What leads individuals to take a subjective or an objective perspective to evaluate career success?

The role of career identity

Work and Organizational Psychology

Bachelor Thesis

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Samenvatting

Het doel van deze studie was om te onderzoeken welk effect twee typen van carrière identiteit – namelijk work involvement en desire for upward mobility – hebben op het perspectief van individuen voor het evalueren van carrière succes: volgens een subjectief perspectief of volgens een objectief perspectief. In totaal namen 94 studenten van de Universiteit Twente deel aan een experimentele studie waarbij ze werden geprimed met één van de twee typen van carrière identiteit. Na de prime moesten de deelnemers het carrière succes van 20 beroemde personen beoordelen, waarbij 10 personen subjectief succesvol en 10 personen objectief succesvol waren. De resultaten toonden aan dat, over het algemeen deelnemers die met work involvement geprimed waren carrière succes volgens het subjectieve perspectief beoordeelden, terwijl deelnemers die met desire for upward mobility geprimed waren carrière succes volgens het objectieve perspectief beoordeelden. Helaas waren de resultaten echter niet significant. Mogelijke oorzaken voor deze niet significante bevindingen en de theoretische en praktische implicaties van deze bevindingen zullen besproken worden.

Abstract

The objective of this study was to investigate the effect of two types of career identity – work involvement and desire for upward mobility – on individuals' perspective to judge career success: subjective versus objective. In total 94 students from the University of Twente participated in an experimental study in which they were primed with either work involvement or upward mobility career identity. After the prime the participants need to judge the career success of 20 famous persons (10 with a subjective career success and 10 with an objective career success). The results showed that, on average, participants primed with work involvement judge career success according to the subjective perspective, while participants primed with the desire for upward mobility judge career success according to the objective perspective. However, none of the results were significant. Possible reasons for these insignificant findings and the theoretical and practical implications of these findings will be further discussed.

Introduction

Paul is 30 years old and works as an estate agent for an international company. Two years after his start he has already been the most successful seller. He got his first promotion, as a department supervisor, and he was rewarded with a new company car. Investing all his time for the company and taking every chance to improve his career, has led him to other promotions and salary raises. Last year Paul became the vice president of the company and he is now in the running for the position of the new president. Paul is proud of his achievements and considers himself as successful.

Peter is also 30 years old and he works as a teacher at a basic primary school. He decided to become a teacher because he thinks that it is his vocation to support young children in their journey to adulthood and to be involved in their education. To help children with learning disabilities satisfies him most and makes him feel proud. Next to his career as a teacher, his family and friends play a major role in his life and he appreciates the balance between work and private life that he can create by being a teacher. Peter is really happy with his career. He considers himself as successful.

These are descriptions of two persons, who characterize themselves as successful in their career. Their career paths are quite different and so are the two persons living out these careers. Individuals have different career ambitions, and place different values on career related aspects such as income, employment security, the location of work, status, progression through different jobs, access to learning, and work-life balance (Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005). Dependent on their career aspirations, individuals establish careers that can differ tremendously from each other.

The term career can be defined as the elaborative sequence of a person's work experiences over time (Arthur, Hall & Lawrence, 1989). Arthur et al. (2005) note that this definition places emphasis on the relevance of time rather than the workplace or what career

success implies. The examples above show that there is a broad range of what normally is viewed as a successful career, and that career success can be regarded from different points of view. Seibert, Crant and Kraimer (1999) define career success as the psychological or work-related outcomes or accomplishments one collects as a result of work experiences. In literature, career success is often split up into two perspectives: objective and subjective career success. *Objective career success* is an external perspective that describes indicators of an individual's career situation that can be seen and evaluated by outsiders (Arthur et al., 2005), like salary attainment and the number of promotions in one's career (Judge, Cable, Boudreau & Bretz, 1995). These indicators are objective because they are tangible and can be evaluated by others. *Subjective career success*, on the other hand, can only be evaluated and experienced by the person them self, it is most commonly operationalized as either job or career satisfaction (Heslin, 2005). In other words, individuals can have different perspectives to judge career success and the meaning of being successful can vary. In the example above, it is clear that Paul is mostly focused on the objective aspects of career success: earning a high salary and holding a position in the company that is associated with status and power. Peter, on the other hand, is more focused on the subjective aspects of career success: enjoying what he does, being able to teach and help children, and a good work-life balance.

Focus of this study

Although the two types of career success attracted a lot of attention in the literature, most of the studies focused on factors influencing the two types of career success, such as organizational sponsorship (Ng, Eby, Sorenson & Feldman, 2005), personality (Seibert et al., 1999), and job performance (Day & Allen, 2004). Researchers investigated which factors either predict a high salary attainment and the number of promotions in an individual's career (objective career success) or the career satisfaction (subjective career success). This means that they examined the actual career success. However, as far as I know, no attention has

been paid to the perspective individuals take to judge career success. In contrast to other studies, I do not focus on the factors that take influence on career success but on factors that influence the perspective individuals take to judge career success.

A further difference to prior research is that I act on the assumption that both types of career success are always part of an individual's value system. Previous studies used to investigate subjective and objective career success apart from each other. With this study I try to fill this research gap and find an answer to the following question: What leads individuals to either have an objective or a subjective perspective on judging career success?

Influence of career identity

To answer the research question we need to understand what motivates employees in their career. According to London (1983) career motivation is one of the driving forces behind many of the career decisions and behaviors of employees such as revising one's career plans, seeking training and new job experiences, and setting and trying to accomplish career goals. London (1983) defined career motivation as the motivation to do one's current job. The most important aspect of career motivation is career identity, which represents how central the career is to the individuals' identity and the extent to which persons define themselves by their work (Noe, Noe & Bachhuber, 1990). London (1983) proposed that career identity consists of two sub domains: work involvement and the desire for upward mobility. *Work involvement* directs employees to work hard, to commit to their work and organization, to describe themselves as professionals, and to recommend the work to others (London, 1993).

The desire for upward mobility emphasizes employees' needs for advancement, recognition, dominance and money. It directs employees to seek acknowledgement, to take leadership roles and to constantly further their career (London, 1983). This could be compared to climbing the career ladder.

The interest in and the satisfaction from the current job is an important factor for individuals with a strong work involvement and this satisfaction from work is even more important than the satisfaction from other areas of life (London, 1983). This suggests that individuals with a strong work involvement have a strong focus on subjective aspects of career success. Some empirical evidence also suggests a positive link between work involvement and subjective career success. Nabi (1999), for example, found that the work involvement of employees is a strong predictor for subjective career success but not for objective career success. Aryee, Wyatt & Stone (1996) found similar results in their study about early career outcomes of graduate employees. They detected a positive relation between career identity salience, which reflects the importance of work in an employee's life compared to the importance of other major life domains, and career satisfaction (which is often used as a measure of subjective career success). However, they did not detect a relationship between career identity salience and salary and number of promotions (often used as measures of objective career success). These findings suggest that individuals with a strong work involvement are strongly focused on achieving subjective career outcomes. We thus suspect that work involvement leads employees to take a subjective perspective to view career success (Hypothesis 1).

Individuals with a strong desire for upward mobility, on the other hand, focus on money, status, achievement and acknowledgement. Promotion and high salary attainment are crucial for people with a desire for upward mobility. This suggests that individuals with a strong desire for upward mobility have a strong focus on objective aspects of career success. There is also some empirical support for this argument. Wayne, Linden, Kraimer & Graf (1999) conducted a study on the role of human capital, motivation and supervisor sponsorship in predicting career success. They found that compared to employees with a low desire for upward mobility, those with a strong desire for upward mobility received a higher percentage

increase in salary. Mael, Waldman & Mulqueen (2001) examined the predictors of management aspirations among technical personnel of an astronomical scientific research institute. Results showed that desire for upward mobility is one of the best predictors for distinguishing between individuals who are willing to enter management and those who are not willing to take a management position. In other words, employees who are continually seeking for better job opportunities, promotions, and advancement are more willing to take on a management position that is associated with status, promotion and a higher salary. The results of both studies show that there is a strong link between individuals' desire for upward mobility and their focus on achieving objective career success outcomes. Therefore we propose that desire for upward mobility leads employees to take an objective perspective to view career success (Hypothesis 2).

Method

Participants

The participants of the study were 94 students from the University of Twente. The average age was 21 years (ranging from 18 to 29). The percentage of female participants was 78.7%. Most of the participants studied Psychology (48.9%), 30.9% were Communicational or Educational Science students and 11.7% followed other types of education. With two exceptions all participants were Dutch (76.6%) or German (21.3%).

Research materials

Research materials in this study consisted of an online questionnaire, a priming scenario with four different conditions (weak work centrality, strong work centrality, weak desire for upward mobility, and strong upward mobility), and evaluation on two types of career success.

Online questionnaires measure the career identity of the participants, their tendency for social comparison, and some demographic characteristics (e.g. age, gender). The two types of career identity were measured using the scales of Soer (2009). Four items were used to measure work involvement (e.g. *"I would like to have a job I am proud of"*. α = .54). Four items measured desire for upward mobility (e.g. *"I would like to have a job with a high status"* α = .78). The tendency for social comparison was measured using the scale of Gibbons and Buunk (1999). With excluding one item from the original scale, the remained 10 items reached a Cronbach´s Alpha .71 (e.g. *"I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in life")*.

Priming stimulus. Vignettes were used as priming stimulus for career identity. In the vignettes, a person named John was described either to have a weak work involvement, a strong work involvement, a weak desire for upward mobility or a strong desire for upward mobility. In priming the *strong work involvement*, John was described as a person who is committed to his work for a scientific institute. He is self-dependent, enjoys and is satisfied by the challenges of his profession and by the opportunity to specialize himself in an area of his interest. In the *weak work involvement* vignette John was described as someone who sees work as a necessary evil. He chose his job because it is not very demanding and leaves him enough free time for more satisfying parts of his life.

In the *strong desire for upward mobility* vignette John was described as an ambitious and career focused person who works hard to achieve status and acknowledgement and who uses every chance to further his career. In the *weak desire for upward mobility* vignette John was described as someone who likes to be directed because in this way he does not have a lot of responsibilities and he does not draw attention to himself. It is not associated with high responsibilities or attention. He does not earn a lot of money but he enjoys the friendship with his colleagues.

A pilot study was conducted to make sure that the vignettes would work as intended. In the pilot study, the vignettes were randomly assigned to 16 persons (4 participants per version). After reading the vignette, they were asked to give a short description of John. I checked their description with the definitions of two types of work centrality. This comparison revealed that the vignettes worked as intended.

Career success perspective was evaluated after participants had read the vignette. They were asked to rate the career success of 10 famous persons who have a subjective career success and 10 famous persons who have an objective career success on a 5-point scale (1 = very unsuccessful to 5 = very successful). In addition, we recorded participants' response time in making their judgment.

A pilot test was conducted to come up with the 20 successful careers of famous persons. We asked 22 students of the University of Twente to match the definitions of subjective and objective career success with about 51 famous persons. The 10 famous persons who were evaluated as having subjective career success and the 10 persons who were mainly evaluated as having objective career success were chosen for the main study as indicators for subjective and objective career success (see appendix 1 on page 23 for the results of the pilot test for the 20 famous persons used in this study).

Kendall's coefficient of concordance for the ratings of subjectively successful persons was .23, which indicates rather strong differences among the judges. For the ratings of objectively successful persons Kendall´s coefficient of concordance was .48, which hints at moderate differences among the participants.

The Cronbach's Alpha of the initial 10 objectively successful persons was .49. By means of excluding 3 of the 10 famous persons it was possible to increase Cronbach's Alpha to .65. For the 10 subjectively successful persons a Cronbach's Alpha of .55 was found. By excluding 2 of the 10 famous persons Cronbach's Alpha was improved to .66.

Procedure

Participants were recruited at the University of Twente in three ways: via the Sona system through which students could earn one credit by participating in the experiment, via the distribution of flyers, and finally via personal recruitment. Participants also had the opportunity to win one of four movie tickets by participating in the experiment.

A cover story was built up to conceal the real purpose of the experiment. Participants believed to attend a study about information retrieval from memory. They were told that the purpose of the study was to investigate how different types of intervening information and assignments have an effect on information retrieval from memory. They were asked to read a short story first and would then answer questions about this story at the end of the experiment. Before and after reading the story they would be distracted with different kinds of assignments. After they participated in the study they were debriefed about the real purpose of the study.

One week before the participants attended in the actual priming study they had to fill in the online questionnaire. By letting them fill in the questionnaire one week before participation in the study, we avoided possible priming effects that could occur through the online questionnaire.

For the priming study the participants were sat into a room equipped with a desk, a chair and a computer. After a brief introduction from the researcher the participants could start with the priming study which was run on a computer. First of all an instruction text appeared on the computer screen explaining that the purpose of the study (cover story). Participants were then directed to pay good attention to the story and to remember as much as possible. At the end of the introduction participants were assured that their answers would be confidential.

After reading the instruction text, participants clicked a button to go to the short story (priming stimulus). A manipulation check was followed by asking for a short characterization of the described person in the vignette. Next participants were asked to judge the success of 20 famous persons on a 5-point scale. A picture and the name of the person were displayed on the screen. The participants had five seconds for their judgment of each person.

Afterwards, 7 irrelevant questions about the version of the vignette the participant had read were brought in. The purpose of asking these 7 questions was to make the participants believe their memory would be tested and thereby strengthen the cover story. Finally was checked whether participants believed the cover story by asking what they thought to be the purpose of the experiment.

Results

Manipulation check

In the weak work involvement condition participants described John as a social person who´s family and friends are more important for him than his work. He was described as not ambitious. In the strong work involvement condition John was described as a disciplined, motivated person who is passionate for his work. He is ambitious and his work is the centre of his life, while he pays less attention to his social life. In the weak desire for upward mobility condition John was described as a social person who enjoys his work and colleagues, who is satisfied with his job and has no ambition to further his career. In the strong desire for upward mobility condition John was described as a career focused person who works hard and is ambitious. He attaches great importance to status, acknowledgement and achievements. These answers show that the vignettes worked as intended. Furthermore participants were asked what they think the goal of the study was to validate the efficient

working of the cover story. All participants responded that their memory was tested which confirms that no one has detected the real focus of the study.

Descriptive analyses

Table 1 (see appendix 2 on page 24) reports the means, standard deviations and correlations between the control variables and relevant measures. Participants' evaluation on the two types of career success are significantly positively correlated with each other ($r = .44$, $p < .01$). Respondents who give high scores to objectively successful persons also tend to give high scores to subjectively successful persons and vice versa.

A significantly negative correlation between the reaction times for judging objectively successful persons and gender was found ($r = -.23$, $p < .05$) which implies that it is more difficult for men to judge objectively successful persons than for women. Furthermore a significantly negative correlation was found for the career success scores given to objectively successful persons and gender ($r = -.28$, $p < .01$) which means that men tend to give lower scores to objectively successful persons than women.

Hypothesis testing

The first hypothesis proposes that work involvement leads employees to take a subjective perspective to view career success. To test this hypothesis, a one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted with the scores of career success of subjectively successful persons as dependent variable. Because of the significant correlation between scores of career success of subjectively successful persons and objectively successful persons, we controlled for the scores of career success for objectively successful persons (covariate). The results showed that on average, participants in the strong work involvement condition judged the career success of subjectively successful persons higher than participants in the weak work involvement condition (M = 4.05 and M = 3.94, respectively). However, this difference was not significant $F(1,35) = 1$, *ns* .

I also use the reaction time as a dependent variable to further test the first hypothesis. Another one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted, The results showed that the reaction times for judging subjectively successful persons in the strong work involvement condition were on average shorter than the reaction times in the weak condition (M = 2.34 and M = 2.43 respectively). But the difference was not significant $F(1, 35) = .25$, *ns*.

The second hypothesis proposes that desire for upward mobility leads employees to take an objective perspective to view career success. I applied the same one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with the career success scores and reaction times on objectively successful persons as dependent variable. The results showed that on average, participants in the strong desire for upward mobility condition, judged the career success of objectively successful persons higher than participants in the weak desire for upward mobility condition (M = 4.01 and M = 3.95, respectively), and reacted faster than those in the weak condition (M = 2.36 and M = 2.58, respectively). However, neither of the differences was significant $F(1, 35) = 30.01$, $p = .15$ and $F(1, 35) = 2.14$, $p = .15$.,

Discussion

Since Hughes (1937) first made the theoretical distinction between the objective and the subjective career, researchers in the field of career theory have generally agreed on these two types of career success. Although there has been much research interest into the predictors of these two types of career success, little attention has been paid to the question why some individuals focus on aspects of objective career success while other individuals focus on aspects of subjective career success. With this study I started a new branch of research into the two perspectives of career success. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to see the effect of individuals' career identity on their career success perspective. Results showed that on average participants primed with the strong work involvement judged

the career success of subjectively successful persons higher and they had shorter reaction times for judging the career success of subjectively successful persons, than participants primed with the weak work involvement. This means that work involvement seems to lead individuals to take on a subjective perspective to view career success, which is in line with our first hypothesis. Moreover, I detected that participants primed with the strong desire for upward mobility judged the career success of objectively successful persons higher and they had shorter reaction times for judging objectively successful persons than participants primed with the weak condition. In other words, desire for upward mobility seems to lead individuals to take on an objective perspective to view career success, which is in line with our second hypothesis. However, the analyses also showed that the differences between the strong and the weak work involvement condition and between the strong and the weak desire for upward mobility condition were not strong enough to reach statistically significant. Thus, we cannot draw a solid conclusion that individuals' career identity does influence their career success perspective.

In the following part I will discuss the theoretical implications of these results, the limitations of this study and finally the practical implications of these results.

Theoretical implications

This study has two important theoretical implications. First I took a new approach in my study and investigated an unexplored branch of research. In this study, I tried to find factors that lead individuals to either take on a subjective or an objective perspective on career success. Second, although the career motivation theory of London (1983) has been quite influential in the field of career theory, to my knowledge, this theory has been empirically tested, neither by London himself nor by other researchers in the field. This study has shown that career identity seems to have a potential influence on individuals' career success perspective, and thus shows some promising signs that individuals' career identity is

associated with employee workplace behaviours and career decisions, like London (1983) suggested in his career motivation theory.

Limitations

Although the outcomes of this study indicated that my hypotheses make sense, unfortunately the results were not statistically significant. This could be due to three limitations that our study holds.

First, with 94 participants (19 per condition) the sample was quite small. To generate statistical power and to make inferences about a population, the sample size needs to be enlarged. By testing the hypotheses with more participants it could be possible to create stronger and significant results.

Second, the sample was not representative because it consisted only of students who did not have much work experience. They did not have the time or opportunity to develop their own vision about career success which might lead to a lack of ability to judge the career success of other individuals. The results might be different if an employee sample would be recruited for this study.

Finally, another source of possible error is related to the measurement technique, especially the way of measuring two types of career success. In this study participants need to evaluate the career success of 20 famous persons. Of these 20 famous persons, 10 persons can be most likely seen as subjectively successful and 10 as objectively successful. Although the famous persons are or were extremely successful in their career, it is still questionable that the differences which distinguish their career success are clear enough for respondents. In other words, the measurement technique of judging the career success of famous persons might not be able to deliver significant results. A different way of testing our hypothesis could be a questionnaire that participants have to fill in after they have been primed with one of the vignettes. Participants could judge statements about their careers. Most studies about

subjective career success used career satisfaction items as measurement of subjective career success (Abele & Spurk, 2009; Seibert et al., 1999; Byrne, Dik & Chiaburu, 2008; Hofmans, Dries & Pepermans, 2008), therefore items such as *"A good work-life balance is more important for me than earning a lot of money"* or *"I am satisfied with my career"* could be used to measure a subjective career success perspective. Objective career success is mostly measured by evaluating the monthly income and/ or the number of promotions (Abele et al., 2009; Seibert et al., 1999; Byrne et al., 2008), therefore items such as *"Most important for my career is to earn a lot of money"* or *"Promotions are a crucial part of my career"* could be used to measure an objective career success perspective. In future study, one may test this way of measuring career success with employee samples.

Practical implications

The results of my study can be helpful for companies as well as for employees. Companies can base their selection procedures on the career identity that the potential employees have. Different jobs are associated with different expectations and requirements. A sales representative, for example, needs to be highly ambitious, wanting acknowledgement, achievements and a high salary; a person high on the desire for upward mobility would be the right choice. This is completely different if a teacher is sought-after. A good teacher needs to be committed to his function and his pupils, he/she is not solely interested in a high salary but seeks satisfaction in helping others develop and enhance their abilities; a person high on work involvement would be the right choice in this case.

Also for employees it can be helpful to know which type of career identity they have. A right job means that a job fits both employee abilities and their career identities. A career that is against employee career identity may in the long run lead to disappointments and dissatisfaction. Therefore, companies and employees can benefit from the identification of one´s career identity.

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Appendix

1. Results of the pilot test for the 20 famous persons used in this study

Objective career success		Subjective career success	
George Bush	86%*	Nelson Mandela	86%**
Vladimir Putin	77%*	Martin Luther King	82%**
Cleopatra	82%*	Dali Lama	91%**
Napoleon Bonaparte	91%*	Mahatma Ghandi	91%**
Julius Caesar	95%*	Mother Theresa	95%**
Britney Spears	82%*	William Shakespeare	95%**
Victoria Beckham	86%*	Vincent van Gogh	86%**
Robin Williams	73%*	Rembrandt van Rijn	81%**
Paris Hilton	77%*	Leonardo Da Vinci	91%**
Nicole Richie	77%*	Pablo Picasso	95%**

* percentage of individuals who judged the famous persons as objectively successful; ** percentage of persons who judged the famous persons as subjectively successful

2. *Table 1: Means, standard deviations and correlations of the relevant variables*

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Controle variables										
1. Age	21.61	2.29								
2. Sex	NA	NA	-.30**							
3. Social Comparison	3.28	.38	-.20*	.11						
Career Identity										
4. Work involvement	3.78	.38	.09	-.11	.33**					
5. Upward mobility	3.35	.74	.03	.00	.34**	.35**				
Career success										
6. Subjective score	3.8	.455	.10	-.28**	.02	.16	-.06			
7. Objective score	4.10	.42	.04	.00	.09	.10	.00	.44**		
8. Subjective time	2.44	.48	.12	-.23*	.08	-.02	-.02	.12	-.06	
9. Objective time	2.36	.52	.03	-.14	-.02	-.08	-.04	.09	-.14	.73**

Sex: 0 = male; 1 = female; Subjective scale = mean scores on subjective items, Objective scale = mean scores on objective items, Subjective time = mean reaction times on

subjective items, Objective time = mean reaction times on objective items

$*p < .05$, $**p < .01$