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A Conceptual Framework for Contextualizing Womens Subjective Career Success (SCS)

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ABSTRACT

Careerist" successful females are found to be rejected as relevant role models for some women, which demonstrates the limits of defining career success according to objective elements only. Drawing from a body of literature, this study assumes that the mixed results of the impact of gender on SCS may stem from the individualized way that SCS is defined, thus ignoring the social roots of people's cognition of career success. The study contributes to both the development of more gender-inclusive career theories and the establishment of gender-inclusive institutions at organizational and societal levels.

Keywords: Conceptual framework; Women; Subjective career success; Context

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Research Problem

Improving the representation of women in leadership positions is a common practice of gender inclusion in the field of human resource management (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018). The underlying assumption is that gender diversity at the leadership level is conducive to achieving gender equality in the workplace. Successful women, as female role models, are thought to have a positive impact on women’s career advancement, and the representation of women at management level is usually seen as a symbol of women’s success (Glass & Cook, 2018). However, “careerist” successful females are found to be rejected as relevant role models for some women, which demonstrates the limits of defining career success according to objective elements only (e.g., positions and income) (Lebegue et al., 2019; Cross et al., 2017).

Theoretical Gap identified in Literature on gender and career success

Extant career literature shows that Objective Career Success (OCS) presents the public understanding on career success (Gunz & Heslin, 2005) “*in the sense of being socially shared*” (Abele, Spurk & Volmer, 2011, p.196), while Subjective Career Success (SCS) refers to how successful individuals feel about they have done in their working lives. Based on the definition, the objective/subjective duality of career success creates a methodological division between the objectiveist vs. subjectiveist approach in career research (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2011). Then, OCS is described in an objectiveist way as income, hierarchical level, and the social status of a profession (Arthur et al., 2005; Ng et al., 2005; Abele & Wiese, 2008), while SCS can be operationalized in both objectiveist way as job satisfaction and subjectiveist way as individuals’ perceptions of career achievement (Judge et al., 1995) (see Table 1).

Table 1 Typology of career success

	Objective career success	Subjective career success
Objectiveist approach	Income, position, promotion	Job & career satisfaction
Subjectiveist approach		Perception of career success

(Adapted from Dries, 2011, P; Gunz & Heslin, 2005)

So far, the relationship between gender and career success has received much attention among social scientists (Powell & Mainiero, 1992). However, although the negative impacts of gender on women's OCS have been globally identified from the gender pay gap to gender occupational segregation (Santero-Sanchez et al., 2015; McKinsey & Company, 2018; Castell project, 2019; Hutchings et al., 2020), the empirical findings from the research that related to the role of gender in SCS are mixed. On one hand, when SCS is conducted as job satisfaction (i.e., objectiveist approach), both positive and negative as well as null effect of gender on satisfaction are reported (Green et al., 2018; Ng & Feldman, 2014; Steyrer et al., 2005). On the other hand, gender difference is found in women's perceptions of SCS (i.e., subjectiveist approach) when data is drawn on a small sample size, while it disappears when the broader and more diverse samples are involved (Tamang, 2020; Briscoe et al., 2018; Kirkwood, 2016). As the gender disparities in career experience being increasingly found to link with broader contextual issues (Grönlund & Öun, 2018; Lightman & Kevins, 2019), scholars call for attention to the contextual impacts on people's career experience (e.g., Briscoe, Hall, & Mayrhofer, 2011; Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011; Mayrhofer, Meyer, & Steyrer, 2007; Fernando & Cohen, 2014).

Research Question and Aim

Drawing from a body of literature, this study assumes that the mixed results of the impact of gender on SCS may stem from the individualized way that SCS is defined, for which ignoring the social roots of people's cognition of career success. Responding to Afiouni et al.'s (2020) call to develop contextual explanation for women's SCS, the study argues for a shift in the way that SCS is conceptualized, and considering the influences of context on it. Employing Bourdieu's concepts, "habitus" and "field", the study explores:

RQ 1: How would females construct their perceptions of career success in working context?

RQ 2: How could the situational meanings of women's SCS help to understand the mixed findings in literature related to gender and career success?

By answering the questions above, this paper aims to develop a gender-inclusive conceptual framework for contextualizing women's SCS to further our understanding of the contextual roots of SCS, and to promote a shift in the way that SCS is conceptualized, from individualizing one's perception of career success as a personal concept to contextualizing it as a social construct in context either.

Result

Based on Bourdieu's concepts, a conceptual framework of contextualizing women's SCS is developed (see Figure 1) which illustrates the possible relationships between one's perception of career success and the context in which her career unfolds. Here,

Paths 1-4 are developed to applied to explain how women's definitions of career success can be determined through their acquisition and internalization of both the constraining and supporting influences of gendered structures in the working context.

Path 5 is developed to explain how women's career success can be constructed through their career practice in an agentic way.

Paths 6-8 are developed to explain how women's OCS and SCS can be mutually constructed with each other in working context.

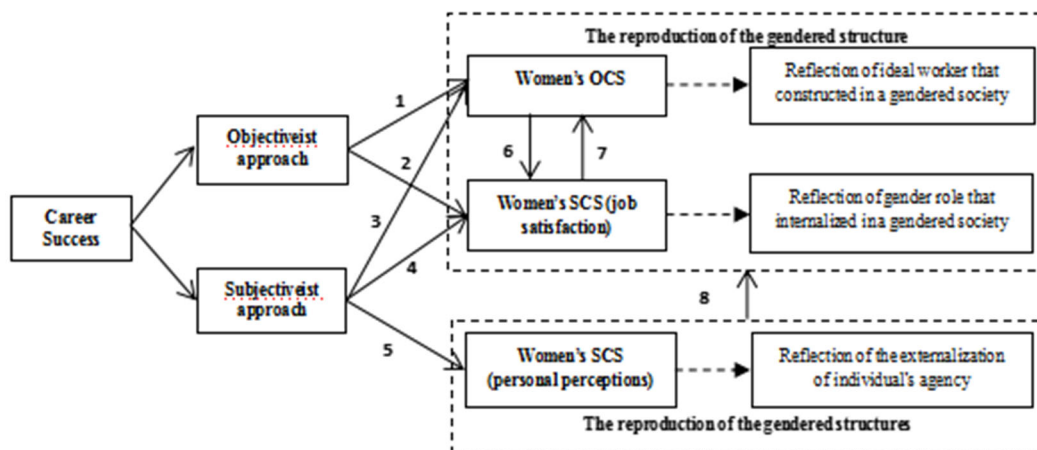


Figure 1 The conceptual framework of contextualizing women's career success

Discussion: situational meanings of women's SCS

Theoretical analysis of the contextual impacts on women's career success indicates that complicated relationships may be dynamically involved between career success and the context across time, and the concept of career success that women construct in workplace can be in line with, independent from, even conflict with the multiple structures in gendered context. As the framework shows:

Path 1: Women's inferiority in OCS may be the result of evaluating against a socially constructed ideal worker norm that based on a male role.

Path 2: Women may be satisfied with the properties of a work valued by most females for

which help to fulfill their social gender roles.

Path 3: Women's definitions of SCS may present what is a successful employee by internalizing the criteria of the ideal worker in the workplaces.

Path 4: Women's definitions of SCS may reflect what would be a successful female through the socialization of the social gender role.

Path 5: Women can construct SCS in a structuring (or innovative) way to adapt themselves to external circumstance, from rationalization, self-deceiving, avoiding being defining to complicity (Powell & Eddleston, 2008; Fernando & Cohen, 2014).

Path 6 shows that Women's SCS may be consistent with their OCS when they internalize the ideal worker norms in the workplace as their own criteria of assessment. Since the subjective and objective standards tend to be consistent, women's subjective feelings will keep in line with their objective career situation. In this sense, OCS works as the evaluating foundation for SCS.

Path 7 offers an explanation for the separation of women's OCS and SCS that the so-called gender paradox in job satisfaction (Pita & Torregrosa, 2021; Clark, 1997) can be understood as women are socially influenced to more willingly expect and accept the low level of OCS than their male counterparts, and the paradox of contented females (Powell & Eddleston, 2008) for their career inferiority may be the result of the unequal structure for genders in society.

Path 8: Women's SCS can be independent from OCS when there is a historical and spatial mismatch between one's perception and the context. Here, the independence of SCS indicates that women's perceptions of career success may have the potential to challenge the established gendered contexts.

Contribution

The current study is assumed to contribute to both the development of more gender-inclusive career theories and the establishment of gender-inclusive institutions at organizational and societal levels.

It adds a contextual perspective on the way that SCS is defined. Based on the contextual framework, future research can examine the possible relationships between women's SCS and the contexts at occupational, organizational and societal levels.

It feeds into career theory by employing a gender lens on people's cognition for career success. Through focusing on women's SCS, it responds to the calls for developing gender-inclusive

career theories based on women's work experience (O'Neil, 2008; Segovia-Pérez et al., 2018).

It provides various ways of rethinking organizational structures to be more gender-inclusive (Kossek & Buzzanel, 2018) by shedding more light on the diverse strategies that women construct their perceptions of career success in context.

Conclusion

It is concluded that Bourdieu's sociological concepts offer an effective way to help understand the subtle and complex links between SCS and the context, and to argue that no matter how SCS is defined at the individual level, it needs to be understood and interpreted within the particular context where individuals' careers are situated in at occupational, organizational and societal levels.

It is never enough for women to be competent, agentic participants, and perform successfully in working domains, for only when femininity can be equally valued and rewarded as masculinity, a gender-inclusive workplace can be fully achieved.

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