* or a *career* work orientation (see Table 1, quadrants 2 and 3).

### *Goal orientation*

People differ in the types of goals they pursue and use to evaluate themselves. For instance, Dweck and Elliott (1983) distinguished between *performance goals*, where the purpose is to demonstrate, validate, and avoid negative judgments about one's competence, and *learning goals*, where the aim is to acquire new knowledge or skills. Considerable research (e.g., Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Erdley et al., 1997; Robins & Pals, 2002; VandeWalle, 1997) has established that a learning goal orientation is generally based on the *incremental implicit theory* that one's abilities are malleable and can thus be developed with persistent effort. On the other hand, underlying a performance goal orientation is typically the *entity implicit theory* that one's abilities are largely fixed, inherent attributes that are difficult to develop.

Dweck and Leggett (1988) reasoned that the goal orientation resulting from these two types of implicit theories would affect the criteria people adopt to evaluate their success. Dweck and Bempechat (1983) found that entity theorist children adopted performance goals and reported that they felt smart when their schoolwork was error free (e.g., 'When I don't do mistakes') and surpassed that of their peers (e.g., 'When I turn in my papers first'). By contrast, children with an incremental theory reported feeling smart when they worked on and mastered their personal learning goals (e.g., 'When I'm reading a hard book'; 'When I don't know how to do it and it's pretty hard and I figure it out without anyone telling me'). The learning orientation of those with incremental beliefs made them relatively unconcerned about their performance relative to their peers.

Dweck (1999) theorized that in contrast to the personal learning goal orientation of incremental theorists, the self-validation concerns of entity theorists would lead them to focus more on performance goals regarding how their presumably fixed abilities and resulting achievements compare to those of other people. Consistent with this theory, Butler (2000) reported that when self-appraising their academic ability, compared to incremental theorists, children who were entity theorists paid more attention to their performance relative to their peers. Similarly Heslin (2003a) found that part-time MBA students who were incremental theorists used relatively more self-referent criteria, while entity theorists used comparably more other-referent criteria to evaluate their career success. However, a more complete picture emerges from research regarding how the relationship between goal orientation and social comparisons depends upon one's level of attainment.

Butler (1992) argued that for those with a performance goal orientation:

... relative outcome is perceived as the major determinant of success and satisfaction ... however, because satisfying (performance-oriented) goals requires one to demonstrate high, rather than low ability, interest in normative comparisons should be stronger among more competent than less competent individuals. (p. 935)

Consistent with this hypothesis, Butler (1992) found that compared to those with a learning goal orientation, sixth-grade children with a performance goal orientation paid more attention to normative information about their performance on a divergent thinking task, particularly if they had performed well. In addition, the performance-oriented students attributed success on this task to ego-involved causes (relative ability, desire to outperform others, and desire to avoid doing worse than others) significantly more than did those with a learning goal orientation. Butler concluded that performance goal-oriented 'subjects who realized that they had relatively poor ability may have avoided establishing how poor it was, whereas high scorers may have received hedonic satisfaction from confirming the degree to which they were superior to others' (p. 941). In a study of college students, Butler (1993) similarly observed that high performers with a performance goal orientation strived to outperform others and sought more normative information than either low performers with a performance goal orientation or those with a learning goal orientation—a finding that was again replicated by Butler (1999).

In summary, Dweck (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Dweck, 1999) theorized that people with a performance goal orientation would be more interested in normative comparisons than those with a learning goal orientation. Butler's (1992, 1993, 1999) evidence in this regard suggests that career research may fruitfully explore the following proposition:

*Proposition 4:* Performance goal orientation is positively associated with use of other-referent criteria of career success, especially by those who perceive their career as successful.<sup>2</sup>

Well-validated goal orientation scales (e.g., VandeWalle, 1997; VandeWalle, Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1999) are available to facilitate empirical tests of this proposition.

### *Career type*

Work careers come in many different forms. Organizations play a large role in determining the shape careers can take, but many authors have pointed out that careers increasingly transcend organizations (e.g., Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2002). One resulting key distinction in the literature is between linear and non-linear careers.

A *linear career* is focused on progressive steps upward in an organizational hierarchy to positions of greater authority (Brousseau et al., 1996); Sturges (1999) labels this career type as *climber*. Brousseau et al. (1996) observed that 'People who see the ideal career in linear terms often find it difficult to imagine any other definition of success' (p. 56). The zero-sum, competitive nature of linear careers can be expected to lead people to continually assess their career attainments relative to those of other people, such as their organizational cohort; that is, to use other-referent success criteria.

*Non-linear careers* encompass many other types, such as *boundaryless* (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), *cosmopolitan* (Gouldner, 1957), *expert* (Brousseau et al., 1996; Sturges, 1999), *protean* (Hall, 1976; Hall & Moss, 1998), *transitory* (Brousseau et al., 1996), or *self-realizer* (Sturges, 1999) careers. These variously involve a lifelong commitment to developing a high level of skill in a particular field or specialty, periodic shifts between related occupational areas, specialties or disciplines, or regular changes between often seemingly unrelated careers. A commonality is often a deeply held commitment to discovering one's personal values, before shaping a career that satisfies these values (Brousseau et al., 1996; Sturges, 1999; Hall, 2002). Compared to traditional, organizationally based linear careers, those engaged in non-linear careers are much more inclined to set their own

<sup>2</sup>This proposition is not represented in Table 1, as it pertains only to self- and other-referent criteria.

career agenda and determine the yardsticks by which its success is measured. As Hall (2002) observed, a non-linear, protean career contract 'is with the self and one's work' (p. 34). Thus, non-linear careers can be expected to be evaluated against more self-referent criteria than linear careers.

Linear career success is measured in terms of position in an organizational hierarchy, together with traditional symbols of success such as a large office, accountability for many staff, and demonstrable power to influence other people (Brousseau et al., 1996). However, it has been noted above that organizational delayering, downsizing, and outsourcing have lessened the scope (Evans et al., 1997) and relative desirability (Hall, 2002; Reitman & Schneer, 2003) of objective success criteria such as hierarchical progression.

Hall (2002) suggested that for those with a non-linear career, 'the path to the top has been replaced by what Herb Shepard (1984) called the path with a heart. Sheppard used this term to describe success in terms of one's unique vision and central values in life' (p. 34). The resulting self-referent, subjective criteria are likely to include a broader range of elements than those that are used to evaluate a linear career. In contrast to the narrow concern with pay, power, and promotions that characterize linear careers, Brousseau et al. (1996) argued that non-linear careers tend to be driven by motives to experience outcomes including personal growth, creativity, variety, and independence. Similarly, when some people re-evaluated their linear careers in light of the September 11 tragedy, Wrzesniewski (2002) described how their non-linear career transitions to roles such as teaching, nursing, and fire-fighting were guided by a broader range of altruistic, subjective success criteria than they had previously held. Thus, the following proposition is offered:

*Proposition 5:* Subjective and self-referent criteria are particularly salient when individuals have a non-linear, rather than a linear career (see Table 1, quadrant 2).

## Discussion

Career success research increasingly assesses both objective and subjective career outcomes, apparently presuming that people define their career success in largely the same way (i.e., current salary, promotions and job satisfaction). Consideration is rarely given to how individuals may differ in the types of criteria they most emphasize when evaluating their careers.

This paper is intended to encourage and heuristically aid career theorists and researchers to focus on a broader range of subjective success criteria when striving to model and assess whatever career success means to the individuals and population(s) under consideration. The related propositions suggest the conditions under which each of the four types of criteria illustrated in Table 1 are most likely to be salient. Empirical testing of the propositions offered is required. The results will suggest the types of studies in the extant career success literature that are most likely to have questionable criterion-related and ecological validity, as a result of inattention to, for instance, participants' other-referent career success. They may also ultimately assist scholars to model and assess as much as possible of what matters most to the focal population, while minimizing the noisy data that results from inadvertently giving equal weighting to ratings of criteria that the people being studied consider irrelevant or relatively unimportant.

Even though most people who have careers are not white, male, well-educated managers or professionals working in large, hierarchical organizations, the vast majority of careers research has been focused on this very narrow subset of all the people who are engaged in a career (Blustein, 2001; Sullivan, 1999). The five propositions offered in this paper are intended to be merely suggestive of the factors that could influence the conceptualization of career success by people from diverse

educational, gender and socio-economic demographics, working in settings beyond large, profit-oriented organizations. More theory and research is needed on what career success means to people such as entrepreneurs, older workers, the self-employed, the physically and mentally challenged, migrant workers, expatriates, stigmatized workers (e.g., people living with HIV), teleworkers, the under-employed, single parents, volunteers etc. Many avenues for further enquiry can be readily imagined.

### *Research agenda*

Based upon the premise that organizations attract individuals who hold the values they embody (Judge & Bretz, 1992; Schneider, 1987; Schneider et al., 2001), research could assess whether the objective criteria of pay, promotions, and occupational status are more salient within the definition of career success adopted by people who work for profit-based organizations, compared to those who work for not-for-profit organizations (Steinbereithner, 2003).

Potentially relevant gender differences should also be considered. For instance, a meta-analysis by Konrad, Ritchie, Lieb, and Corrigan (2000) revealed that men most value objective outcomes such as money and advancement, while women tend to evaluate their career success in broader and more subjective ways, using criteria such as feelings of accomplishment, growth and development, challenge in their work, interpersonal relationships, and opportunities to help others at work. Research may usefully investigate individual and contextual boundary conditions on these gender differences in career success criteria.

Broader issues raised by the propositions offered in this paper pertain to the mechanisms and consequences of (a) who is chosen as a referent, (b) how organizations may strive to shape conceptions of success, and (c) the potential role of national cultural differences.

### **Other-referent selection**

Establishing that some people use others as a referent for evaluating their career success begs the question of *who* they use as a referent. Referents may be chosen from, for instance, the same or a different organization, business unit, department, profession, job level, industry, family, or nationality as the focal person. While it has long been established that people use multiple referents regarding their pay (Goodman, 1974), many questions remain about the selection and weighting of referents, especially regarding the particularly subjective facets of career success (e.g. work-life balance, contribution to society). Research is needed regarding how such choices are driven by an individual's salient identities, as mediated by factors such as information availability and referent relevance (Kulik & Ambrose, 1992).

Use of theoretical impetus for such research is nicely exemplified by Toh and DeNisi's (2003) application of social identity theory (Hogg & Terry, 2001) to the issue of when Host County Nationals (HCNs) are likely to compare their pay with that received by expatriates. Toh and DeNisi reasoned that the likelihood that HCNs will choose expatriates as referents is increased by, for instance, (a) expatriate pay practices that differentiate HCNs and expatriates, (b) high salience of the expatriate out-group, (c) proximity of HCNs to expatriates, as well as (d) integration of HCNs and expatriates within the host unit. In addition, expatriates' high failure rates could reflect HCNs offering them mediocre support, as a result of the latter experiencing relative pay deprivation. This dynamic highlights the potentially consequential nature of theory-driven research contributing to knowledge about who is chosen as a basis for comparison when evaluating one's career success.

In addition to the contextual factors addressed by Toh and DeNisi, research may fruitfully examine how referent choice is influenced by an individual's immediate career objectives. For instance,



social comparison research has established that children and students tend to make upward comparisons (to those perceived as superior) when their goal is learning or development, while making more downward comparisons (to those perceived as having achieved less) when their immediate goal is self-enhancement (i.e., to feel 'successful'; Wood, 1989). Do such processes occur in career domains? Are they consciously (or otherwise) harnessed and traded-off to achieve a desired balance between (a) *feeling successful* versus (b) *becoming more successful*, as a result adopting upward comparisons from which career development and inspiration may be derived, albeit at the cost of feeling not-so-successful in the immediate term? Do such self-regulatory processes differ more between people, or the career domains in which they are applied? Can they be usefully taught and consciously managed so that people can simultaneously optimize both their learning *and* their experience of career success?

### Organizational interventions

Tight labor markets for knowledge workers and other scarce human resources have stimulated interest in creative ways to attract, motivate, and retain required talent (e.g., Kerr, 1999; Lawler & Finegold, 2000). Among these options is offering *ideological rewards* (Blau, 1964), such as the opportunity to contribute to a worthwhile cause, e.g., 'to give unlimited opportunity to women' (*Mary Kay Cosmetics*), 'to give ordinary folks the chance to buy the same things as rich people' (*Wal-Mart*), 'Elevation of the Japanese culture and national status' (*Sony*), and 'To preserve and improve human life' (*Merck*). Based on the premise that 'helping to advance cherished ideals is intrinsically rewarding' (Blau, 1964, p. 239), espousal of a cause can represent a distinct inducement to elicit employee contributions and commitment (Collins & Porras, 1996; Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). Research is needed regarding how organizational proclamations about striving to benefit salient constituencies—such as 'the environment,' 'the poor,' 'the unborn,' 'families,' 'oppressed women,' 'future generations,' etc.—potentially build and sustain devotion by nurturing members' relevant subjective criteria of career success (e.g., having '*made a difference*')?

The prospect of stimulating the motivation, commitment, pride, loyalty and meaningfulness felt by organizational members (Collins & Porras, 1996)—perhaps even in lieu of adequate traditional inducements (e.g., pay)—provides a powerful incentive for organizations to encourage the adoption of ideologically infused subjective criteria of career success. Thompson and Bunderson (2003, p. 574) define *ideological currency* as 'credible commitments to pursue a valued cause or principle (not limited to self-interest) that are implicitly exchanged at the nexus of the individual-organizational relationship.' Thompson and Bunderson also outline mechanisms whereby the creation of ideological currency may backfire (e.g., result in moral outrage) when organizations are perceived to have violated their ideological commitments (e.g., to 'help the needy,' 'protect the environment').

How do such incidents affect the construal and experience of career success by organizational members? Under what circumstances do people respond by altering their personal career success criteria versus their organizational commitment/membership? Does the salience of personal values to those with a *career* orientation, rather than a *job* or *work* orientation (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), make the former particularly likely to adopt ideologically based career success criteria and/or be particularly sensitive to perceived ideological breeches by their employer? Does the primacy of normative, personal victories make ideological currency a less salient criterion of career success in winner-take-all markets than in other contexts? Research addressing such questions will suggest when people are likely to adopt ideology-infused criteria of career success. It may also ultimately inform initiatives aimed at fostering ideologically based psychological contracts and organizational commitment, without incurring the strife associated with creating expectations that an organization is unwilling or unable to meet (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003).

### Cultural differences

Although national cultural differences have a pervasive influence upon how people approach and evaluate their work (Triandis, 1994; Hofstede, 2001), they have been largely neglected in the careers literature (Brown, 2002; Spokane, Fouad, & Swanson, 2003). The potential for cultural differences to moderate the propositions offered in this paper is exemplified by Brown's (2002, p. 53) call for research to test the proposition that:

The primary bases for job satisfaction for people with an individualism social value in order of importance will be (1) the congruence between the values reinforced on the job and individuals' work values; (2) conflicts that occur between the career role and other life roles; and (3) the approval of the work roles by others such as parents, spouses, and friends. Job satisfaction for people with a collective social value will be, in order of importance, (1) the extent to which the work role is approved by significant others such as parents, spouses, and friends; (2) conflicts between the career role and other life roles; and (3) the congruence between the values reinforced by the job and individuals' work values.

Do other-referent criteria of career success, such as evaluating one's attainments in terms of other people's expectations and group achievements, figure more prominently in collectivist than individualist cultural contexts? Do people in *being-oriented* (Adler, 2002) or *feminine* (Hofstede, 2001) cultures—that give primacy to relationships, harmony, and balance—use more subjective and less objective criteria of career success than those in more *doing-oriented* (Adler, 2002) or *masculine* (Hofstede, 2001) cultures? Empirical tests of these propositions may elucidate how cultural values place boundary conditions on the propositions summarized in Table 1, as well as on the cross-cultural generalizability of the primarily U.S.-centric career success literature.

### *Implications for measurement*

Context matters! (Blustein, 1997; Higgins, 2001; Johns, 2001). It is anticipated that research stemming from the present propositions and related research agenda will yield broad heuristics, rather than firm prescriptions, about how best to measure career success within a particular context. Preliminary heuristics include (a) use relevant theory and research to guide the exploration of what matters most to study participants, (b) ask the focal population how they know (or anticipate that they will judge) the extent to which their career is successful, (c) assess participants on, for instance, the 7–10 criteria they identify as most salient, and (d) ensure that each criterion assessed (e.g., promotions relative to peers) is valued and relevant to those surveyed. Research is needed to test, refine, and extend these measurement suggestions. For instance, it may be fruitful to explore the utility of weighting success criteria by their rated importance to the overall career success of the person being surveyed. While this approach should be fairly straightforward in the context of one-on-one career coaching, it would complicate the assessment, scoring, and comparability of responses when a group of individuals is surveyed simultaneously.

Depending on the purpose of measuring career success, researchers and practitioners alike should carefully trade-off the issues of (a) fidelity to how each individual conceptualizes her or his career, (b) utilization of theory and findings regarding factors that influence the selection of different types of criteria, and (c) the efficiency and parsimony of the prevailing approach of assessing everyone relative to the same, standardized success criteria. This paper will have succeeded if it prompts reflection on the relative merits of these three considerations, when theorizing about and empirically assessing career success.

## Conclusion

Career success potentially means much more to people engaged in a career than has typically been measured by empirical research on this topic. The resulting criterion deficiency has probably diminished the validity with which many career theories, models, and intervention programs have been assessed. Similarly, the criterion-related validity of research on the antecedents of career success is likely to have been bounded by the extent to which study participants define their career success in terms other than the generally narrow, self-referent operationalization of this construct adopted in most studies. Thus, advances in the conceptualization and operationalization of career success may enhance theory building and research aimed at understanding, predicting, and facilitating the experience of 'career success.'

## Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was presented in P. A. Heslin and H. P. Gunz (Chairs), *Unpacking and reconceptualizing career success*, a symposium conducted at the annual meeting of the Academy of Management, Denver, Colorado, August 2002. The author thanks Michael Arthur, Martin Evans, Hugh Gunz, Tim Hall, Denise Rousseau, and John Slocum for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

## Author biography

**Peter A. Heslin** is Assistant Professor of Management at the Cox School of Business, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, U.S.A. He received his PhD in Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management from the Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto, Canada. His current research is focused on feedback, coaching, and career success, as well as the nature and consequences of implicit theories about the malleability of personal attributes.

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