

# A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF THE MEANING OF CAREER SUCCESS

by

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## ABSTRACT

KATHERINE ANNE FREAR. A grounded theory study of the meaning of career success. (Under the direction of DR. ERIC D. HEGGESTAD)

The purpose of this research was to examine the concept of career success as discussed by career actors and to develop theory about the construct of career success. I used grounded theory methodology with constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to achieve these aims. Data consisted of qualitative interviews with 44 career actors across various career stages and occupations; participants were asked to define and evaluate career success from multiple perspectives. I found that participants had idiosyncratic personal definitions of career success, yet they believed that “most people” share a common definition, namely that career success comprises money and status. I also found that the evaluation of career success differs from the work outcomes (e.g., salary, satisfaction, etc.) that determine it. I use these findings to develop a new construct called self-evaluated career success, which I propose to be related to work motivation, intentions to leave an occupation or employer, and personal definitions of career success. This study contributes to existing research by showing that common academic conceptualizations of career success do not reflect how career actors define career success for themselves. This research also contributes to management and organizations by identifying a potential predictor of employee work motivation and intentions to quit.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my maternal grandmother, the late Ida Viola Dygert.

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## INTRODUCTION

Career success has been of interest for at least four decades, dating back to Gutteridge's (1973) paper on the career success of graduate business school alumni. Yet, after forty years of research we know surprisingly little about career success. The existing literature is fragmented, empirical findings are not often synthesized, and incremental contributions that build on one another are rare. Thus, we are left with a noncumulative area of inquiry in which one cannot easily tell what is known, what is unknown, and what signifies advancement in the literature.

One likely explanation for this state of the literature is the lack of consistent operational definitions of career success across research studies. No consensus exists regarding the best—i.e. most valid—way to measure career success. Consequently, various dissimilar measures are used throughout the literature and the validity of any given measure is questionable (Dries, Pepermans, & De Kerpel, 2008b; Dries, Pepermans, Hofmans, & Rypens, 2009; Heslin, 2003, 2005). This lack of confidence surrounding the measurement of career success creates uncertainty about the inferences drawn from the use of such measures, which further hinders the possibility of achieving a cumulative area of inquiry.

While measurement might appear to be the main concern, the measurement shortcomings depend on an additional underlying issue, namely the lack of a clear conceptualization of the construct. Though there is a substantial body of literature in which so-called “career success” is regressed on predictors, the conceptual meaning of career success as a theoretical construct is not yet well-understood. Without construct clarity, moreover, it is impossible to evaluate or proclaim the validity of career success



measures. Thus, although the establishment of valid measures is essential for the advancement of the career success literature, it is first necessary to clarify the meaning of the theoretical construct. Such clarification is the goal of the current research.

In particular, the current study is intended to be the first in a series of studies aimed at standardizing the measurement of career success. The purpose of the current study—the first step toward this aim—is to establish the construct of career success. Since constructs are abstract, theoretical concepts rather than “concrete observables” (Willer & Webster, 1970), this first step entails filling the theoretical gaps in the current conceptualization of career success. That is, in order to clarify the construct, it is necessary to develop *theory* surrounding the abstract meaning of career success. To develop said theory, I conduct a grounded theory investigation of the phenomenon of career success as perceived and experienced by career actors. The end result is a series of propositions and predictions about the theoretical construct that can be subject to future empirical examination.

Upon completion of the current study, the next step in this stream of research would be to test the propositions and to use the results of these tests to refine the theoretical construct. At that point, the clarified construct could be used to develop and validate measures of career success. For instance, existing measures could be examined against the developed theoretical construct for evidence of construct validity. In addition, new measures could be created based on the theory underlying the refined construct. Ultimately, the creation and use of valid measures should lead to standardized measurement, which, in turn, will enable scholars to conduct more rigorous and valid research on career success in the future.

### The Context of a Career

At the foundation of the construct of career success is the concept of a career. More specifically, there are three characteristics of the career concept that provide the context for understanding career success. The first characteristic is that a career is a pattern of social roles (Super, 1980). When Hughes (1937) first conceptualized *career*, he defined it as “the moving perspective in which persons orient themselves with reference to the social order” (p. 413). While such orientation to the social order is generally thought to encompass roles in paid employment, Hughes specified that individuals can also have careers in avocations and unpaid occupations, such as that of a homemaker.

Second, a career has both internal, subjective properties as well as external, objective properties. In this vein, Hughes (1937) distinguished between the objective career and the subjective career. He considered the objective career to be a series of roles—or, in some instances, clearly defined offices—that are observable and interpretable by others. By contrast, the subjective career, according to Hughes, comprises an individual’s own perspective in which “the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes, actions, and the things which happen to him” (pp. 409-410). Thus, the objective career and subjective careers represent distinct phenomena in which the former is a socially perceived phenomenon and the latter is an individually experienced phenomenon.

Third, careers are dynamic, as exemplified by Hughes’ (1937) discussion of a career as a “moving perspective.” A career is a *series* or *pattern* of social roles, rather than a single role at a given point in time. Similarly, in the spirit of the ancient Greek meaning of career as a “course”, Schein and Van Maanen (1977) asserted that a career is

an individual's path traveled over time and space (p. 31). A career, thus, implies variation in time and, as a result, scholars have noted that static theories do not capture the richness of a career (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2011; Savickas, 2002).

In sum, a *career* is a sequence of social roles (Super, 1980), a path taken across time and space (Schein & Van Maanen, 1977), and an individual's perception of his or her orientation to the social order (Hughes, 1937). When focusing on *work* careers, as in the current study, jobs and occupations represent the social roles and conditions, and work structures represent the social order. A *work career* can thus be defined as the unfolding sequence of work-related experiences, both within and outside of organizations, throughout a person's life span (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989: 8; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009: 1543). Furthermore, the work career represents the scope of career phenomena on which I focus for the current research and the term *career* will henceforth refer to a work career. Similarly, *career success* will hereafter refer to success in the context of a work career and *career actor* will refer to any individual who is engaged in a work career.

### The Meaning of Career Success

Career success has been defined as the "real or perceived achievements individuals have accumulated as a result of their work experiences" (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999a, p. 622). Although other definitions have been offered in the literature (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995; Melamed, 1996), all such definitions encompass the idea that career success represents positive, work-related outcomes. Furthermore, similar to Hughes' (1937) distinction

between the objective and subjective careers, scholars differentiate between two dimensions of career success: objective career success and subjective career success.

Objective career success comprises career attainments that are verifiable and observable to others (Abele & Wiese, 2008). Hence, measures of objective career success capture phenomena that do not vary as a function of idiosyncratic perceptions (Arthur et al., 2005; Nicholson & Waal-Andrews, 2005). Such measures typically assess an individual's pay or hierarchical status. For instance, monthly income, total annual compensation, and salary growth—all measures of pay—are often used to assess objective career success (e.g., Abele, Spurk, & Volmer, 2011; Judge, Klinger, & Simon, 2010; Wolff & Moser, 2009). Similarly, managerial or hierarchical level, occupational prestige, and promotions are status-related indicators that are used to measure objective career success (Dries et al., 2009; Judge & Hurst, 2008; Sagas & Cunningham, 2004). Other indicators, which do not necessarily represent pay or hierarchical status, include promotability (Wayne, Liden, Kraimer, & Graf, 1999), managerial tenure (Dries et al., 2009), job performance ratings (Judiesch & Lyness, 1999), accomplishments (Peluchette & Jeanquart, 2000), and job characteristics, such as managerial or leadership tasks (Mayrhofer, Meyer, Schiffinger, & Schmidt, 2008).

Subjective career success, by contrast, represents an individual's self-evaluation (Gattiker & Larwood, 1986; Peluchette, 1993) or internal apprehension (Arthur et al., 2005; Van Maanen, 1977) of career success that can only be accessed via introspection (Nicholson & Waal-Andrews, 2005). Measures of this second dimension of career success thus capture phenomena that are internal or idiosyncratic to career actors. For instance, one approach to measuring subjective career success is to ask respondents to

report their perceptions of their own career success. In some cases respondents make up their own mind about the meaning of career success; i.e. they might be asked, “Everything considered, how successful do you consider your career to date?” (Heslin, 2003: 271). In other cases, respondents are asked to consider particular career characteristics, such as career progress or development, and then report how successful they feel they have been in these areas (Abele et al., 2011). Whether broad or specific in scope, perceptions of career success have been evaluated with reference to the self (Poole, Langan-Fox, & Omodei, 1993), with reference to others (Abele & Spurk, 2009; Heslin, 2003), and without any specified referent (Mayrhofer et al., 2008). Finally, other approaches to measuring subjective career success include assessing an individual’s standing on work-related psychological constructs, such as career satisfaction and job satisfaction (e.g., Wolff & Moser, 2009), or using value-weighted self-ratings of career achievements (Dyke & Duxbury, 2011).

Despite widespread use of these dimensions to conceptualize and operationalize career success, scant theoretical grounding exists to relate them back to an overarching theoretical construct. This issue, among other issues, stems from the fact that the theoretical construct of career success itself is underdeveloped and lacks clarity.

#### Career Success and Construct Clarity

According to Suddaby (2010), there are four elements of construct clarity. First, a definition that outlines the essential properties of the construct must be provided. Second, scope conditions must specify the contexts in which the construct does and does not apply. Third, it must be specified how the construct semantically relates to other similar constructs. Finally, the three former elements, as well as the dimensions that subsume the

construct, must all cohere with one another. This framework of construct clarity is useful for outlining the theoretical gaps regarding the status of career success as a construct; hence, each of the four elements will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

#### ❖ Definitions

A good construct definition should outline the essential properties of the abstract theoretical concept (Suddaby, 2010). While definitions of career success do exist, they do not fully outline the properties of the construct. In my review of the literature, for instance, I found four statements that represent attempts to define career success. These definitions are provided in Table 1. A careful examination of these definitions suggests that the concept of career success centers on the accomplishment of positive and desirable work outcomes. This would suggest that, based on the available definitions, *positive*, *desirable*, and *work outcomes* represent essential properties of career success.

Yet, these properties—positive, desirable, and work outcomes—are broad and do not sufficiently describe the phenomenon of career success, at least not as it has been used in research thus far. There are positive work outcomes, for instance, that have been considered to be beyond the domain of career success. Some examples include receiving positive job performance ratings from supervisors and experiencing reduced work-family conflict, both of which have been purposefully excluded at times on the basis that they are distinct from career success (Arthur et al., 2005; Heslin, 2005). The exclusion of these positive work outcomes from the domain of career success suggests that there are additional implicit properties that are not captured in the definitions presented in Table 1. In other words, it is implied that career success has properties that are not shared by the concepts of job performance and work-family conflict. Moreover, if implicit properties

indeed exist, then the existing definitions are deficient; that is, the current definitions do not capture all of the essential properties of the construct.

It should be noted that inductive, qualitative research is especially well-suited to furthering the development of a construct definition, and a number of qualitative studies of career success have been conducted over the last ten years (e.g., Briscoe, Hall, & Mayrhofer, 2012; Hennequin, 2007; Lee et al., 2006; McDonald & Hite, 2008). However, such research has stopped short of identifying additional properties that could refine the conceptualization. What have been identified instead are observable manifestations of the existing properties.

For example, Dries, Pepermans, and Carlier (2008a) set out to increase the breadth of the application of career success operationalizations by interviewing a diverse sample of career actors about their personal definitions of career success. The authors found evidence of nine indicators of career success, including performance, advancement, factual contribution, self-development, security, recognition, cooperation, and perceived contribution. Importantly, the indicators identified in this research exemplify the already stated properties of career success, i.e. positive, desirable, and work outcomes. What is gained, thus, is insight about additional observable examples of such work outcomes. This insight helps to improve the measurement of the existing theoretical definitions by revealing additional *operational* definitions of career success, yet it does not enhance clarity of the construct itself because it does not contribute any new information at the abstract level of the *theoretical* construct. That is, the research does not provide any insight on how the properties outlined in the construct definitions should be expanded or refined.

### ❖ Scope Conditions

The next element of construct clarity is scope. Scope conditions represent the boundaries of a theoretical construct. Suddaby (2010) identifies three types of scope conditions: time, space, and values.

1. Time: Time can affect the substantive meaning attributed to career success. For example, at the individual level, a career comprises various stages. Such stages were illustrated by Schein (1978) who examined the distinct issues that career actors confront as they move through each one. He asserted, for instance, that while career actors are concerned with finding a job that suits their abilities upon entry into a career, they shift their emphasis to achieving meaningfulness and getting ahead later during the socialization stage. As a consequence, an individual's concept of career success is likely to change in tandem with the changes in salient aspects of his or her career. Related to this line of thinking, Lee and colleagues (2006) found that part-time professionals defined career success differently at the start of their career than they did six years later. Similarly, Mahler (2008) found that individual concepts of career success change during or after career transitions. Hence, career success as it is conceptualized at the beginning of a career might not be relevant at the end of a career.

At the societal level, the meaning of a career changes as well. Before the 1990s, careers were characterized as being bureaucratic or intra-organizational in which career actors advanced into an identified hierarchy of positions within a single organization (Abele et al., 2011; Hennequin, 2007; Kanter, 1977). Today, however, the walls of a single organization no longer represent the boundaries of a career and careers are increasingly characterized by extra-organizational mobility (Arthur et al., 2005; Cappelli,



1999; Rubin, 1996). As a result of societal shifts in the meaning of a career, social definitions of career success have changed over time as well. In the traditional, bureaucratic careers during the industrial economy, career success was attributed to successfully transitioning “up the ladder” or into senior positions in the hierarchy (Hall, 1976). In modern careers however, advancing in the organizational hierarchy is less prevalent and arguably, less of an ideal (Arthur et al., 2005), suggesting that such advancement might not be a meaningful indicator of career success any longer.

2. Space: According to Suddaby (2010), spatial scope conditions reflect the idea that constructs may apply differently in different settings, at different levels of analysis, in different cultures, and so on. Although he describes such scope conditions in terms of physical space, it is more useful to consider these in terms of socially structured space for the purposes of understanding career success. That is, various social structures should be considered when determining the boundaries of the theoretical construct.

One example is organizations or sets of “stable social relations deliberately created, with the explicit intention of continuously accomplishing some specific goals or purposes” (Stinchcombe, 1965: 142). Many organizations have a hierarchical structure in which there are a large number of jobs at the bottom of the hierarchy and a small number of jobs at the top. Moreover, jobs at the bottom of the hierarchy tend to be characterized by low pay, power, and prestige, whereas jobs at the top are characterized by high pay, power, and prestige (Rosenbaum, 1984). Given that high pay, power, and prestige are arguably positive and desirable work outcomes, it is not surprising that individuals with jobs at the higher end of the hierarchy are viewed as having more successful careers; however, this type of hierarchical status can only be indicative of career success for

individuals who work in an organization. Said differently, the meaningfulness of hierarchical status is bounded by organizations because it may not exist beyond the social space of an organization. As a result, hierarchical status likely cannot be used as an indicator of career success for those who do not work in an organization or, for instance, someone who is self-employed.

Another example of a spatial scope condition relates to occupations, which are “sets of activities or tasks that employees are paid to perform” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). A crude, but theoretically important distinction is that of blue-collar versus white-collar occupations. Such occupations are distinct in that the tasks performed in blue-collar occupations tend to encompass manual labor, whereas the tasks performed in white-collar occupations often involve intellectual or administrative labor. In terms of career success, Lucas and Buzzanell (2004) observed that the positive work outcomes that are desired in white-collar occupations—such as advancement and increased financial gain—are not always available in blue-collar occupations. As a result, the blue-collar workers that the authors interviewed defined career success as earning a living wage, as well as finding meaning and dignity in their work. Such workers also sought to be a “hero” in their work group, which meant that they accomplished their daily work goals even in the face of difficult work conditions or danger. Hennequin (2007) also found that blue-collar workers do not feel that they have the same career opportunities as white-collar workers and thus, the workers in her sample focused on task enrichment, continuous training, and status recognition as indicators of career success.

Another possible scope condition is gender, or the “complex set of social processes that create and sustain differences between women and men” (Ely & Padavic,

2007: 1125). In particular, research has shown that men and women, on average, define career success differently. Sturges (1999), for instance, found that women described career success in terms of personal feelings of accomplishment and recognition, whereas men described it in terms of hierarchical position, status, and influence. Similarly, Dyke and Murphy (2006) found that women focused on work-life balance and relationships when defining career success, and men emphasized material outcomes. There was, however, considerable overlap between men's and women's definitions of career success in both studies, illustrating that the significance of gender in bounding the theoretical construct is not clear. Indeed, Blair-Loy (2003) found considerable differences in career success definitions *within* a sample of only women and Kanter (1977) found that men who were employed in a female-dominated job (i.e. secretary) focused on the same career outcomes as women employed in the same job. Thus, while gender is a potential scope condition worth considering, it should be further examined for relevance.

A final example of social space as a scope condition is culture. Culture can be defined as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede, 2001: 9). Briscoe, Hall, and Mayrhofer (2012) examined cultural trends in terms of definitions of career success across 11 countries. They found that themes of achievement, satisfaction, and job characteristics were consistent across many cultures, yet there were considerable differences across cultures as well. For instance, they noted that job outcomes such as achievement, performance, and recognition were emphasized in the United States, whereas satisfaction and work-life balance were emphasized in Spain. There is little

explanation provided for this finding, which signifies an opportunity for future theoretical development.

### 3. Values: Values can also constrain the meaning of a theoretical construct.

According to Suddaby (2010), the “constraints of value refer to scope conditions of a theoretical construct that arise as a result of the assumptions or world view of the researcher” (p. 350). Consider, for instance, the values and assumptions implicit in defining career success as work outcomes that are *positive* and *desirable*. Such a definition begs the question: By *whom* are the outcomes judged to be positive and desirable?

Interestingly, the judge is often not specified, which suggests that the desirability of work outcomes is implied, assumed, or determined by the researcher. Gunz and Heslin (2005) refer to this phenomenon as an objectivist approach whereby the scholar defines career success for the career actors by using a predetermined set of survey items to assess success. The alternative, according to the authors, is a subjectivist approach, which privileges the perspective of the career actor rather than the perspective of the researcher. Use of the subjectivist approach requires researchers to ask each career actor what career success means to him or her. By acknowledging individual concepts of career success researchers can obviate the issues that arise from researcher bias and assumption. Overall, without the specification of scope conditions, it is not clear in which contexts the construct applies and in which contexts it does not.

### ❖ Semantic Relationships with Other Constructs

Semantic relationships with other existing constructs represent the next element of construct clarity. As Suddaby (2010) noted, constructs are “the outcome of a semantic network of connections to other prior constructs” (p. 350). Specification of these connections—together referred to as a nomological network (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955)—adds precision and clarity to the construct itself. Such relationships should be specified with either conceptually similar constructs or theoretically relevant processes.

Consider, for instance, the semantic relationship of career success with job satisfaction. On the one hand, career actors who are satisfied with their jobs are thought to be successful in their careers, which is evident when job satisfaction is used as an indicator of career success (Judge & Bretz, 1994; Judge et al., 1995; Judge & Hurst, 2008; Judge, Thoresen, Pucik, & Welbourne, 1999b). Such use of job satisfaction to exemplify career success suggests that job satisfaction could be an empirical proxy for the theoretical construct of career success. It could also mean that job satisfaction is a semantic synonym of career success or, perhaps, a subordinate theoretical facet.

On the other hand, Poole, Langan-Fox, and Omodei (1993) propose that job satisfaction *causes* perceived career success. Moreover, Dyke and Duxbury (2011) hypothesize that job satisfaction is *caused by* career success. In both of these latter cases, job satisfaction and career success are distinct constructs linked in a causal chain (though the authors of the various studies do not agree about the order of causation). This distinction contradicts the use of job satisfaction as an indicator of career success as described above, and instead suggests that it is either a cause or an effect of career success. Additional theory is needed to resolve this discrepancy in the literature.

Another example relates to status and prestige. Hierarchical level—which is frequently used as an indicator of career success—gains its theoretical importance due to the underlying characteristics of status and prestige. That is, individuals who occupy high-level jobs often enjoy greater status and prestige than those in lower-level jobs. I would argue that, without such status and prestige, hierarchical level would not be as desirable and thus, would not be a meaningful indicator of career success. This is important because status and prestige are preexisting constructs with long theoretical histories (e.g., Weber, 1946). Without specification of the semantic relationship with career success, it is unclear where the construct of status (or prestige) ends and the construct of career success begins.

Furthermore, Suddaby (2010) contends that additional relationships need to be specified when constructs are embedded in processes, such as in the case of career success. The assessment of career success is inherently an evaluation *process* that comprises a stimulus and a response: the criteria to be evaluated represent the stimuli, whereas the resultant evaluation of the criteria represents the response. Illustrations of this process are provided in Figure 1. For instance, a manager who receives a high salary (the stimulus) might be perceived to be successful as a result (the response). Similarly, the same manager might feel satisfied with her current job (the stimulus) and thus perceive herself to be successful (the response).

Thus far, however, it is not clear where the construct of career success belongs in this process. When objective career success is of concern, career success is always indicated by the stimulus, as shown in Box A of Figure 1. However, when subjective career success is of concern, career success is sometimes indicated by the stimulus (see

Box C for an example) and sometimes indicated by the response (see Box D). This creates confusion about the meaning of the construct.

Moreover, Lewin (1936) suggested that success, in the psychological sense, is simply a feeling, whereby the things that *cause* the feeling—such as an achievement—are in fact determinants of psychological success rather than part of success itself. This parallels Poole, Langan-Fox, and Omodei's (1993) examination of job satisfaction as a determinant of perceived career success. In their study, job satisfaction represented a work outcome (the stimulus), whereas perceived career success represented a feeling that *resulted from* the work outcome (the response). Hence, from this perspective, work outcomes and achievements are beyond the scope of phenomena subsumed by career success, which contradicts the existing definitions of career success and thus, should be resolved with future theory.

Next, a career—which represents the foundation of career success—is also a process. It is a process that encompasses multiple jobs or occupations over the course of an individual's life span (Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999; Gunz, 1989; Savickas, 2002). Because a career is a process that develops or unfolds over time, Gunz and Mayrhofer (2011) assert that it is inappropriate to examine career success without considering the aspect of time. In particular, they argue that the evaluation of career success *depends* on time and thus, one must observe how career conditions have *changed* over time in order to infer success.

With few exceptions (e.g., Judge & Hurst, 2008; Judge et al., 2010), however, career success is evaluated independent of time in research studies. In such cases work-related achievements are observed at a single point in time, without any reference to past

achievements or future opportunities. For instance, a career actor's current salary might be used to indicate career success, regardless of how his or her salary has changed over time. In fact, these studies could be criticized as being void of career theory because they do not acknowledge how career success relates to the career process.

Interestingly, the inconsistent use of time is rooted in the definitions of career success. For instance, some scholars define career success as an *accumulation* of positive work outcomes (Judge et al., 1999a), whereas others assert that it encompasses outcomes *at any point* over time (Arthur et al., 2005). This discrepancy illustrates a lack of consensus regarding the temporal relevance of the theoretical construct. Further development of the construct requires that it be specified how career success conceptually relates to the time-oriented career process.

#### ❖ Coherence

Finally, construct clarity requires logical consistency or coherence. One aspect of this requires that all of the elements described above—the definition, scope, and semantic relationships—fit together (Suddaby, 2010). The definition, for instance, must be theoretically consistent with the scope conditions, and the scope conditions must be consistent with semantic relationships with other constructs. Given that these other elements of construct clarity are underspecified, however, it is not yet appropriate to evaluate coherence in this manner.

An additional aspect of coherence requires that the *dimensions* of the construct cohere with one another such that they indeed represent the higher-order umbrella construct (Suddaby, 2010). Thus, the two dimensions of career success—subjective and objective career success—must exhibit sufficient logical consistency to warrant their



status as two dimensions of the same multidimensional construct. While scholars have frequently cited the “duality” of careers and career success, which means that each encompasses two *distinct* dimensions (e.g., Arthur et al., 2005), no one has discussed whether or not the two dimensions—objective and subjective career success—indeed represent two parts of the *same* construct. In other words, there exists theory and evidence in support the two dimensions being dissimilar, but there is no theory or evidence to suggest that they are similar or that they cohere.

This shortcoming is problematic for two reasons. First, scholars and laypeople alike refer to career success as if there is a single concept that captures all relevant phenomena. Such a belief in a single concept is evidenced by the fact that definitions of the single concept (i.e. “career success”) exist. Thus, the lack of evidence in support of a single concept either reflects inadequate scientific knowledge or a flawed lay understanding of the phenomenon. Before continuing to examine career success in theory-testing research, systematic scientific inquiry can and should be used to resolve this discrepancy.

Second, if objective and subjective career success indeed represent two dimensions of an umbrella construct, then the lack of theory and evidence in support of combining them further means that there is no prescription or guide that instructs scholars how to do so in their research. As Law, Wong, and Mobley (1998) note, there are several models in which dimensions combine to reflect or form multidimensional constructs. These include latent models, aggregate models, and profile models, each of which yields distinct theoretical and methodological implications.

In order to consider these models in relation to career success, I have illustrated the implied internal structure of the construct in Figure 2. This figure includes the two commonly used dimensions of career success as well as various indicators that have been used to represent each one. Objective career success, as illustrated, comprises phenomena such as salary growth, hierarchical level, occupational status, promotions received, and current annual salary. Subjective career success comprises phenomena such as career satisfaction, job satisfaction, and perceived career success (both self-referent and other-referent perceived career success). The dashed lines connecting each of the dimensions to the overall construct symbolize the lack of understanding regarding how the dimensions combine into a single construct.

According to Law, Wong, and Mobley (1998) a multidimensional construct is best represented by a *latent model* if it is theorized to be a “higher-level construct that underlies its dimensions” (p. 743). The dimensions in such a model are thought to be manifestations that are caused by the higher-order construct. In other words, the dimensions are different observable instances of the same abstract phenomenon. Moreover, the higher-order construct is defined as the commonality among the dimensions and thus, the dimensions must be correlated with one another. Note that the way that dimensions correspond to constructs in a latent multidimensional construct model is similar to the way that items correspond to variables in a reflective variable model, whereby, in the latter case, the commonality among items reflects the higher-order variable (Edwards & Bagozzi, 2000).

If career success were specified to be a latent multidimensional construct, the higher-order construct would be defined by the commonality among its dimensions—i.e.

the commonality among objective career success and subjective career success. It would be assumed—or theorized, rather—that the abstract phenomenon of career success *causes* a career to manifest objective and subjective outcomes, which means that the dashed lines in Figure 2 should instead be solid arrows pointing from the overall construct to each of the dimensions. Applying the latent model to career success would further require that the two dimensions correlate with one another and that career success be operationally defined via a factor score of the two dimensions.

Next, Law and colleagues (1998) assert that a multidimensional construct is best represented by an *aggregate model* when the construct is formed by a mathematical composite of the dimensions. This model differs from a latent model because the dimensions need not be correlated and, even if they are, the mathematical function used to combine them exists independently of such correlation. Value is gained by combining the dimensions rather than examining them separately—i.e., a meaningful composite of the dimensions exists—however, the dimensions are not thought to be caused by the overall construct like they are in a latent model. Instead, the dimensions are thought to cause the overall construct, much like how a formative variable is thought to be caused by the items it comprises (Edwards & Bagozzi, 2000).

In the context of career success, an aggregate model would allow for the objective and subjective dimensions to combine to represent an overall construct even if they were not expected to be correlated with one another. It would also mean that the two dimensions would not be expected to be caused by the overall construct; rather, overall career success would be an outcome of a linear or nonlinear mathematical combination of the two dimensions. Thus, if career success were specified as an aggregate

multidimensional construct, the dashed lines in Figure 2 should instead be solid arrows pointing from the dimensions to the overall construct, signifying that the dimensions cause the construct. For example, if it were theorized that individuals give equal weight to objective and subjective career outcomes when evaluating the careers of others, the aggregate model of overall career success could be operationally defined as a simple sum or average of a career actor's objective and subjective career success.

The final possible relationship between the dimensions and overall construct is in a profile model. Law et al. (1998) suggest that a multidimensional construct is best represented by a profile model when various combinations of specified levels of each dimension form the construct. In this type of model, the construct can only be represented by a set of profiled characteristics, such as “high-high” representing high standing on two dimensions, or “high-low” representing high standing on one and low standing on another dimension. Dimensions in a profile model are not mathematically combined and thus, there is no interpretable overall representation of the dimensions.

If the construct of career success were specified to be a profile model, there would be no meaningful construct of “overall” career success. Rather, meaningful levels of each dimension would be specified and theoretically significant sets of such levels would be formed to represent the profiles. For instance, perhaps individuals think of career success in terms of “poor, but happy” (i.e. low on the objective and high on the subjective dimension) or “rich and miserable” (i.e. high on objective, low on subjective). Note that these phrases do not represent the commonality or averages of the two dimensions—which would correspond to a latent or aggregate model, respectively. By contrast, they represent pairs, or profiles, of specific levels of each dimension.

In addition to those that fit into one of the above models, Law et al. (1998) note that there are many constructs that are defined as having multiple dimensions but have not been classified into one of the three models. The lack of classification means that it is unclear how the dimensions theoretically relate to the construct, which further signifies an underdeveloped construct. The authors warn that such lack of development could lead to various issues during the research process. For example, theoretical rationale for hypotheses might be developed at the level of the construct, whereas the analyses might be carried out at the dimensional level.

This unclassified scenario describes the state of the construct of career success. In particular, career success has been described as having multiple dimensions, but it has not been specified as a latent, aggregate, or profile model and thus, is not yet clear how the dimensions relate to the construct itself. Moreover, while definitions and hypotheses sometimes occur at the construct level, analyses are consistently carried out at the dimensional level. Such lack of coherence makes it difficult to know what can be concluded from existing research.

### Summary

In sum, the construct of career success is grossly underdeveloped. The existing definitions of the construct are insufficient, which means the essential properties are underspecified. Moreover, the scope conditions are not known, nor have semantic relationships with similar constructs been proposed or established. Since too few elements of the construct have been developed, it is not yet possible to evaluate coherence among the definition, scope, and semantic relationships. Additionally, there is

not enough theory to assess coherence among the dimensions or to say whether or how the dimensions indeed represent a common construct.

Further issues with the theoretical construct can be illustrated by outlining the consequences that scholars might face if they continue to use conventional conceptualizations of career success. First, the lack of construct clarity will likely perpetuate the current problem of inconsistent operational definitions, which impedes the advancement of knowledge. Second, since there is no guide for how to combine the objective and subjective dimensions into a higher-order construct, research can only be carried out at the dimensional level; that is, objective career success can only be examined independently of subjective career success, and vice-versa.

Finally, the current lack of clarity surrounding the construct of career success has led to inconsistent research and a stagnating body of knowledge. Since constructs are abstract theoretical concepts, moreover, this lack of clarity stems from a lack of theory. Thus, the theory regarding the abstract meaning of career success needs to be improved. The proposed research is designed to fulfill this need.

### Research Questions

The purpose of the current research is to generate theory that will enhance the clarity of the theoretical construct of career success. While quantitative research methods are particularly well-suited for *testing* theory, qualitative research methods are better suited for *generating* theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, the proposed research is a qualitative study aimed at generating theory that is grounded in data obtained via systematic observation. The proposed research design and analysis are consistent with the recommendations of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1998).

In particular, I wished to examine how career success is discussed, interpreted, and experienced by career actors. I achieve this by engaging in in-depth, semi-structured conversations (i.e. interviews) with career actors that are focused on the topic of career success. I aimed to speak to a diverse sample of career actors and to vary my interview questions as needed in order to maximize my ability to capture divergent insights. The qualitative data gained from these interviews were coded into conceptual categories, which were further used to form theoretical propositions regarding the phenomenon of career success.

This study contributes to the existing literature by addressing each of the elements of construct clarity outlined by Suddaby (2010). In particular, I aimed to answer the following research questions.

1. What are the essential properties of the construct of career success?
2. What are the scope conditions that bound these essential properties?
3. How does the construct of career success semantically relate to existing constructs?
4. How does the construct of career success relate to relevant processes?
5. How do the dimensions of career success relate to the overall construct?

Answers to these research questions will greatly enhance the clarity of career success as a construct, which will provide a theoretical foundation for improving the measurement of career success in the future.

Furthermore, to refine the proposed plan of research, I first carried out a pilot study. The specific purpose of the pilot study was to test the initial sampling strategy, data collection procedure, and interview guide. Several changes were made to the data

collection method throughout this process. As a result, what follows is a description of the pilot study and my reflections on the lessons learned from this process. The current research is discussed subsequently.



## PILOT STUDY

### Sample and Procedure

Recall that a career is defined as the unfolding sequence of work-related experiences—both within and outside of organizations—throughout a person’s life span (Arthur et al., 1989; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). For the purpose of the current pilot study, a person immersed in a career—i.e. a career actor—was operationally defined as anyone who has worked or is currently working, for pay or unpaid, in any occupation. Furthermore, career actors represented the population for the current research because these are the individuals who have the greatest experience with and exposure to career success. Career actors are also stakeholders who arguably have the greatest interest in the evaluation and perception of career success.

To obtain a sample of this population I started by using a mix of snowball and theoretical sampling strategies. To encourage participation, all participants were entered into a random drawing to win one \$50 Amazon.com gift card. Initial participants were composed of, and were identified by, personal contacts. To reach a wider variety of career actors, upon completing the study each participant was asked to refer two additional career actors.

This sampling approach was chosen for two reasons. First, using referrals (i.e. snowball sampling) was expected to lead to greater participation than would a “cold call” approach to contacting a random sample of participants. Second, I acknowledge that snowball sampling can lead to a homogeneous sample that does not represent the diversity of the population of career actors and, as a result, I attempted to recruit individuals with particular characteristics with potential theoretical relevance.

Table 2 lists several characteristics and dimensions that, based on the existing literature, were thought to be theoretically related to various career success definitions. I also recognized that I would likely become aware of other theoretically relevant participant characteristics after starting data collection. Thus, I sought to make it a priority to contact prospective (i.e. referred) participants who added heterogeneity on these relevant characteristics.

Once potential participants were identified, they were contacted via email or phone and asked if they would like to participate in an interview about career success. Participants who agreed were emailed a consent form that outlined the details of the study. After returning a signed copy of the consent form, participants were interviewed either in-person or via phone, depending on the preference and convenience of the participant. Interviews were conducted by either me or one of two trained research assistants. Interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed by the interviewer who carried out the interview.

### Instruments

#### ❖ Initial Pilot Interview Guide

An initial interview guide was designed with three goals in mind. The first goal was to build rapport with participants, which was achieved by asking an initial question about the participant's work history. The second goal was to obtain participants' initial thoughts about career success before they had a chance to reflect on it deeply. Sample questions for achieving this goal included: "How do you define career success *for yourself?*" and "How do you think *most people* define career success?" The third goal was to subsequently probe participants' thoughts about career success from various

angles, at which point they were encouraged to consider career success more thoroughly. Sample questions for achieving this goal included: “Do you feel that you have had a successful career? Why or why not?” and “Has your perspective on career success changed over time?” The full initial pilot interview guide is provided in Appendix C.

#### ❖ Revised Pilot Interview Guide

Two interviews were conducted using the initial pilot interview guide, at which point I felt some revisions were needed before moving forward. The first revision concerned a poorly functioning question. The question read as follows: “For the purposes of this interview, please note that a career is defined as a person’s accumulated work experiences. Based on this definition of a career, if you had to write a definition of ‘career success’ for the dictionary, what would you write?” This question was problematic for two reasons.

One reason the question functioned poorly was because the participants did not seem to acknowledge the definition of a *career*. In particular, they did not provide responses that were consistent with the definition that was given. This made me realize that I should not expect participants to process the academic definition of a career while they reflect on their own interpretations of career success; rather, it is my responsibility to do so when I reflect on their insights during data analysis. Moreover, I realized that I was imposing the concept of the career process on the data with this interview question. As a result, I was privileging existing theory rather than the career actor’s perspective. If career actors define career success in a way that does not correspond to the academic definition of a career, then it is useful for me to capture and interpret this information.

Another reason this question functioned poorly was because the insights provided were not what I intended. In fact, the responses indicated to me that my intention was misguided and I was asking the wrong question. I initially wrote this question hoping to gain insight about social norms related to career success, thinking that if someone were asked to write a definition “for the dictionary”, they would provide a definition that they felt applied to *most* people. I realized, however, that this approach reflected too narrow of a perspective for the start of the interview (which is when this question was asked). Instead of providing insight about social norms specifically, each participant provided their most salient thought about career success. For instance, while Cat (pseudonym) responded with a potentially social definition of career success, RJ provided a very personal definition.

Moreover, the fact that participants were giving their most salient insight about career success was very interesting and could have thus turned into quite valuable data. As a result, I revised the question to better capture these initial, salient thoughts about career success. The revised question read as follows: “What comes to mind when you hear the words ‘career success’”? This change was also intended to obviate the issue with participants not understanding the definition of a career as outlined in the original question.

Second, consistent with a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I continued to refer back to the existing literature periodically during the data collection process to gain additional insight on the interview procedure and the data being collected. In doing so, I decided that the initial interview guide was not flexible enough to capture the phenomenon of “referents” as described by Heslin (2003,

2005). In particular, Heslin asserts that career actors use multiple referents when subjectively assessing their own career success. Career actors, in some cases, compare their career outcomes to their own past outcomes or their personal aspirations, thereby using themselves as the referent for evaluating success. In other cases, they might compare their career outcomes to the outcomes of other career actors, thereby using others as referents.

Related to this line of thinking, I considered the possibility that career actors' conceptualizations and perceptions of career success might change depending on the referent that they are using. Consequently, I added additional questions with referents to see if definitions changed based on the particular referent used. As an example, one of the added questions read as follows: "Do you feel that your career has been successful compared to the careers of others? Why or why not?" Five additional questions were added with regard to specific referents, which included current aspirations, past aspirations, peers of the same age, family members, and friends. The full revised pilot interview guide is provided in Appendix C.

### Results

A total of 13 participants were interviewed for the pilot study ( $n = 2$  using the initial interview guide and  $n = 11$  using the revised interview guide). The sample included 7 women and 6 men (54% and 46% respectively). The majority of the participants were Caucasian (85%), with the exceptions being one African American and one Asian participant. Ages ranged from early twenties to early sixties and about half of the participants were married or partnered (46%) and/or had children (54%). Annual

household incomes ranged from less than \$25,000 to more than \$100,000 with just over half being between \$25,000 and \$100,000.

The participants had diverse career experiences as well. Three were students who were transitioning into full-time work. One was a stay-at-home parent who had previous experience as a nanny. Two participants worked in independent contractor positions—one as a handyperson and another as an IT consultant. Three participants had experienced career transitions; for instance two were officially retired, yet had returned to work in some fashion. Additional current occupations included computer programmer, dental hygiene instructor, accountant, and electron microscopy researcher.

The primary purpose of the pilot study was to make efficient use of a small sample to test whether or not the research design was generating meaningful data. Indeed, the pilot study generated a significant amount of useful data. The interviews resulted in 6 hours and 13 minutes of audio recorded data ( $M = 28.7$  minutes per interview), which further resulted in more than 142 pages of single-spaced transcribed data ( $M = 10.9$  pages per interview). With few exceptions, the participants were quite engaged in the interviews and provided candid and thoughtful responses to the questions asked.

Importantly, the participants provided varying perspectives on career success in response to the nuanced questions on the interview guide. Tables 3 and 4 represent two sets of examples of these varying perspectives that were observed within each interview. For instance, most participants displayed distinct conceptualizations of career success when asked for their initial definitions, their personal definitions, and their perspectives regarding how they think “most people” define career success (see Table 3). In addition, participants were asked to evaluate their own career success compared to various

referents—e.g., compared to current aspirations, compared to others, compared to peers of the same age, etc. In nearly all instances, participants reported varied self-evaluations of career success across the different referents (see Table 4).

In addition to these patterns, other phenomena and research questions emerged from the data that potentially shed light on one or more of the elements of construct clarity described by Suddaby (2010). First, one potential new research question is as follows: To what extent is career success based on the achievement of *expected* outcomes, in which expectation varies by referent, as opposed to being based on the achievement of *positive* and *desirable* outcomes (as indicated by existing definitions)? I ask this question because I have seen multiple examples in the data in which simply *doing something* is indicative of greater career success than idleness or stagnation. Similarly, some participants evaluated the careers of others as successful or not based on whether or not they felt those individuals were working (i.e. striving or attempting) to live up to their career potential. I felt that there were implicit expectations in these cases and that careers were being compared to specific expectations rather than universal norms or particular outcomes. This idea of expected outcomes accommodates idiosyncratic definitions of career success across individuals, social groups, and occupations. It could also represent a possible property of career success, and therefore it might inform the construct definition.

Second, I also noticed that participants tended to provide different patterns of responses for different rater-target combinations. The *rater*, in such instances, is defined as the individual doing the rating (or defining) of career success and the *target* is defined as the individual whose career is being rated (or defined) in terms of career success. For

example, when a participant is defining and rating career success for themselves they are both the rater and the target. When a participant is defining and rating the career success of a peer, the participant is the rater and the peer is the target. I observed subtle differences across the various rater-target combinations that appeared in the data, which might represent possible scope conditions or, perhaps, multiple dimensions or constructs of career success. A potential research question related to this emergent phenomenon is: To what extent do the patterns in these rater-target combinations correspond to the different definitional perspectives provided by participants (i.e., participants' personal definitions versus what they say "most people" think of career success)?

Third, I found initial evidence of semantic relationships between career success and the concept of personal life success. Participants were asked what difference, if any, they felt there was between career success and personal or life success. A consistent pattern among the responses was that there is conceptual overlap between career success and personal success, but that the two concepts are not the same thing. Most respondents felt that personal success was broader than career success and that career success was one component of life success. As one participant noted, "personal success takes into account your relationships with other people, your emotional well-being, your spiritual well-being, and [it's] more of a holistic approach for the evaluation of life." This finding suggests that career actors indeed perceive and interpret career success as a phenomenon that is distinct from a general notion of personal success.

### Discussions

In conclusion, the pilot study resulted in a great deal of rich and insightful data related to the phenomenon of career success. The data provided initial insight related to



existing research questions and also included newly emergent phenomena that inspired new research questions. In general, the quality of the data suggests that many of the questions on the revised interview guide are functioning well.

Despite the strengths of the pilot study, I identified notable challenges as well. One minor challenge resulted from the addition of multiple questions asking participants if they felt their careers were successful compared to various referents. In particular, asking participants repeatedly to compare their careers to those of others created discomfort for those who did not feel they had successful careers. Also, these questions were perceived as repetitive to a few participants who were not able to discern the nuanced differences between some of the referents. During the interview process I, too, felt that the questions seemed repetitive, yet during data analysis the responses to the distinct referent questions revealed meaningful insights (as shown in Table 4). Consequently, I did not want to delete these questions from the interview guide; however, when I asked these questions during later interviews, I made a focused effort to balance the comfort of participants with my goal of collecting meaningful data.

Finally, a larger challenge stemmed from the sampling procedure. Although it was fairly easy to obtain the current sample of participants, participants were not providing an adequate number of referrals and thus, I had nearly used up my pool of referrals at the end of this study. On average, each interview yielded only 1.09 referrals, which suggested that the snowball sampling approach was not working well. Furthermore, participants were not referring others with diverse characteristics; hence, the sampling strategy did not yield as much participant diversity as I would have liked.

The proposed method that follows incorporates improvements designed to alleviate this issue.

## THE CURRENT RESEARCH

### Sampling Strategy and Procedure

Consistent with the pilot study, career actors represent the population for the current research. A career actor was operationally defined as anyone who has worked or is currently working, for pay or unpaid, in any occupation. To increase feasibility, I focused on career actors age 18 and older that reside in the United States.

Consistent with the theoretical sampling aspect of grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I began by recruiting participants that maximized diversity on characteristics relevant to the construct of career success. Examples of characteristics suggested by the existing literature were gender, age, life course, family status, career transitions, and occupation (Dries et al., 2008a; Hennequin, 2007; Mahler, 2008; Moen & Sweet, 2004). Additional characteristics that I thought might be theoretically relevant to the construct of career success were marital status, educational background, race and ethnicity, career stage, and income. Over time, however, diverse work experiences became increasingly relevant to my findings, more so than the characteristics listed above. I thus shifted my sampling strategy to capture diversity in work experiences—such as autonomy, managerial responsibility, feeling successful, etc.—rather than demographic diversity. The purpose of sampling based on theoretically relevant characteristics was to increase the probability of observing important patterns or relationships in the data.

Achieving the desired sample diversity was one limitation of the pilot study, which caused me to modify the current recruitment and data collection procedure. The current sampling procedure began with a snowball approach, in which research assistants

recruited participants for interviews by word of mouth and via email. At the end of each interview, the research assistant asked the participant to identify others who would have a different perspective to offer and might be willing to participate in an interview. I continued using this approach until I reached theoretical saturation of open coding concepts for the meaning of career success (discussed in detail below). This recruitment process yielded an additional 24 interview participants.

Next, I distributed a very short online survey that comprised two open-ended questions, demographic questions, and an invitation to participate in a phone interview. The initial invitation to participate in the survey was posted on social media websites (e.g., Facebook and LinkedIn) and distributed via email by personal contacts. To promote participation, all participants were entered into a drawing to win one of five \$10 Amazon.com gift cards. Participants were encouraged to forward the survey invitation via email or social media to friends and colleagues so that these friends and colleagues also had an opportunity to complete the survey and potentially win an Amazon.com gift card. To further encourage participation, I designed the survey to take no longer than five minutes to complete, which is considerably shorter than most online surveys and was intended to be viewed as a minimal commitment by individuals who were interested but would otherwise be turned off by the idea of taking a long survey. Thus, the survey design and procedure was intended to reach a moderate to large, diverse sample of potential respondents and be easy to complete. A total of 46 people completed the survey.

The primary purpose of the survey was to recruit more people to participate in phone interviews, which is a strategy that comprised two important elements. First, I acknowledged that qualitative interviews are time-consuming and often inconvenient for

participants. A short online survey, by contrast, is less time-consuming and more convenient. Thus, I expected participants would be more likely to initially agree to participate in a short online survey rather than a longer qualitative phone interview. Furthermore, according to the principles of the foot-in-the-door technique (Freedman & Fraser, 1966), individuals are more likely to agree to larger requests after they have agreed to smaller requests; thus, participants would be more likely to agree to participate in a phone interview after they have agreed to participate in a short survey. The survey also provided some exposure to the research topic research, which will lessened the uncertainty and perceived risk of participating in a phone interview.

The second element of this strategy related to theoretical sampling. In particular, I collected demographic information (i.e., the theoretically relevant characteristics of career actors) via the online survey. This process obviated the difficulty or awkwardness of asking for this information during phone interviews, and also made the information available to me *before* conducting the phone interviews. Additionally, at the end of the survey, survey participants read a brief invitation to participate in a phone interview and they were asked if they were interested in being interviewed. To encourage participation in the interviews, all interview participants were entered into a separate drawing to win a \$50 Amazon.com gift card. Thus, my goal was to use the survey to generate a large pool of potential participants—who had already expressed interest in being interviewed and whose demographic information was available—to choose from to maximize the theoretically-relevant diversity of the sample. I only wanted to interview people I did not know personally, so I added a question to screen out people who I knew; of the 39 survey respondents who did not know me personally, 14 volunteered to be interviewed (36%).

Furthermore, I selected participants from this pool who contributed to my theoretical sampling strategy. Once participants were selected, I emailed them a consent form and contacted them via phone or email to schedule the phone interview. The interviews were conducted via phone in order to allow for the inclusion of a geographically diverse sample. Interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. Lastly, I continued to select, recruit, and interview participants until I achieved theoretical saturation, which will be discussed in subsequent sections. Seven additional participants were interviewed as a result of this process.

### Instruments

#### ❖ Online Survey

The online survey was designed to serve three purposes: to recruit individuals to participate in phone interviews, to collect demographic data, and to collect some anonymous data related to the phenomenon of career success. The survey began with a single open-ended question asking participants to provide their thoughts about the meaning of career success. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four questions: “What comes to mind when you hear the words career success?”, “Think of someone you know who has a successful career. What is it about their career that makes it successful?”, “How do you define career success for yourself?”, and “How do you think most people define career success?” They were asked if there was anything else about careers, career success, or any other topic that they would like to share, in case they had additional pressing insights that they cared to share.

Following these open-ended questions, participants were asked if they knew me personally. Those who reported knowing me were taken to the end of the survey. Those

who did not know me were presented with a brief overview of the phone interview procedure, at which point they were asked to indicate whether or not they would like to participate in an interview about career success. Interested participants were asked to provide contact information so that I could contact them to set up a phone call. Finally, participants were asked to report various demographic characteristics. These include age, race and ethnicity, gender, occupation, marital status, family status (i.e., children), and household income. The full online survey, including response options where applicable, is provided in Appendix D.

#### ❖ Interview Guide

The proposed interview guide was designed to achieve the same three goals as the pilot interview guide: build rapport with participants, obtain participants' initial thoughts about career success before they have much time to reflect, and then probe participants' thoughts about career success from various angles while encouraging them to reflect on it more deeply. To build rapport, the interview guide began by asking participants to describe their careers in general. Afterward, to capture their initial salient insights, they were asked, "What comes to mind when you hear the words 'career success'?"

Following their initial, most salient thoughts, participants were encouraged to reflect on the phenomenon of career success more deeply. For instance, they were asked to provide their personal definition as well as what they perceive to be a definition that applies to "most people". The purpose of these distinct questions was to tease apart idiosyncratic personal definitions from socially constructed definitions, if applicable. They were also asked to reflect on the meaning of career success from the perspective of multiple social groups—e.g., their family, occupation, friends, etc.—and to evaluate their

own career success with reference to these various targets. They were asked, for example, “How is career success defined in your occupation?” and “Do you feel that your career has been successful compared to the careers of your work peers or colleagues?”

Furthermore, the interviews were semi-structured. On the one hand, interviews were structured such that all participants were asked nearly all of the questions on the guide, except when it was apparent that particular questions were not relevant; for instance, I did not ask an individual to describe how they define career success for their children if they disclosed that they did not have, nor did they plan to have, any children. On the other hand, interviews were less structured such that I strayed from the interview guide in instances in which participants brought up new, interesting, and theoretically-relevant ideas that were not captured in the existing interview guide. Moreover, I probed for clarification when needed, which occurred at different rates across the interviews. I also encouraged participants to elaborate when they were vague or brief, or when it seemed that underlying meaning was assumed or implied by their responses.

Finally, the interview guide was dynamic such that questions were modified, added, and deleted as necessary throughout the research processes. For instance, in the middle of data collection I noticed an important pattern emerging when people did not feel they had successful careers; however, I was not asking people about it directly and thus I thought I might be missing valuable data. As a result, I added the question: “Tell me about a time you felt your career was not successful.” Also, to replace a poorly functioning item, I added the question “If you were asked to evaluate the success of a stranger’s career, what information would you need?” This item did not yield theoretically meaningful data, so it was later deleted. In general, I modified the interview



guide when questions became saturated, when they functioned poorly, and when I realized I was missing an important question or set of questions.

### Data

The final interview sample consisted of 44 respondents. Various occupations were represented: white-collar/bureaucratic (27%), pink-collar/service (27%), entrepreneurial (9%), professional (9%), blue-collar (3%), and other (25%); other occupations include students ( $n = 4$ ), retirees ( $n = 2$ ), artists ( $n = 2$ ), and unemployed persons ( $n = 3$ ). Ages ranged from early twenties to late seventies and were fairly evenly represented across this range. Of the current sample, 64% of participants were married, 32% had children, 84% were White, and 52% were female. I collected a total of 22 hours, 21 minutes of audio data and 518 pages of transcribed data (average of 30 minutes of audio and 12 pages transcribed text per participant).

## ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The overarching goal of this study was to develop an understanding of the construct of career success. With that goal in mind, the purpose of the data analysis was to identify insights leading to hypotheses or propositions about the nature of the theoretical construct. Specifically, I combined Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method with the open coding techniques described by Strauss and Corbin (1998). The constant comparative method includes creating categories, comparing categories, delimiting a theory, and writing the theory. Open coding entails reducing the raw data down to concepts and categories.

I cycled through these analytical techniques throughout the research process. Meanwhile, I continued theoretical sampling and data collection as needed. I also tracked my hypotheses, observations, negative cases, and emergent questions in memos, to which I referred while writing and refining the theory. Analyses were carried out on the transcribed interviews, audio files from the interviews, and survey responses using Nvivo 10, SPSS, and Microsoft Excel. Details about the analyses that led to specific findings are outlined with each finding below. Supplemental examples of methodological rigor are provided Appendix F.

### Diversity of Work Outcomes

I began by coding each participant's interview responses using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I coded words, ideas, and incidents into abstract underlying concepts, which reduced the data and allowed me to compare concepts across interviews. In particular, I identified and labeled everything that signified a work outcome or a definition of career success. For instance, when someone described their perception of a

successful career, I labeled all of the examples that he or she provided. I did not code antecedents to career success—i.e., examples of why someone felt they were able to achieve success—because I did not feel these concepts were relevant to understanding the construct of career success at this time.

The excerpt below illustrates how I performed open coding on the transcripts. The codes are identified with brackets and quotation marks.

For myself, I feel like my career success is that I am doing something that I enjoy [“Enjoy Work”] – that helps other people [“Helping People”]. I personally am not that interested in whether I make a bunch of money or not [“Not in It for the Money”]. I want to be helpful to people [“Helping People”]. And that’s where I get my enjoyment [“Intrinsic Need or Desire”] so, whatever career I have, I want to be out there interacting with people [“Social Environment”] and making their lives better [“Helping People”]. (From Big Papa<sup>1</sup> interview)

I coded conscious or intentional concepts as well as underlying or symbolic concepts that participants did not state explicitly. When Steven, for instance, described career success as “how happy you are”, this was coded as “happiness”, thus representing a concept intentionally or consciously stated by the participant. Big Papa, by contrast, described his experience as a surgical assistant, saying “to hold a beating heart in your hand is unreal”, which I coded as examples of “power” and “thrill”, even though he did not mention these concepts specifically.

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of participants. Participants were given the opportunity to select their own pseudonym or to have a pseudonym assigned by the interviewer.

Through the open coding process, I reduced 518 pages of transcribed data down to 347 career success concepts. A list of the codes corresponding to these concepts is provided in Appendix E. The most consistently discussed concepts were happiness, financial level, enjoying work, goal achievement, status, advancement, and being able to satisfy needs.

Each participant discussed somewhere between 25 to 117 unique career success concepts during his or her interview. These results indicate that career actors' perceptions of career success are much more complex than the existing literature would suggest. Specifically, existing conceptualizations of career success primarily include three concepts: money, advancement, and satisfaction (e.g., Judge & Hurst, 2008). While these three concepts were mentioned in many interviews, participants also described career success in terms of work outcomes not represented in the existing literature, such as job performance, work-life balance, contributing to society, contentment, fulfillment, doing what you want, feeling competent, love of work, power, prestige, recognition, not needing to work (e.g., retirement), and achieving potential.

To reduce the data further, I eliminated redundancies and sorted the codes into themes, from which eight higher order themes emerged: money and financial concepts, status and prestige, social esteem, self-esteem, affect or emotions, personal mastery, power, and utility. For example, money and financial concepts included anything that related to money, income, or financial needs, such as being able to provide for a family or making a six-figure salary. Moreover, the two esteem categories comprised concepts that referred to being highly regarded by either the self (self-esteem), such as achieving

personal goals, or by others (social esteem), such as being respected by peers. Table 5 contains definitions and exemplars from the data for all eight themes.

A complexity I observed while sorting codes into themes was how career actors discussed money. In the existing literature, money is conceptualized as annual salary, total annual compensation, or salary growth (e.g., Abele & Wiese, 2008; Judge & Hurst, 2008; Wolff & Moser, 2009). In the current data, however, participants discussed many more variations of money, including having “enough” money, making good money, making a lot of money, having enough to satisfy needs plus a little extra, being able to provide for family, earning six figures, earning minimum wage, being paid a “shit ton” of money, making more or less than others, and living paycheck to paycheck. Interestingly, many participants simply said the word “money”, without any further elaboration.

Beyond illustrating the large number of factors that individuals use to discuss career success, coding and sorting work outcomes did not yield additional insights about the theoretical construct. Thus, I reached saturation in coding work outcomes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I did, however, begin to notice that participants altered their descriptions of career success when they were provided with different prompts, which led me to the identification of additional categories, as described below.

❖ “Everyone Wants Money and Status, but I’m Different”

One of the first questions I asked participants was: How do you define career success for yourself? Similar questions have been used in past qualitative studies of career success (Briscoe et al., 2012; Hennequin, 2007). In response to this question, participants listed characteristics of careers that they desired. I thus created a category for

*personal definitions* of career success. Below are some prototypical responses that fall into this category.

Feeling content with the work that you do. That would be success in my book.

(Elle)

It would have been to where I could financially care for my family, in a career that actually uses my degree. (Heidi)

Setting personal goals that I can achieve now so that I can achieve what I really want later on. (O.B.)

Career success for myself is where I am happy and enjoying what I am doing.

When even on the bad days I still want to go to work, even if I don't make money.

(Sam)

Just keeping the house running like a business. Keeping the peace, keeping the kids doing what they need to do and everyone happy. (Sarah)

Happiness and monetary stability. (Steven)

I would like to, number one, enjoy my job and, number two, I guess have a stable job and be able to make enough money to provide for my family. (TT)

Happiness, because I truly think for you to be successful in anything that you do, you truly need to be happy, and it's something that you want to do. So I guess that comes to mind in anything that pertains to being successful and happy. To me, personally, money is not an issue. I want to be happy. (KJ)

The above responses exemplify the idiosyncrasy of personal definitions of career success. No two responses were the same. The most common concepts—enjoying work and happiness—were mentioned by less than 40% and 20% of respondents, respectively.

Of the eight broad open coding themes, affect or emotion (which includes both enjoying work and happiness) was mentioned most often, followed by financial concepts and self-related esteem concepts. While all eight themes were represented in personal definitions, social-related esteem and personal mastery concepts were mentioned least often. In general, responses for personal definitions were varied, with little coherence and few meaningful patterns.

Next, I asked participants how they thought “most people” defined career success. This is not a typical question asked in qualitative studies of career success. Exemplar responses, which I categorize as “*most people*” definitions, are as follows:

A lot of people would define it as how much money someone makes. Like if you don't make a six digit income, then you're not very successful. (Alan)

I think it's traditionally been a thing about how much money you make, where your office is located, which floor it's on, but I think we're starting to get more and more of what makes you happy. Do you feel completed by it? But, there's still a lot of emphasis on prestige, power, and wealth. (Bill)

That someone's good at their job, receives recognition for their hard work. Promotions are always kind of telling of a successful career. Maybe just happiness with what they do as well. (Charlie)

I think a lot of people define success as making a lot of money. (E.B.)

I think money, position, title, and, you know, basically having moved up the ladder. (Heidi)

I think many people define career success strictly financially, by the amount that somebody earns. That's just based on what I've heard people say, and many

people are willing to accept jobs that they don't find enjoyable just based on the compensation. (Jay)

Across the interviews, I observed a striking difference between the pattern of personal definitions and views about how "most people" define career success. When asked how "most people" define career success, all but four participants mentioned money and status. Thus, almost 90% of the sample thought that other people define career success by earning a large salary or by ascending in an organization. By contrast, only one-third of respondents included money or status in their personal definitions of career success; this means that participants' views about "most people" do not reflect the personal views of most of the participants in the sample.

I also observed a distinction *within* participant interviews. Many participants gave different responses for how they define career success for themselves and how they think most other people define career success. For instance, when asked how he defines career success for himself, RJ indicated, "I would say a sense of contributing in a meaningful way those talents that are bestowed upon you. And, being appreciated by others." Yet, he did not expect others to share this sentiment. Instead, when asked how he thinks most people define career success, RJ stated, "I would guess that most people would define career success by making a lot of money. I would think a lot of people, maybe not most, but many people would [define it as] the combination of making a lot of money and becoming more senior in, you know, in the ranks."

Like RJ, many participants implied that their response about "most people" did not apply to themselves. In fact, some participants explicitly excluded themselves from the "most people" category and reiterated their unique personal definition. For instance,



CC said, “A lot of people look at the power, the money. That’s what they call success. I’m not necessarily one of those people because I like to think that—I believe—the satisfaction that I get is from giving to others and seeing the results back at me.”

Even when there was conceptual overlap, the overlapping concepts were discussed more richly at the individual level than at the “most people” level. Many people, for instance, mentioned money somewhere in their personal definition of career success, however, it was not discussed as a blind pursuit of money. Rather, it was enough money to meet their needs without sacrificing too much elsewhere. By contrast, participants oversimplified the focus on money when discussing how they think “most people” define career success, as evidenced by participants simply saying “money”, without further clarification. Thus, money was important for some people in defining career success, but its importance in personal definitions was not as simple as people made it out to be when speaking for others. Interestingly, the way money is used in scholarly measures of career success reflects the simplified concept, which suggests to me that scholars have similarly (and wrongly) assumed that the simple pursuit of money is part of how most people define career success.

Given this discrepancy between my observations and the existing literature, I sought to understand this phenomenon further by conducting constant comparison analysis—i.e., the continuous comparison of data across and within categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I aimed to answer the following question: Why do participants provide definitions of career success for themselves that are different from the definitions they provide for “most people”? I developed several explanations, which are described below. As a note about author positionality, I interpreted the responses as reflecting what

participants were willing and able to share during the interviews. Responses may not perfectly represent what participants think and feel. Thus, I aimed to explain why participants would *say* what they said, whether or not it represented what they truly thought or felt. I acknowledge or predict discrepancies between what participants say and what they think when relevant.

#### ❖ Cognitive Dissonance

My first explanation for the difference between personal definitions and views about how “most people” would define career success relates to Festinger’s (1962) theory of cognitive dissonance. The theory purports that we often experience dissonant cognitions – or multiple simultaneous cognitions that are incompatible with one another – such as wanting to live a healthy lifestyle while not wanting to exercise. According to the theory, dissonant cognitions lead to discomfort. We thus strive to reduce the dissonance and restore our comfort. A common way to reduce the dissonance is to reframe one of the cognitions to be consistent with the other.

In terms of the current research, perhaps at the start of their careers, each participant shared the definition of career success that he or she said most people have. That is, perhaps participants defined their own career success in terms of money and status at the start. Yet, after a few years of working toward this aim, they found it difficult to achieve such measures of success. Their feelings about their career were thus dissonant with what they desired and as a result, they changed their personal definitions of career success to reflect something more attainable—such as satisfaction or enjoyment. In short, the cognitive dissonance explanation would work if most participants did in fact want

money and status at the start, and they had re-framed their view of career success when (or if) they found that money and status were unattainable.

I did, in fact, observe a direct case of cognitive dissonance in the interviews. One participant, Lisa, she said had many aspirations in the past that she now thinks were “immature”. She wanted to be her own boss, for example. When she realized the aspirations were unrealistic, though, she changed her perspective and career aspirations. When asked how she defines career success for herself now, she said, “If you’re happy with where you are—and, um, you know happy doing what you’re doing. You’re happy going to work, glad to have a job.” This is an example of cognitive dissonance because her career outcomes were inconsistent with how she defined career success, so she revised her definition of career success to eliminate the inconsistency.

Lisa’s case is an exception, however. Many people I interviewed had achieved or even exceeded the “money and status” benchmarks and still defined career success for themselves as something different. Suzanne, a physician married to a physician, earns plenty of money and has a high status job. She said most people define career success as “prestige, power, and income”, yet she defines career success for herself as “making a difference in the lives of my patients, improving their functionality and quality of life.”

Similarly, Jay successfully climbed the corporate ladder as a software engineer and provided a detailed definition of career success for himself, of which money is only a small piece. His personal definition is as follows:

I think it’s doing something that is enjoyable, that you don’t dread work every day. That you’re able to maintain some kind of work-life balance. That you are able to have a good personal life in addition to what you do at work, and you

make enough financially to feel like you're compensated adequately for what you do. It's also good to feel a sense of what you do is appreciated, even if it's just by your superiors and that there is some area to grow in your career.

These examples suggest that personal definitions of career success were not the result of cognitive dissonance.

#### ❖ Impression Management

Next, I hypothesized that participants might have provided a personal definition that is different from how they really define career success for themselves—i.e., by saying something different from what they think or feel. If they were self-conscious about their personal definitions, for instance, they might have been uncomfortable sharing their feelings. Instead, they might have provided a response that they felt was normal, acceptable, or less anxiety-provoking.

This relates to existing theory about impression management and social desirability bias. Impression management is when people represent themselves in a particular way to be seen favorably (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Paulhus, 1986). The social desirability bias is when people provide socially acceptable responses on surveys or during interviews, even if the responses do not reflect their true beliefs (Fisher, 1993; Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987). Thus, in line with these perspectives, perhaps people really do, internally, define career success the way they say "everyone else" does (i.e., money and status), but they did not admit it to me because they think it is socially unacceptable. Instead they projected their definition onto others when asked how they think "most people" define career success.

By contrast, participants were quite candid when reporting their own career success, even when it did not present themselves in a favorable light. When I asked Cat if she felt her career was successful, for instance, she said “yes and no”. She reported liking what she does—teaching dental hygiene at a community college—but that she wishes she could work full time and have more autonomy. Steven also said “yes and no”, citing that he watches the clock and often wishes he were doing something different. Elle simply said “no”, explaining how her poor job performance resulted in frequent negative feedback from her superiors, and Keith admitted feeling his career was going backwards. This frankness suggests that participants were not using very strong impression management. Thus, impression management or social desirability is an unlikely explanation for the discrepancy between personal and “most people” definitions of career success.

#### ❖ Pluralistic Ignorance

Another possibility is that participants really do have idiosyncratic definitions of career success for themselves, yet they think there is a cultural norm, distinct from their own definition, that most other people subscribe to. This resembles the concept of pluralistic ignorance, in which people believe everyone else thinks something is true, but they personally do not think it is true (Taylor, 1982). For instance, most participants think the public opinion about career success is that it comprises money and status; however, most participants privately describe their own career success as something else.

Consistent with this hypothesis, some participants cited social or cultural norms as an explanation for why they think most people seek money or status. As stated by RJ: “I do think that the money and the power thing – because we live in the society we do –

becomes somewhat overpowering sometimes, and therefore becomes a dominant thing.”

Moreover, while Bill does not refer to society specifically, he implies a collective understanding of career success. In his response about how most people define career success he said:

Well, I think it's changing. I think it's traditionally been a thing about how much money you make, where your office is located, which floor it's on. But I think we're starting to get more and more of what makes you happy. Do you feel completed by it? But there's still a lot of emphasis on prestige, power, and wealth, but I think that we are currently deviating away from that a little bit.

Upon further examination, I found that one participant, Jessica, did not differentiate her personal definition from how she thought most people would define career success. She defined career success for herself as being happy, having enough income to support her needs, and having a safe work environment. She later said most people would define it as “basically the same thing: being happy and being able to support yourself or whoever you're with financially, and being in a safe environment.”

Notably, Jessica was the *only* participant to say that “most people” would define career success the same way that she does. Additional analysis of this negative case revealed that Jessica had Asperger's syndrome. Asperger's syndrome, a mild form of autism, is a disorder characterized by an inability to perceive social cues (Santosi & Powell-Smith, 2006). Thus, if there were a social norm regarding the societal definition of career success—i.e., that it comprises money and status—it would make sense for participants, with the exception of Jessica, to provide responses consistent with this norm.

Further negative case analysis revealed that even those people who did not include money or status in their “most people” definition acknowledged that such a definition did, in fact, reflect a social norm. Val, for instance, admits “there is a financial success—financial gain—that drives a lot of people. That doesn’t drive me, but that does drive a lot of people.”

What makes these cases different from the rest is that these individuals did not see it as a universal norm. Phil, for instance, said career success is about getting “more money” in blue-collar occupations specifically, and that for *some* people it is about getting “up and up and up”. Cat said “I think there are some people who would think that making a lot of money is important, you know, constantly being rewarded financially”. She later specified that money would be important in banking occupations in particular. Keith claimed that only men seek money or status, because for females, he said, “there is a natural tension between career success and starting a family.”

In short, there seems to be a social or cultural norm about how most people are expected to define career success. Specifically, the norm is that career success is believed to be defined by “most people” as money and status. While most participants believe this norm exists, some challenged the norm by rejecting it as being universal. More importantly, whether or not they believe it exists, many participants did not subscribe to the norm themselves. Instead, they reported idiosyncratic personal definitions of career success.

Taken together, these findings shed light on the current state of the construct of career success. The idiosyncrasy of personal definitions means that the work outcomes reported in such definitions do not cohere to represent a common construct, hence why

personal definitions are not better represented in existing theory and research. Moreover, the normative definition (money and status) is a culturally acceptable—or even expected—definition that is attributed to “most people”. Consequently, it is not surprising that salary and hierarchical level are used as ubiquitous indicators of career success in extant research (Arthur et al., 2005). My findings, however, suggest that these indicators do not represent personal definitions of career success. Furthermore, by defining and measuring career success in terms of money and status in their research, scholars have given in to and perpetuated a norm that is based on pluralistic ignorance.

❖ Author Reflexivity: A Turning Point in the Analysis

After saturating the above finding, I realized that I was not closer to clarifying a theoretical construct. In fact, I noticed that my view of the data up to this point was heavily influenced by the existing literature: I was focusing almost entirely on work outcomes, which is how career success has been defined previously (Arthur et al., 2005; Judge et al., 1995; Judge et al., 1999a; Melamed, 1996). I, thus, started to question my focus on work outcomes as being a limitation or bias.

To overcome this bias, I referred back to my memos and searched for observations I had made that were distinct from, or broader than, work outcomes alone. Some observations I recorded, but had not yet developed, are as follows:

- People more readily reported evaluations rather than definitions of career success
- Participants compartmentalized time in their descriptions of career success



- Participants reported conceptual overlap between feeling a career is successful and feeling successful in life in general, but the overlap varied from one person to the next
- People used work outcomes to justify their evaluations of career success
- People provided a range of evaluations of career success
- Participants reported having ‘sub-careers’, or multiple occupational careers, within a lifetime career
- People differentiated between the work outcomes they used to define career success and the work outcomes used to evaluate career success

By revisiting my memos, I found that I had recorded a series of successive observations about participants’ *evaluations* of career success, to which I had not yet given much thought. Thus, I reoriented my focus to the category of “evaluation” and continued constant comparison analysis. For the sake of transparency, I wish to note that I observed evidence of both self-evaluations and other-evaluations in the data and decided to focus on only one at a time to ease analysis. Because I had already recorded more observations about self-evaluations, I chose to focus on self-evaluations until I reached theoretical saturation on either the category or my research questions, whichever came first.

#### ❖ Self-Evaluations of Career Success

To examine evaluations, I started coding responses to the question “Do you feel you have had a successful career?” Responses typically included an evaluation and rationale for the evaluation. For instance, Tracy said “I think I do [have a successful career], knowing that I can relate to people and help them out, plus provide for my

family.” In this example, “I think I do” is the evaluation, while the rest of her response is the rationale for her evaluation. Additional examples are below:

Currently I don’t think I have a successful career. The reason being I’m still young, I don’t think I have that career path that I want to take. I’m still exploring different jobs, different things. I haven’t quite found that niche. (Mr. B)

I think I’ve been as successful as I’ve wanted to be. I think I’ve made—achieved the goals that I wanted to achieve. I guess right now I kind of feel like I’m at a plateau. (Loretta)

On some levels yes, and on some levels no. Thus far, I would say yes on the personal growth and the enjoyment standpoint. I would say yes to some degree in the financial standpoint. And I would say up ‘till this point there’s some areas of no because there are certain goals that I have not hit yet. (K.A.)

I found that evaluations varied on a continuum ranging from negative to positive. When asked if participants felt their careers were successful, some of the positive evaluations provided were: “Yes”, “Yes, overall, but still many years to go”, “Yeah, for the most part”, “Yeah, very successful”, and “I think so.” All of the negative evaluations were a simple “No”, followed by a descriptive rationale. The rest were somewhere in the middle: “So far pretty successful, but not all of it”, “Somewhat up to this point”, “Yes and no”, “Part of it”, and so on.

In searching for negative cases, I found that Big Papa was the only participant to not evaluate his career when asked. He responded with descriptive information only, stating “I am happy with where I am at, but I wish I was doing something different.” He does give an evaluation later, however, when asked if his career is successful compared

to past and current aspirations. With regard to past aspirations he said “no”; with regard to current aspirations, he said “In some aspects no, but in the one that matters to me [...] yeah, I’m a success.” It is interesting to note that Big Papa alternated between saying “it’s a success” and “I’m a success”, suggesting that, for this participant, there is overlap between personal success and career success.

My negative case analysis revealed that all other participants—across various occupations, social groups, and career stages—provided an evaluation when asked. None said “I don’t know”, which suggests that the evaluation of career success was a conceivable concept for all participants (even Big Papa, who evaluated career success relative to aspirations). Notably, some did supplement their evaluation by saying that it’s “still too early to tell”, which suggests there might be a minimum amount of time in a career needed before the career can be evaluated.

Construct Development. I concluded that the above findings illustrate an abstract phenomenon characterized by *the extent to which an individual thinks that his or her own career is, was, or has been successful*. Furthermore, this characterization functions as a working definition for a theoretical construct, which I call *self-evaluated career success*. The proposed construct and definition are based on the following properties that I observed in the findings outlined above.

First, self-evaluated career success refers to *how people evaluate their own careers*. It is an individual’s self-evaluation. As such, it is a psychological construct, meaning it exists at the individual level—in the mind of each individual career actor—and cannot be seen directly by outside observers. This property is based on the observation that participants were able to evaluate their own career. When asked, for

instance, if they felt they had a successful career, all but one participant answered the question directly; the remaining participant nonetheless provided a self-evaluation later in the interview when asked about his career's success relative to his career aspirations.

This property also suggests that self-evaluated career success is bound by the career in question. This means that a career—defined as any amount of paid or unpaid work experience—must be present in order for it to be evaluated by the career actor. Moreover, self-evaluated career success refers to the evaluation of a person's career, not the individual person. Thus, it is theoretically imprecise to refer to a person as being successful or not—e.g., “*She* is successful”—when self-evaluated career success is the construct of interest; instead, the career must be the focus—e.g., “She has a successful *career*”.

The first property also suggests that self-evaluated career success is bound by the career actor whose career is in question. The career is evaluated by the career actor engaged in the career, not by any other person. Importantly, the construct itself is not bound by values, meaning it can be conceptualized and measured the same way for all career actors. Additionally, while the evaluations themselves might change over time—e.g., someone might feel their career is successful today, but something might change their mind tomorrow—the conceptualization of the abstract construct does not. Thus, the meaning of self-evaluated career success is not time dependent.

Second, self-evaluations are *based on an individual's own connotative understanding of career success*. The data suggest that individuals have their own ideas about the meaning of career success. Without being given a definition, individuals can and do evaluate their own careers. Thus, the construct of self-evaluated career success

reflects the individual's own abstract understanding of the phenomenon, rather than an external conceptualization of career success.

Third, evaluations themselves *exist on a continuum*. When asked if they felt their careers were successful, participants provided a range of responses. On one end of the continuum, participants said “no”; on the other, they said “yes, very successful.” There were also evaluations in between, such as “somewhat” or “yes and no”.

Fourth, and finally, self-evaluated career success refers to an individual's *overall* evaluation of his or her own career. It is a global perception that encompasses all areas of a career. This includes past and present aspects, as well as a career actor's perceived path toward the future. Keith, for instance, perceived his career to be “pretty successful” in the past, but less successful now and (with where he is heading) in the future. When relevant, the construct also includes multiple career stages, jobs, or work roles, which is based on the finding that Val and RJ said they felt that their careers were more successful during some work roles than during others.

As a caveat to this property, Bill and TT reported that it is “still too early to tell” if their careers are successful or not. Thus, some individuals might not evaluate their careers until they have accumulated enough time or experience in their career. This suggests a boundary condition in which there is a threshold for time spent in a career that must be exceeded for the self-evaluation to be meaningful or valid.

#### ❖ Evaluation as a Process

To further understand evaluations, I compared data across the following categories: work outcomes, self-evaluations, personal definitions, and rationale for self-evaluations. I found that evaluations were conceptually distinct from work outcomes.

Earning a large salary and being satisfied with the work, for instance, represent work outcomes. While such work outcomes might cause a participant to evaluate his or her career as successful, I found that they do not signify the evaluation itself. Consider the following response from Phil:

Yeah, I've had a very successful career. I've done interesting things. I've been able to transition from one job description to another within the same career field successfully, so it's allowed me to explore different aspects of my field. I've risen at a nice pace through my years—I'm not trying to become a vice president or anything—I like what I do.

Phil's evaluation indicates that his career is successful—i.e., “Yeah, I've had a very successful career.” He feels successful *because* he has advanced in his career and likes what he does; however, advancement in his career and liking what he does are not the same as *feeling* successful. Rather, advancement and liking the job are stimuli that trigger a particular response—i.e., the feeling. Thus, I observed a stimulus-response process in individuals' conceptualizations of career success.

In this process, work outcomes such as salary, work-life balance, and promotions are the stimuli, whereas the proposed construct, self-evaluated career success, is the response. That is, people evaluated their careers as successful or not *because* their careers comprise various work outcomes that they see as necessary for a successful career. This process resembles Boxes C and D in Figure 1, with the exception that the work outcomes (i.e., stimuli) could be *any* work outcomes, not just psychological outcomes as would be suggested by current conceptualizations of subjective career success in the extant

literature. Phil, for example, reported both advancement and liking his job as reasons why he evaluated his career as successful.

Proposition 1: Work outcomes lead to self-evaluated career success.

Although I consistently observed a relationship between work outcomes and self-evaluations in the data, the actual work outcomes that determined self-evaluations varied greatly across participants, much like the idiosyncrasy in personal definitions that I noted previously. While achieving honors led to a more positive self-evaluation of career success for Jane, making enough money to retire determined the positive self-evaluation for Megan. Moreover, the relationship between salary and self-evaluations was linear for some people and not linear for others, such that increases in salary had diminishing returns at higher levels. J, for instance, felt his career was not successful because he thought he should be making “30 to 40 thousand dollars” more per year and wants his salary “to keep increasing over time.” By contrast, Alan felt his career was successful because he made “enough money to get by”. Therefore, based on these observations, I do not expect the relationship between work outcomes and evaluations to be the same across all individuals. Instead, I expect it to depend on the person’s personal definition of career success.

Proposition 2: Personal definitions of career success moderate the relationship between work outcomes and self-evaluated career success.

#### ❖ Temporal Components of Evaluations

Given my previous observations that participants compartmentalized time in their responses and that their self-evaluations comprised multiple career stages, I next analyzed self-evaluations with regard to time. In particular, within evaluations and rationale for

evaluations, I coded for verb tense and for specific mentions of time-based concepts.

Consider J's evaluation of his career and his rationale below:

No, actually, I don't think [my career is successful]. It took 11 years for my MBA. I'm a senior manager running a business unit and I'm really learning business for the first time. [...] I should have been doing this five years ago, and today I would be—I should be like twenty positions ahead of this. So I look at myself and I see I've wasted a lot of time. [...] What I'm making right now, I should be making 30 or 40 thousand dollars more if I had that focus in my career earlier on.

In this response, J explains how his past progress has been slower than he desired—e.g., “It took 11 years” and “I should have been doing this five years ago.” He speaks in past tense in these examples and refers to elapsed time. He also describes his current status and speaks in present tense; he says “I'm a senior manager,” “I should be like twenty positions ahead of this,” and “I should be making 30 or 40 thousand dollars more.” Thus, J justifies his self-evaluation of his career in terms of past progress and his current position.

I observed other examples of past progress, too. When I asked Will to describe a time when he felt his career was not successful, he described his experience in graduate school when he realized it was going to take him an extra year to complete his degree. Also, when describing why they felt their careers were successful, Phil said “I've been able to transition from one job description to another [over time]” and Steven reported “I've been able to get promoted and work my way up.” Moreover, some people discussed past progress in terms of time elapsing up to the present. Tracy, for instance, said “up to



this point so far” her career has been successful because “everything has been on track.” Similarly, when talking about the financial aspects of his career success, Mark says “I’ve succeeded up to this point.”

Like J, additional participants spoke about the current status of their career as well. Lisa, for instance, said “Yes, I do have a successful career, and that’s because I am doing what I want to do and I’m helping people achieve their goals.” Similarly, Jessica said “Even though my income is not how I want at the moment, as of now I still find [my career] pretty successful.” Another example is from TT, who said “I get good feedback from my boss, it seems like the people I work with think that I do a good job, and I make enough money to provide for myself so it seems pretty successful.”

Next, negative case analysis revealed that not all past tense responses were based on elapsed time. Some participants spoke in past tense about discrete events or moments in time, without an emphasis on something occurring over time. Sarah, for example, described one of her past jobs when she explained why she felt her career was successful. “I got to get a job that I enjoyed, and traveled, and I was successful at it,” she said. Jane similarly spoke about her career during a past job. After saying she felt her career was successful, she said “because I was able to do what I loved to do, and I achieved honors from it, and made a living.”

The remaining references to time were when careers were discussed in the future tense. For instance, some participants reported moderate to low evaluations of their career success because they anticipated little to no future progress in their careers. When asked if she felt her career was successful, Cat said “yes and no”, because she wishes she could work more hours in the future, but she is “restricted to part time.” Hence, she anticipates

her future trajectory will be flat, given the time restrictions. Similarly, Loretta said, “Right now I kind of feel like I’m at a plateau”, anticipating little to no advancement in the future. Along the same lines, Keith anticipated the future when he said “[My] career is kind of on a stable plain”. On a more positive note, Chuck and Alan discussed the future with optimism, each by stating “I’m pursuing a path that I’m very happy with” and “It’s helping me get to where I want to go”, respectively.

These findings suggest that there are four dimensions of self-evaluated career success. The first dimension is the perceived success of past positions. By past positions I mean discrete points in time over the course of a person’s career to date. Such points in time could be long in duration, like a job that the person held, or they could be short in duration, such as a critical incident that occurred during one’s career thus far. This dimension could be based on a single time, or an accumulation of points in time, depending on how the person perceives it. Nonetheless, the past positions in this dimension are perceived to be static rather than as changing over time. A potential item that could be used to measure this dimension is: “I feel that my career was successful in the past.”

The second dimension is the perceived success of the past trajectory. Past trajectory refers to change in a career from the start until the present. Thus, the perceived success of the past trajectory is time dependent, such that the present is evaluated only as it relates to the past. One potential item that could be used to measure this dimension is: “I feel my career path has been successful so far.”

The third dimension is the perceived success of the current position. Current position refers to the person’s career at present. It is a single point in time and its

evaluation is independent of past or future aspects of the career; however, the evaluation is based on the accumulation of all present career outcomes and characteristics. A potential item that could be used to measure this dimension is: “I feel my career is successful today.”

The fourth dimension is the perceived success of the future trajectory. This refers to perceived success based on anticipated change in position or career outcomes over time in the future. This trajectory represents what people expect to happen in the future given knowledge of their current position. One potential item that could be used to measure this dimension is: “I feel that I am heading toward future success in my career”.

Although I identified four dimensions of self-evaluations, most participants provided a single evaluation—e.g., “Yes,” “no,” “somewhat,” etc.—when asked if their career was successful. Hence, they combined the dimensions into an overall evaluation. To examine the combination process, I compared each individual’s evaluation to the dimensions mentioned when justifying the evaluation.

Keith’s response provides an illustrative example of what I found. When asked if he felt his career was successful, Keith hesitated, and then said “I think I... I think I’ve been pretty successful”, in an unsure sounding tone. He continued to evaluate his career as being successful in the past (based on awards and advancement), but less successful now and in the future (based on lowered engagement and declining future progress), which contributed to his modest overall evaluation. Thus, Keith combined the four dimensions by averaging them in two parts (past and present).

Unlike Keith, most participants did not mention all four dimensions. When they mentioned two or more, however, they seemed to conceive of them in only two parts—

past and present—much like Keith did. More specifically, participants provided separate evaluations of past and present, but they had equal evaluations within the past and within the present. This pattern is illustrated in Keith’s response above: he evaluated his past positions and past trajectory the same way (i.e., as successful), he evaluated his present position and anticipated future trajectory the same way (i.e., as less successful), but he did not evaluate the past and present the same way (i.e., the former was successful and the latter was less successful).

This suggests to me that the two past dimensions (past positions and past trajectory) are conceptually similar enough that they can replace one another, or even stand alone, to reflect an individual’s evaluation of his or her career in the past. Thus, *perceived success of the past* is an intermediate dimension of the overall construct that reflects the commonality of past positions and past trajectory. Likewise, the two present dimensions (current position and anticipated future trajectory) can replace one another to reflect an individual’s evaluation of his or her career in the present. Therefore, *perceived success of the present* is an intermediate dimension of the overall construct and it represents the commonality of the present position and anticipated future trajectory. Together, the two intermediate dimensions combine mathematically to form self-evaluated career success.

Using the terminology of Law, Wong, and Mobley (1998), perceived success of the past and perceived success of the future are latent models of their respective dimensions because they exist on a different level than their dimensions and they reflect the commonality of their dimensions. The overall construct, by contrast, is an aggregate model of the two intermediate dimensions (perceived success of the past and perceived

success of the present), because these two dimensions can be combined into a single construct, but they are not correlated with one another; hence they combine algebraically to form self-evaluated career success, rather than reflecting it via their commonality. Thus, the data suggest that self-evaluated career success is a hierarchical multidimensional construct with both latent and aggregate features. Figure 3 depicts a model of the dimensions and overall construct.

Proposition 3a: Self-evaluated career success is an aggregate multidimensional construct formed by the algebraic combination of two dimensions: perceived success of the past and perceived success of the present.

Proposition 3b: Perceived success of the past and perceived success of the present are latent multidimensional constructs; the former reflects the commonality of past positions and past trajectory, whereas the latter reflects the commonality of the present position and anticipated future trajectory.

#### ❖ Implications of Evaluations

Next, although I had saturated the categories and characteristics comprised by self-evaluated career success, the implications of this newly developed construct were not clear. As a result, I examined the data for outcomes of self-evaluations. I sought to answer the question—how does self-evaluated career success affect career actors and organizations?

During this analysis, I found that some people reported working harder (or intending to work harder) when they did not feel their career was successful. In particular, they attempted to improve their self-evaluated career success by changing their work behavior. RJ, for instance, reported feeling unsuccessful in his career as an artist.

He said, “I got to work harder,” and explained how he aimed to work more (i.e., create more art) and improve his skills.

Similarly, Sam described a friend who defines career success competitively: “[My friend] likes competition and she has a drive to be the top sales person.” When this friend was not viewed as being the best, she did not feel her career was successful and was, thus, motivated to work harder to reclaim her rank. As described by Sam, “If you’re making more money than her, then she doesn’t like that. She does not like that your name is being called. She does not want that. She has to beat you, and she’s not going to stop until she gets it, until she gets to that level.” In these examples, feeling that their careers were unsuccessful resulted in increased work motivation.

More commonly, though, people reported changing (or intending to change) occupations or employers when they felt their career was not successful. Elle, for example, did not feel successful at her last job, so she quit. Also, Heidi said she would be happier and feel her career were more successful if she could be a full-time stay-at-home mom, because her paid job as a preschool teacher was unfulfilling. Hence, changing occupations or employers was another way that participants coped with low self-evaluations of career success.

Proposition 4: Self-evaluated career success is negatively related to work motivation, such that low self-evaluated career success leads to higher work motivation.

Proposition 5: Self-evaluated career success is negatively related to an individual’s intention to quit his or her current occupation or organization, such that low self-evaluated career success leads to a higher intentions to quit.

Negative case analysis and theoretical sampling revealed that taking action or desiring to take action—i.e., by working harder or changing employers—was not a consistent outcome among all participants. Some participants did *not* want to work harder or change their work situation when they evaluated their career as unsuccessful; however, they reported being uncomfortable with negative self-evaluations nonetheless. As a result, instead of taking action, they changed how they defined career success for themselves.

For instance, Lisa decided that her career goals were unattainable, such that she would never perceive her career to be successful based on her previous criteria for career success. As a result, she adjusted her criteria to be more achievable. In addition, RJ previously viewed happiness as a criterion for career success, yet he found himself in a career that paid a great deal of money and made him unhappy—thus, causing him to evaluate his career as unsuccessful. Consequently, he shifted his personal criteria for career success to more heavily emphasize money, which allowed him to improve his self-evaluation. These examples show how self-evaluated career success can lead to adjusted personal definitions of career success.

Proposition 6: Self-evaluated career success is negatively related to adjusting personal definitions of career success, such that low self-evaluated career success leads to more adjustments in personal definitions.

The above outcomes have two things in common: (1) they all result from low self-evaluations of career success and (2) they all result in higher self-evaluations of career success. Thus, I observed a consistent need to improve self-evaluations of career success when they were low. This observation resembles Festinger's (1962) cognitive dissonance

theory, which purports that people often experience dissonant cognitions – or multiple simultaneous cognitions that are incompatible with one another – such as wanting to have a successful career but feeling that the current career is not successful. According to the theory, dissonant cognitions lead to discomfort, which motivates people to reduce the dissonance.

Since people wanted to feel their careers were successful, a low or negative evaluation of their own career success was inconsistent (dissonant) with this desire. As a result, when evaluations were low, participants were motivated to improve their self-evaluated career success—i.e., to reduce the dissonance. In order to do so, they did one of three things: they changed their behavior (by working harder), they changed the situation (by switching occupations or employers), or they changed their cognition (by changing their personal definition of career success). Given this pattern of findings, the data suggest that motivation to change the current self-evaluation of career success mediates the relationships between self-evaluated career success and the three proposed outcomes.

Proposition 7: Motivation to change an individual's self-evaluated career success mediates the relationships between self-evaluated career success and its outcomes, such that low self-evaluated career success results in higher motivation to change the evaluation, which further results in increased work motivation, intention to change occupations or employers, or a revised personal definition of career success.

#### ❖ A Grounded Theoretical Framework of Self-Evaluated Career Success

In sum, during my data collection and analysis, I identified and developed a new construct: self-evaluated career success. I define self-evaluated career success as the



extent to which an individual thinks that his or her own career is successful. The proposed definition is based on four essential properties. First, self-evaluated career success refers to how people evaluate their own careers. Second, self-evaluations are based on an individual's own connotative understanding of career success. Third, evaluations themselves exist on a continuum. Fourth, self-evaluated career success refers to an individual's overall evaluation of his or her own career.

Self-evaluated career success is proposed to be a response to work outcomes, such that the relationship between work outcomes and self-evaluations varies as a function of an individual's personal definition of career success. I further propose that the construct is an aggregate construct composed of two subdimensions: perceived success of the past and perceived success of the present. These subdimensions are proposed to be latent models of further dimensions; success of the past trajectory and past positions reflect the former, while success of the present position and anticipated future trajectory reflect the latter. Finally, I expect low or negative self-evaluations to result in a desire to improve the evaluation, which will further result in one of the following: increased work motivation, intention to change occupations or employers, or a revised personal definition of career success. Figure 4 displays the proposed model of self-evaluated career success and its relationships with other constructs.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current research was to clarify and develop the construct of career success. To accomplish this, I used a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to collect and analyze qualitative interviews with career actors. I concluded that the concept of career success is complex and cannot easily be reduced to a single construct given the data at hand. This conclusion is based on two important discoveries. First, I found that participants thought “most people” define career success in terms of money or status, yet most participants did not subscribe to this definition themselves. Second, I found that work outcomes, such as salary and satisfaction, can be distinguished from the evaluation or feeling of career success. I, thus, observed and identified a new framework of career success centered on individuals’ self-evaluations. Together, these discoveries guided my development of a new construct: self-evaluated career success.

### Discovery #1: Public versus Private Opinions about Career Success

My first discovery stemmed from a combination of observations. In particular, I observed a great deal of variation in how participants defined career success for themselves; definitions included salary, flexibility, contentment, meaningfulness, and more. I found little variation, however, in how participants thought other people defined career success; participants consistently reported thinking that “most people” define career success as money or status. Moreover, on an individual basis, the definitions that participants gave for themselves were often different from how they thought other people would define it.

After ruling out competing explanations, I concluded that participants have idiosyncratic definitions of career success for themselves, yet they think there is a cultural norm, distinct from their own definition, to which most other people subscribe. This resembles the concept of pluralistic ignorance, in which people believe everyone else thinks something is true, but they individually do not agree with it themselves (Taylor, 1982). Specifically, most participants thought the public opinion about career success was that it comprises money and status; however, individually, most participants privately described their own career success as something else.

This cultural expectation that most people seek money and status is consistent with observations by other scholars. Weber (1920), for instance, described it as the Spirit of Capitalism and explained that the cultural norm has religious roots dating back to the Protestant Reformation. Weber asserted that the desire to accumulate wealth and status stems from Protestant uncertainty about going to heaven. Wealth and status, during this time, were seen as blessings from God and were interpreted as indicators that a person or family was “chosen” to go to heaven. Consequently, people sought wealth and status to reduce their anxiety about going to heaven, and thus the Spirit of Capitalism began.

Participants in the current sample, however, report different concerns, such as being able to pay bills or having time to spend with family. Nonetheless, a social norm prescribing people to seek money and status persists today, as indicated by the data. One possible explanation for why this social norm persists, regardless of individuals’ private definitions of career success, is related to the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). According to the theory, when people believe that their opinions represent a minority opinion, they fear social isolation from the majority group. Instead of speaking

out against the majority, they keep their opinions to themselves. Thus, even when private opinions on a subject change over time, the socially accepted opinion can remain unchanged if private opinions are not made public.

In the context of the current research, people who described wanting something other than money and status likely thought that they were in the minority. To avoid social isolation or alienation by revealing their private thoughts about career success, they stayed silent, allowing the existing social norm to remain unchallenged. As long as the social norm regarding career success persists, however, people who reject the norm privately will continue to feel they are in the minority. Thus, as individuals privately steer away from an emphasis on money and status over time, the shift in public opinion will lag until individuals are comfortable speaking against it. Such a lag is consistent with what I observed in the current data.

#### ❖ Implications for Research

The research implications of my first finding are that existing measures of so-called objective career success are based on a cultural norm that career actors do not appear to enact in their own evaluations of their careers. There are two issues with this. First, such measures are not valid representations of how career actors define career success for themselves. This issue is problematic because scholars claim to be basing their measures on career actors' personal definitions (e.g., Judge & Bretz, 1994). Second, scholars perpetuate the norm by imposing it onto measures of career success. By continually reproducing career success research based on money and status, scholars participate in normalizing these as socially perceived indicators of the concept. Thus, my findings could serve as a cautionary tale regarding measures that are not grounded in

systematic observation because such measures could lead to invalid conclusions, which—if applied by career actors, policymakers, or employers—could lead to fruitless initiatives.

#### ❖ Implications for Organizations

Furthermore, organizational reward structures often reflect the cultural norm that employees seek money and status; however, my findings suggest that individuals seek much more than that from their careers, including autonomy, fulfillment, recognition, personal mastery, and so on. These findings support existing theory and research on motivation, such as job characteristics theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1980) and the two-factor theory (Herzberg, 1959), which state that, in addition to income, people seek autonomy, fulfillment, and variety in their work. Hence, the implications for employers are that they might benefit from investing in reward structures that are broader than salary increases and promotions, particularly if they are trying to offer rewards that match what employees seek from their careers.

Another implication is that organizations may not get accurate information about employee career preferences if that information is requested in a public format, such as in focus groups or during meetings, because employees may hesitate to provide their private thoughts if they feel their thoughts are different from those of everyone else. Thus, if employers wish to address the previous implication and create reward structures that match employee desires, they should avoid seeking feedback about such desires in public. Anonymous information-seeking measures, such as an anonymous survey, might work better.

## Discovery #2: Self-Evaluations of Career Success

Although the discovery of pluralistic ignorance in career success definitions was meaningful, focusing on how people defined career success did not get me closer to understanding or developing a theoretical construct, which was the original goal of this research. In particular, the work outcomes that participants used to define career success did not cohere into a single construct or set of constructs. Consequently, I began to focus on how participants evaluated career success instead.

From this endeavor, I found that individuals reported an overall evaluation of their careers and that their evaluations varied on a continuum ranging from negative to positive. I also found that evaluations were conceptually distinct from the work outcomes that determined them. Earning a large salary and being satisfied with the work are examples of work outcomes that I identified. While I found that work outcomes might cause a participant to evaluate his or her career as successful, I noticed that such work outcomes did not signify the evaluation itself.

Based on these findings, I introduced and proposed a new theoretical construct: self-evaluated career success. I defined self-evaluated career success as the extent to which an individual thinks that his or her career is, was, or has been successful. I used the data to develop theory centered on this construct, meanwhile answering my initial research questions and addressing Suddaby's (2010) four elements of construct clarity. Importantly, all theoretical developments and predictions were grounded in findings from the current research.

❖ Research Question 1: What Are the Essential Properties of the Construct?

In response to my first research question, I proposed four essential properties of self-evaluated career success. First, self-evaluated career success refers to how people evaluate their own careers. Second, self-evaluations are based on an individual's own connotative understanding of career success. This means that participants might have thought of salary, work-life balance, or something else when they evaluated their careers; importantly, the *process* of evaluating their own careers was independent from the criteria that determined their evaluations. Thus, this property reflects my expectation that different people choose different criteria when making their own evaluations. Third, evaluations themselves exist on a continuum; they are not discrete or dichotomous. Fourth, and finally, self-evaluated career success refers to an individual's *overall* evaluation of his or her own career.

Note that these are definitional statements, proposed based on systematic observation. Given that they are definitional statements, each likely cannot be tested empirically on its own because each individual statement is not falsifiable. What can and should be tested, however, is that they cohere with one another such that they function to describe and classify a particular phenomenon—a phenomenon that I have called self-evaluated career success. Future research can also test whether or not the definitional statements function to distinguish the phenomenon from other similar phenomena, such as career satisfaction or objective career success.

Next, the purpose of the essential properties is to identify all of the characteristics or qualifications that a phenomenon needs to have to be identified as self-evaluated career success. This means that if an observed phenomenon is missing one or more of the

properties outlined above, then I would not classify that phenomenon as self-evaluated career success. For example, if a career is evaluated by someone other than the career actor, then such an evaluation is inconsistent with the essential property of being *a person's evaluation or his or her own career*. As a result, the evaluation would not be classified as self-evaluated career success.

Such nuanced details are important because they limit my remaining propositions to phenomena that precisely fit the proposed essential properties. The dimensions, scope conditions, and relationships I propose are specific to self-evaluated career success as outlined by the essential properties proposed here. For instance, I would not expect the proposed model displayed in Figure 4 to be supported empirically if self-evaluated career success were replaced with a similar yet distinct construct, such as job satisfaction. While parts of the proposed model in Figure 4 might resemble previously supported relationships with job satisfaction (Proposition 5 for example, see Tett & Meyer, 1993), the model in its entirety is only expected to withstand testing when centered on the construct of self-evaluated career success as defined by *all* of the proposed essential properties.

❖ Research Question 2: What Are the Boundary Conditions of the Construct?

Next, I proposed three scope, or boundary conditions, for the construct. First, self-evaluated career success is bound by the career in question, which means that self-evaluations of a career cannot occur if there is no career to evaluate. Recall that a career is an accumulation of work roles over the course of an individual's life (Arthur et al., 1989; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Thus, self-evaluations of other things—such as a person or a single job—do not represent self-evaluated career success. An evaluation of an entire



person would be beyond the scope of the construct because it would include non-work related roles, such as family or social roles. An evaluation of a job would fall within the scope of self-evaluated career success, because it represents an evaluation of a work role; however, it would be conceptually deficient because it does not capture the accumulation of all work roles that a person has experienced.

Second, self-evaluated career success is bound by the career actor whose career is in question. This requires that the career be enacted and evaluated by the same person. Thus, evaluations by anyone other than the career actor engaged in the career fall outside the scope of self-evaluated career success. For instance, a scholar's evaluation of a research participant's career would not represent self-evaluated career success. Moreover, this boundary condition relates to the proposed essential property stating that self-evaluated career success is based on an individual's own connotative understanding of career success. More specifically, my data suggest that individuals hold themselves to their own standards, which can be distinct from the standards to which they hold others, distinct from the standards applied to them by others, and distinct from the standards that scholars apply to them.

Third, I proposed that there is a threshold for time spent in a career that must be exceeded for the self-evaluation to be meaningful or valid. A shortcoming of this proposition is that I have insufficient data to specify a particular threshold. For instance, the threshold might be related to the first scope condition, which specifies that self-evaluated career success is bound by the concept of a career, because a career is generally based on multiple work experiences; hence, the minimum threshold for the amount of time needed to evaluate a career might be met once a person has experienced more than

one work role. It could also be that some career actors, regardless of the number of work roles, have yet not experienced enough work outcomes—e.g., positive or negative feedback, change in pay, fulfillment, etc.—to construct a positive or negative evaluation of their careers. In this latter scenario, the minimum threshold for time in a career might depend on having enough information for an evaluation, which is gained by accumulating sufficient work outcomes. Thus, two questions for future inquiry are: (1) how much time in a career is needed to make an evaluation, and (2) how should the time span be determined or measured?

In sum, these scope conditions represent the proposed conceptual boundaries of the construct. They identify where the concept of self-evaluated career success begins and ends and provide a guide for how the construct can be distinguished from other constructs. Similar to the essential properties, the scope conditions are also useful in specifying the phenomenon of interest in my causal propositions. In particular, the model in Figure 4 is only proposed to apply to phenomena that meet the boundary conditions described here.

#### ❖ Research Question 3: How Does the Construct Relate to Existing Constructs?

While self-evaluated career success is similar to existing career success constructs, it differs from extant constructs in many ways. First, it differs from extant definitions of career success. As shown in Table 1, career success has been defined as positive and desirable work outcomes or achievements (Arthur et al., 2005; Judge et al., 1995). Based on the current research, I propose that self-evaluated career success is a psychological response to work outcomes or achievements. Thus, extant definitions of career success do not apply to self-evaluated career success as proposed here.

Second, self-evaluated career success differs from objective career success.

Objective career success has been defined as verifiable career attainments, such as salary, hierarchical status, and promotions (Heslin, 2003). Self-evaluated career success, by contrast, is a psychological construct, making it neither easily observable nor measurable by others, and thus, not objective. Moreover, similar to its relationship with extant definitions of career success, self-evaluated career success is proposed to be a result of work achievements such as salary, status, and promotions, thereby making it distinct from objective career success which comprises such achievements.

Third, self-evaluated career success also differs from what is currently called subjective career success. Subjective career success, as used in the extant literature (e.g., Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005), refers to a category of work outcomes that have one thing in common: the way they are observed. Specifically, they are work outcomes that can only be experienced and reported by the career actor him or herself. Examples are job satisfaction, career satisfaction, and other-referent career success. Notice these exemplars are all psychological constructs, which is consistent with my proposed conceptualization of self-evaluated career success.

What differs, however, is that self-evaluated career success is a consequence of these other psychological constructs. Thus, I propose that feeling satisfied with one's job causes a career actor to evaluate his or her overall career as successful. Said differently, I use causal order and temporal precedence to tease apart self-evaluated career success from extant conceptualizations of subjective career success. Subjective career success, when defined as psychological work outcomes such as job satisfaction or career satisfaction, precedes self-evaluations of career success in a causal chain.

In addition to the conceptual relationships with the constructs described above, I propose that self-evaluated career success has additional causal relationships with three constructs. First, I expect self-evaluated career success to affect work motivation (Proposition 4). Specifically, when people do not feel that their career is successful, I expect this negative feeling to motivate some individuals to work harder. Working harder should result in more favorable career achievements, which will in turn lead to a more favorable self-evaluation of the career. Thus, this proposition is based on the expectation that individuals are motivated to improve their self-evaluations of their career when such evaluations are low or negative (Proposition 7).

Second, other participants indicated that they changed occupations or employers when they felt their career was not successful. Thus, I proposed that negative self-evaluations of career success can lead to turnover intentions (Proposition 5). Also based on the expectation that individuals wish to improve negative evaluations, if individuals feel that working harder will not make them feel their career is successful, they will seek other options. Finding a new job or employer, as proposed here, is one such option.

Third, I proposed that negative self-evaluations of career success cause the remaining individuals to change their personal definition of career success (Proposition 6). In particular, I expect people to resort to this outcome when they feel their career is unsuccessful and they believe that neither working harder nor changing their work situation (i.e., occupation or employer) will make them feel more positively about their career success. The individuals who reported this response to feeling unsuccessful were also the least hopeful of the current sample, thus, I interpret this response as being an individual's last resort, when all other options have been exhausted.

All three of my proposed outcomes of self-evaluated career success are consistent with cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1962), which states that people aim to reduce the discomfort, or dissonance, they experience when their feelings (e.g., self-evaluations of their careers) are inconsistent with their desires (e.g., wanting to have a successful career). More specifically, the three methods of reducing discomfort that I observed in the current study—changing behavior, changing the situation, and changing cognitions—are consistent with the theory.

❖ Research Question 4: How Does the Construct Relate to Relevant Processes?

I listened to participants differentiate between their career achievements and the feeling they experienced when they thought their careers were successful. Moreover, they described their work outcomes as rationale for their feelings of success, thereby indicating a causal relationship in which work outcomes lead to feelings—or self-evaluations—of career success. As a result, I proposed a causal relationship between work outcomes and self-evaluated career success (Proposition 1). This can be described as a stimulus-response process whereby work outcomes are the stimuli and the feeling or evaluation of success is the response.

My data further suggest that the relationship between work outcomes and self-evaluated career success differs across individuals. For J, for instance, earning a higher salary than his peers has a strong effect on his feelings of career success, whereas for Sarah, enjoying her current job has a stronger effect. I thus used these observations to add a contingency to Proposition 1, such that I expect individuals' personal definitions of career success to moderate the relationship between their work outcomes and their self-evaluations of career success (Proposition 2). Future research could be used to link this

proposition to work values (Johnson, Sage, & Mortimer, 2012) or vocational interests (Strong, 1943) by identifying antecedents to personal definitions of career success and expanding upon the model proposed in the current research.

#### Research Question 5: How Do the Dimensions Relate to the Overall Construct?

Finally, I found that participants compartmentalized their feelings about career success into distinct temporal categories. Categories were characterized by either past or present, and by occurring at a single point in time or occurring over time. I thus proposed that these categories represent dimensions of career success and I further developed predictions about how the dimensions relate to the higher-order construct of self-evaluated career success.

More specifically, I proposed that an individual's perception of the success of his or her career in the past and in the present can be combined algebraically to form the overall construct of self-evaluated career success (Proposition 3a). The actual algebraic formula has yet to be determined and can be identified via future quantitative research and regression analysis. For instance, a measure of overall self-evaluated career success can be regressed onto the dimensions of past and present career success. The resulting regression coefficients would represent the weights of each dimension to be used when combining them to form the higher-order construct.

I also proposed that perceptions of the past career and the present career can each be further divided into positions that occur at a single point in time and trajectories that occur over time. The data suggested that past positions and past trajectories correlate with one another and hence, I proposed that the dimension of perceived success of the past represents the empirical and conceptual commonality of perceptions of past positions and

perceptions of past trajectories. Being defined by commonality means the dimension is a latent model, as described by Law and colleagues (1998). I observed the same pattern of results, and thus proposed a latent model as well, for the dimension of perceived success of the present (Proposition 3b).

This proposition can be tested via factor analysis of items that represent each aspect of the dimensions. For instance, I provided sample items that indicate each of the four proposed subdimensions of self-evaluated career success. “I feel that my career was successful in the past” indicates perceived success of past positions. “I feel my career path has been successful so far” indicates perceived success of the past trajectory. “I feel my career is successful today” indicates perceived success of the current position. “I feel that I am heading toward future success in my career” indicates perceived success of the future trajectory based on the present situation. To support Proposition 3b, I would expect two factors to emerge from a factor analysis of these four items: one factor that loads on the first two items, and one factor that loads on the latter two items. Future research should be carried out to test this proposition.

#### ❖ Implications for Research

Implicit in my proposed construct and model is a concern about using particular work outcomes as universal indicators of “subjective” career success, which I have seen frequently in existing research (see Arthur et al., 2005 for examples). While subjective career success has been defined as a self-evaluation (Peluchette, 1993), it is instead measured via work outcomes such as job or career satisfaction (e.g., Ng et al., 2005). I argue, though, that the relationship between work outcomes and self-evaluations is neither perfect nor constant across individuals. Thus, when the self-evaluation is of

interest in research, work outcomes, even subjective work outcomes, should not be used in its place.

Notably, there is one instance in the extant literature in which an overall self-evaluation of career success was measured directly. Heslin (2003) assessed individuals' self-evaluations with the following item: "Everything considered, how successful do you consider your career to date?" He then regressed this evaluation onto self-referent and other-referent work outcomes—e.g., "I have accomplished my career goals" and "I have advanced more quickly than my peers", respectively—to identify the statistical importance of such work outcomes. In this scenario, the self-evaluation was used to validate the use of work outcomes as indicators of career success, rather than as a focal variable or indicator of career success itself.

Thus, the proposed construct model contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, the model adds theoretical precision to the construct space of career success. For instance, I explicitly distinguish between work outcomes and self-evaluations, and I make predictions about how they relate to one another. Second, I develop theory about the dimensions and structure of the construct, which I supplement with sample items that could be used by scholars to develop a measure of self-evaluated career success. Third, I have identified potential outcomes of self-evaluated career success, whereas the previous literature has focused on career success itself as the final outcome in a causal chain (Ng et al., 2005).

A further implication of the proposed construct model is that there is no longer an excuse to conflate work outcomes with self-evaluations of career success. While it might have been assumed in the past that satisfaction was equivalent to feeling successful, the



current findings suggest that this is not the case. Not only did many participants distinguish between their self-evaluations and their satisfaction with their careers, I observed several instances in which a participant's satisfaction was a causal determinant of his or her self-evaluation, thereby preceding it. These findings suggest conceptual boundaries that separate self-evaluations of career success from work outcomes, such as satisfaction. As a consequence, to enhance theoretical precision, I recommend that scholars specify whether it is work outcomes, such as satisfaction, or self-evaluations that are of interest in their hypotheses and research questions in the future.

#### ❖ Implications for Organizations

The proposed model also has implications for organizations. First, the proposed model is important for organizations because it suggests that self-evaluations of career success can affect actions, decisions, and attitudes in the workplace. In particular, my data suggest that low or negative self-evaluations of career success can result in increased work motivation or an employee's intention to quit his or her job, both of which have consequences for the employer. While increased work motivation is desired by employers, employee turnover—which results from intentions to quit (Tett & Meyer, 1993)—is not. Thus, organizations would likely want to know when and how negative self-evaluations lead to work motivation, as opposed to intentions to quit, so that they can increase output and reduce costs.

The second organizational implication relates to the incremental validity of self-evaluated career success over job satisfaction in predicting turnover. I have proposed here that self-evaluated career success is distinct from job satisfaction and that negative self-evaluations of career success can lead to turnover. Because turnover is costly for

organizations, and research has consistently demonstrated a negative relationship between job satisfaction and turnover (Tett & Meyer, 1993), organizations dedicate time and money to track and manage employee job satisfaction with the goal of managing turnover. The current research suggests, however, that it might be worthwhile to track and manage employee's feelings about their career success in addition to or in place of job satisfaction. Thus, organizations have the potential to benefit from future research aimed at testing the proposed model, especially research that examines the validity of self-evaluated career success as a predictor of turnover.

#### Limitations of the Findings

It is important to note the limitations of this research when drawing conclusions from it. First, the results of this study are theoretical propositions that have not yet been verified. The study was designed with the explicit purpose of generating theory. Therefore, the research design is not suitable for testing the current propositions. Before drawing conclusions from the proposed model or acting on the organizational implications, scholars should use theory-testing methods to examine the relationships proposed here.

Second, given the purpose of this research, data collection and participant recruitment continued until I reached theoretical saturation on core categories, namely self-evaluated career success. The final sample size of 44 participants, consequently, does not support generalization to the population of career actors. Furthermore, the sample is diverse in terms of occupations, age, career stages, and other demographic characteristics, with few cases in each category, making it impossible to observe contextual effects

across these characteristics. Instead, the current findings are intended to: (1) generalize to theory and (2) serve as a guide for future inquiry on a newly developed construct.

Third, during my data collection and analysis I observed a pluralistic ignorance effect, in which individuals defined career success for themselves differently than they felt most people defined career success. The current study, however, was not designed to examine this phenomenon. Moreover, this discovery did not address the intended research questions, so I ceased analysis of it in favor of answering the original research questions. Thus, the analysis of this finding is incomplete and should be examined with additional theory-generating research.

Fourth and finally, the scope of the current research was to develop and clarify a construct. Hence, I have proposed theory about only one career success construct: self-evaluated career success. The data suggest, however, that there are multiple constructs that make up the umbrella term “career success”. While any conclusions drawn from the current research should be limited to the focal construct, future research should examine and clarify additional constructs, such as perceived career success as evaluated by others (i.e., other-evaluated career success). Furthermore, a long-term goal for the field of career success research could be to develop an exhaustive framework that spans the entire construct space of career success. Such a goal is beyond the scope of the current research and is likely too large to be achieved in any single research study.

### Conclusion

Despite the limitations, this research increases our understanding of career success. The primary contribution, which is consistent with the intended purpose of the research, is that I have clarified the construct space by developing the construct of self-

evaluated career success. Rather than replacing current conceptualizations of career success, I have identified conceptual boundaries and expanded current theoretical frameworks. In other words, I do not suggest that self-evaluations are the only way to conceptualize career success. I do, however, suggest that they represent one of many ways to conceptualize career success and that this conceptualization has important and unique implications for research and organizations.

In short, the propositions resulting from this research place new emphasis on a person's evaluation of his or her own career, along with the potential outcomes of such an evaluation. The findings, thus, provide a framework and theoretical propositions by which to examine and use self-evaluations of career success in the future. My hope for this research is that the proposed model will be tested and refined, and that it will generate additional inquiry on the nomological network of career success.

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## APPENDIX A: TABLES

TABLE 1: Definitions of career success in the existing literature

Definition	Source
“Positive psychological or work-related outcomes or achievements one has accumulated as a result of one’s work experiences”	Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz 1995, p. 486
“Subjective and objective aspects of achievement and progress of an individual through an organization or an occupation”	Melamed, 1996, p. 217
“Real or perceived achievements individuals have accumulated as a result of their work experiences”	Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999, p. 622
“Accomplishment of desirable work-related outcomes at any point in a person’s work experiences over time”	Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005, p.179

TABLE 2: Initial target characteristics for pilot sample diversity

Characteristic	Dimensions or Categories
Occupation	Blue-collar; pink-collar; bureaucratic; professional; entrepreneurial; other
Age	18-25; 35-50; 50-65; 65 & up
Race/Ethnicity	EEOC categories
Sex	Female; male
Household Income	BLS/Census Quintiles
Marital Status	Not married or partnered; married or partnered; divorced or separated
Family Status	No children; young children; adolescent children; grown children

TABLE 3: Varying definitions of career success

Participant Pseudonym	Interview Question		
	What comes to mind when you hear the words 'career success'?	How do you define career success for yourself?	How do you think most people define career success?
Bill	<p>Uh... I see flashes of people who are deemed successful by our society.</p> <p>Usually there is an amount of prestige to a job, salary, the corner office, yeah.</p>	<p>For me it will be a job that affords the lifestyle that I want or that I desire, that allows room for flexibility.</p>	<p>Well I think it's changing, I think its traditionally been a thing about how much money you make, where your office is located which floor it's on, but I think we're starting to get more and more uh of what makes you happy, do you feel completed by it, but there's still a lot of uh emphasis on prestige, power and wealth but I think that we are currently deviating away from that a little bit.</p>
Cat	<p>Career success. I would say... being... satisfied and fulfilled by your career. [pause] Getting satisfaction from it.</p>	<p>For myself... I think that I have been successful in influencing my students. You know, to make a difference in helping them to become successful themselves. [pause] Um, and just being a good role model for them, you know, when they get out.</p>	<p>I think it's what career you are in, would define, would, you would have different definitions of success.</p> <p>You know in my career, teaching, basically is teaching, and health care, you know. You want to influence, not only the students but also the patients, in their... health, You know, overall health.</p>

Participant Pseudonym	Interview Question		
	What comes to mind when you hear the words 'career success'?	How do you define career success for yourself?	How do you think most people define career success?
Charlie	Uh ideally just someone who – career success – I uh, who's challenged, whose uh met the challenges and vigors of his career, advanced up the ladder, and who is content with where they are at the moment.. and is always kinda you know aspiring to be better at what they do.	Uh right now career success was getting the job in the first place. And then you know, hopefully down the road getting a promotion, eventually moving into management, and then going from there.	That's uh a good question, uh. I think uh kinda that someone's good at their job, receives recognition for their hard work, uh promotions I guess are always kind of telling of a successful career. Uh maybe just happiness with what they do, as well, you know someone who seems really in love with what they do can be viewed as a success.
Elle	Um, feeling content, with, the... work that you do. That would be success in my book.	[Same as 'what comes to mind'? response.]	I think that most people probably define it, more so by stature and monetary value.
Jane	Well, contentment, happiness... uh achievement... hopefully a decent living.	Uh, basically it is to be able to do what I wanted to do, ultimately. Uh and I was able to do what I wanted to do, and succeeded at it.	Uh, I would hope... that they'd define it as doing something that they really loved doing, uh rather than just making money.

Participant Pseudonym	Interview Question		
	What comes to mind when you hear the words 'career success'?	How do you define career success for yourself?	How do you think most people define career success?
Jean	Career success. It has to be something to me that fulfills you that satisfies you, you feel that you've reached where you wanted to go. Um it's not always about the money; it has to be you achieved your goal.	Well, I reached my career success before I became a stay at home mom at um, I became a partner in a property management firm and I was fulfilled. I did everything I wanted to do, accomplished it and then I decided to start a family and now I'm back at work again. And for that my career success is fulfilling in the essence that I can go and have adult time and do things but yet I still have the balance that I can come home and still be with my kids.	Most people would define it by their title and the amount of money they make.
Loretta	I guess for some people they have a defined um timeline of how they want to succeed in a career path, so to speak. Some folks start say at the bottom at an entry level position and they- their goal in life is to either be a managing position or uh an officer in a company. So for me when you talk about a career I guess I associate that more with the corporate world.	I would say I probably haven't found it yet.	I guess pretty much... they set goals for themselves with where they want to be monetarily, where they want to be in the company as far as ranking from bottom of the barrel to top of the barrel and as they climb that ladder they feel as though they're achieving, I guess, their ultimate goal.  At least that's what I've observed in others around me.

Participant Pseudonym	Interview Question		
	What comes to mind when you hear the words 'career success'?	How do you define career success for yourself?	How do you think most people define career success?
Mandy	Career success... let's see, I guess getting to where you want to be to where your happy with um with what you want to do for the rest of your life.	Well I want to get good grades all throughout school, try my hardest, um graduate with my degree in psychology and then go to grad school and be a certified occupational therapist, then I'll be successful in my career after I finish all of that.	Umm I think just if they, I guess, get a degree, in order to move forward you have to have a degree and I guess getting to where they have their goals set.
Mr. B	Owning my own business, and it being a successful thriving business.  Something that I can eventually turn over to one of my own kids and they can run it, and I can retire to the mountains and never have to deal with it again.	It's an interesting question... I've never had to think about that really.  I guess I would define career success to myself as... I'm not sure to be honest with you. I've never had to think about it...	Hmmm... <i>[pause]</i> I don't know. I don't know how to answer that question. Maybe by being able to buy their own home, pay all their bills, and keep maintaining their lifestyle.



Participant Pseudonym	Interview Question		
	What comes to mind when you hear the words 'career success'?	How do you define career success for yourself?	How do you think most people define career success?
Phil	<p>Satisfaction. Doing something you like to do, doing something you enjoy doing, not that... we don't all have blue Mondays where it's like "oh god I have to go to work again" but, you know a job that you're proud of what you do. You can say to your kids "I do this" and they go "oh really? That's cool," uh, or you can say to your, your cohorts, uh yeah this is what I do and they say "oh wow, that sounds kind of neat" and you say "yeah, well, you know what, it is neat, I like my job." And "what I'm doing makes a difference." It's not a big difference, I mean it's not like I'm solving malaria, people I work with do solve malaria problems, but I've got a small piece of a big puzzle and it's a positive piece, it's doing something important.</p>	<p>Well, going to work every day, and trying to use... my intellect and imagination to find ways to do the job better, or find ways to stretch the market, or find ways to positively motivate people around me, but basically being positive and doing good work.</p>	<p>Well for people in my kind of positions, probably fairly similar. For people in other positions, more blue collar positions I think it might be uh a little bit more basic, I've got a good job, I'd like to get more money next year if I can, I've got to keep this health plan going 'cause my family needs it. Uh, I mean success can be basically survival in the workforce. For some people its survival in the workforce, for some people it's career advancement and uh people who are very avaricious about getting up and up and up, uh, I guess I'm somewhere in the middle there.</p>

Participant Pseudonym	Interview Question		
	What comes to mind when you hear the words 'career success'?	How do you define career success for yourself?	How do you think most people define career success?
RJ	<p>Um... hm... <i>[pause]</i>... career success... <i>[thinking to himself]</i>... um... I would say, um, a sense of, um, contributing, uh, in a meaningful way, those talents that are bestowed upon you. And um, and that being appreciated. By others.</p> <p>You know, acknowledged. Probably even more so than appreciated, acknowledged probably is, probably a better term.</p>	<p>[Same as 'what comes to mind'? response.]</p> <p>And I feel exactly the same way about [my career in] art as I do about the career in banking, with that statement. Those are the same statement-, that's the same statement.</p>	<p>Well I would guess that most people would define career success, uh, by making a lot of money. I would think, a lot of people, maybe not most, but many, many people would, would um... would, would be the combination of making a lot of money and, becoming more senior in, you know, in the ranks, if you will. <i>[Pause.]</i> Now, you know, that, you know, a lot of people, I think, I think for a lot of people, the idea of, of, um... you know feeling good about what they're doing, and again, feeling like they're making some contribution to that, I think is certainly important as well.</p>

Participant Pseudonym	Interview Question		
	What comes to mind when you hear the words 'career success'?	How do you define career success for yourself?	How do you think most people define career success?
Tracy	Umm I would think of um being able to you know be really really good and master um, the you know, the skills um that you are that are required in your job, um pretty much being able to achieve your goals and um being able to finish everything very efficiently, um, and having a good networking um being respected by your peers um that would what comes to mind.	Um for myself right now at my level, I'm at the entry level so pretty much uh I do what I'm told to do and just being able to you know do everything, what I'm told to do really good and really efficiently. Um also I set goals at the begging of the year you know what I need to achieve by the end of the first year and hoping that at the end I would be able to achieve this goal as well as get a good ranking, good rating by my supervisor. Um also just being able to meet as many people, talk to as many people and um widening my networking.  So pretty much open the door for promotion and all that in the future.	I would say that most people define career success by you know, um the name of the company where you working at, the level you're at, how much money you making, your house, your car, the way people judge you and define you pretty much. So I mean, I would say when I look at um say Bill Gates or Steve Jobs I would say they are really successful but I don't know much about them, I don't really know. I mean I'm not close to them to know their story. So I would look at them and look at how much money they are making or what the press is writing about them so I mean I think that's what people define career success.
Troy	Uh I think about somebody who has been working in the same job for um probably 20 years as, they have made a lot of money and they I guess have good job security, they don't worry losing their job and they enjoy their job.	For myself, I would like to number one enjoy my job and number two um I guess have a stable job and be able to make enough money to provide for my family.	Most people define career success as making a lot of money and um I guess being good at what you do. But making a lot of money.  Like over one hundred thousand dollars.

TABLE 4: Self-evaluations of career success compared to different referents:  
Responses to “Do you feel your career has been successful [compared to referent]?”

Participant Pseudonym	Referent						
	No Referent	Current Aspirations	Past Aspirations	Others (Unspecified)	Peers of the Same Age	Work Peers	Family Members
Bill	Maybe	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes, Somewhat	Yes
Charlie	Yes	Yes	No	Yes, Don't know, Not really	Yes	Too soon to tell	Don't know; Hard to Tell, Sure
Elle	No	Not sure	Not sure	Yes	N/A	N/A	Yes
Jane	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, Compared to most but not all	N/A
Jean	Yes	Yes	Not sure	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A
Loretta	Yes, Somewhat	It depends, Not sure	Somewhat, Maybe	Yes, Somewhat	No	Yes	Yes
Mandy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Compared to some people, but too early to compare to others	Yes	N/A	Yes
Mr. B	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Not sure	Yes compared to some, No compared to others
Phil	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Participant Pseudonym	Referent							
	No Referent	Current Aspirations	Past Aspirations	Others (Unspecified)	Peers of the Same Age	Work Peers	Family Members	Friends
Tracy	Yes	Yes	Not sure	Yes	Yes	N/A	Cannot compare	Somewhat
Troy	Too early to tell, Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	Yes

TABLE 5: Themes of career success concepts from open coding

Theme	Definition	Exemplar Code	Excerpt from Data
Money & Financial Concepts	Anything money related, such as income or financial need	Able to Provide	“Having a job to provide for my family and all the needs and wants” (Alan)
Status & Prestige	Concepts representing social rank	Advancement	“Starting at an entry level position and then, you know, making it into management or even further than that.” (Keith)
Esteem – Social	Being highly regarded by others	Respected by Others	“He’s good at what he does and I think it’s evident based on the way people talk about him.” (Charlie)
Esteem – Self	Being highly regarded by self	Pride	“You would be proud of your work” (E.B.)
Affect or emotions	Personal feelings or emotions	Satisfaction	“You have to do something that basically is going to give you a lot of satisfaction.” (CC)
Personal Mastery	The act of pursuing personal excellence or improvement	Continuous Improvement	“I would just continue to better myself and where I was” (Heidi)
Power	The ability to exert influence over others or control things for self	Autonomy	“I can go to work at 7 and come home by 4. I don’t have to stay. Like today I told my boss that I was going out to dinner.” (Steven)
Utility	Usefulness	Contribute to Society	“He helps society in a way that I can’t” (Mark)

## APPENDIX B: FIGURES

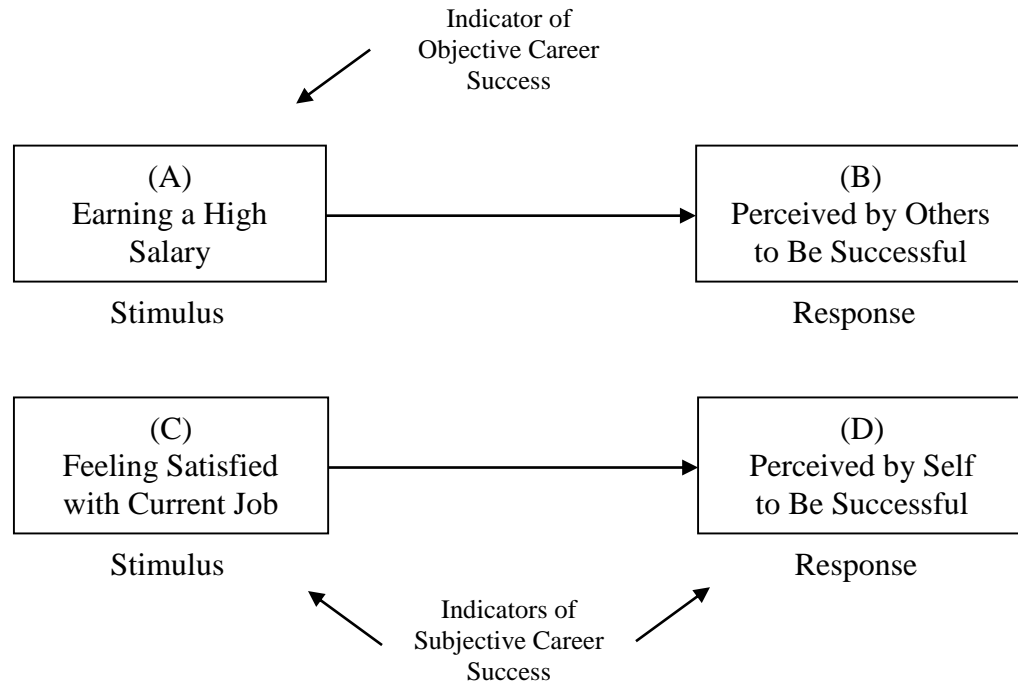


FIGURE 1: The stimulus-response process and career success

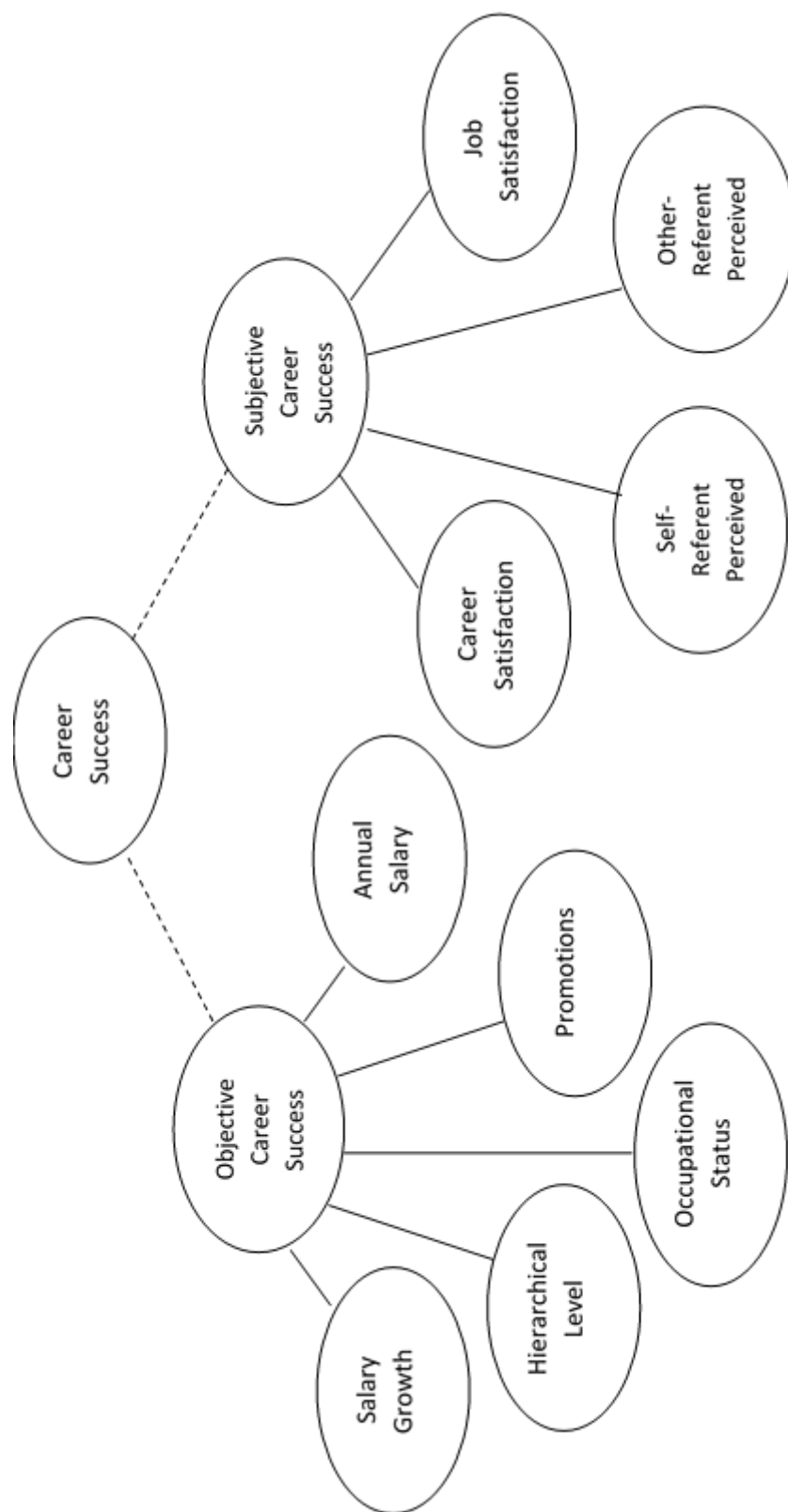


FIGURE 2: The implied two-dimensional structure of career success



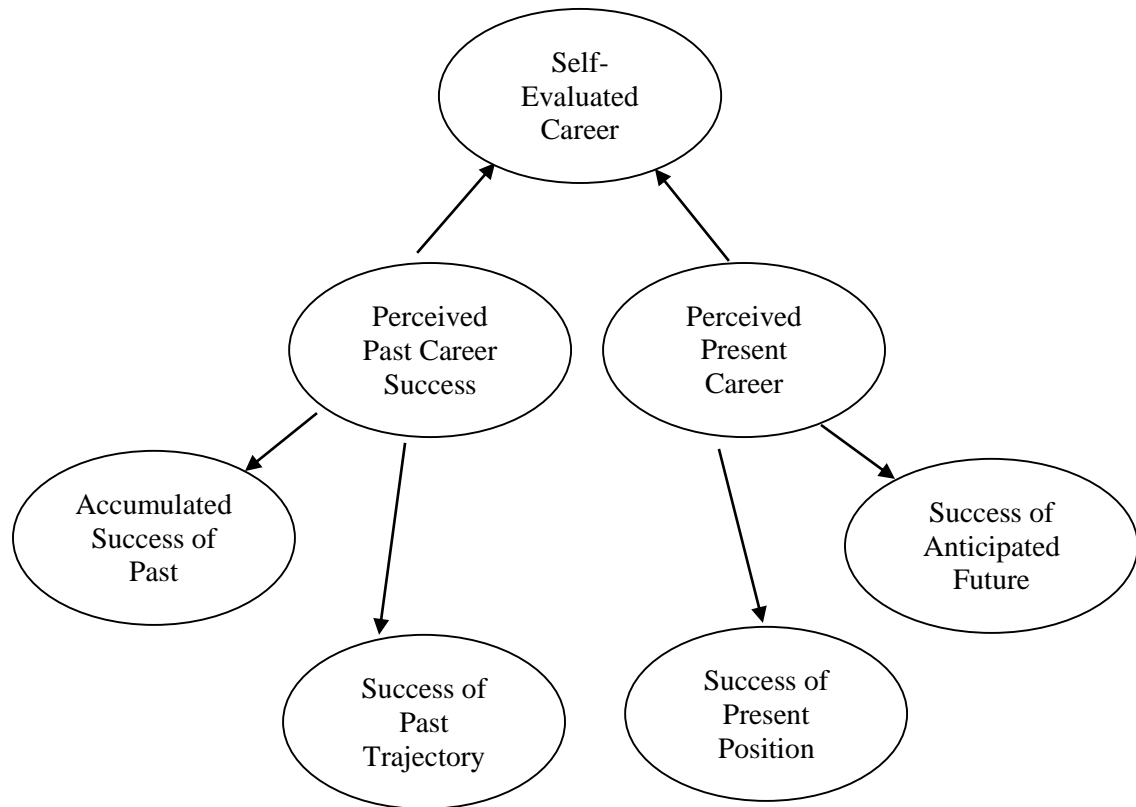


FIGURE 3: Dimensions of self-evaluated career success and their relationships to the overall construct

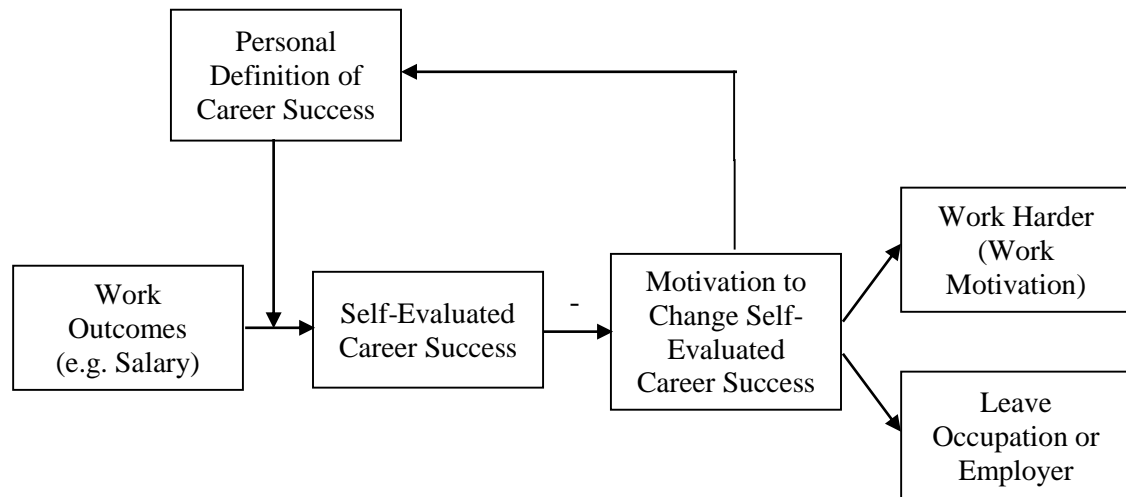


FIGURE 4: Construct model for self-evaluated career success

## APPENDIX C: PILOT STUDY INSTRUMENTS

### Initial Pilot Interview Guide

#### Introduction

- *Go over consent form*
- *Ask for permission to audio record*
- *[If granted permission, turn on recorder now.]*

#### Rapport Building & Career History

- To begin, I was hoping you could tell me a little bit about yourself. In particular, what do you do and how did you get to where you are today?

#### Definitions of Career Success

- For the purposes of this interview, please note that a career is defined as a person's accumulated work experiences. Based on this definition of a career, if you had to write a definition of "career success" for the dictionary, what would you write?
  - [Write down definition in order to revisit it later.]
- How do you define career success *for yourself*?
- How do you think *most people* define career success?
- When you think of a person who has a *successful* career, who comes to mind?
  - What is it about this person's career that you think is successful?
  - Are there any unsuccessful aspects of this person's career?
  - Please explain.
- When you think of a person who has an *unsuccessful* career, who comes to mind?
  - What is it about this person's career that you think is unsuccessful?
  - Are there any successful aspects of this person's career?
  - Please explain.
- Do you feel that you have had a successful career? Why or why not?
- How is career success defined in your job or occupation?
  - If applicable, how do your work peers or colleagues define career success?
- How is career success defined in your family?
  - How did (or do) your parents define career success?
  - Do your parents think you have had a successful career? Why or why not?
  - How do you (or would you) define career success for your children?
  - [If the participant has children of working age...] Do you feel that your children have successful careers? Why or why not?
- How is career success defined by your friends?
  - Which of your friends do you feel have successful or unsuccessful careers? Please explain why you feel this way.
- Has your perspective on career success changed over time?
  - If so, please explain.

#### Career Success & Other Concepts of Success

- What is the difference (if any) between career success and personal success (or life success)?
  - Please explain.
- Setting aside your career, do you feel that you have been successful? (Why or why not?)

#### Revisit Career Success Definition

- Let's revisit one of the first questions I asked. Recall that I defined a career as a person's accumulated work experiences. Based on this definition, I asked what you would write if you had to write a definition of "career success" for the dictionary. You said you would write [INSERT DEFINITION HERE].
  - I asked you this at the beginning of our discussion, likely before you had given much thought to career success. Now that we have discussed career success considerably, what do you think about this definition? Do you like it or would you like to revise it?
  - [Once final definition is established...] Who do you think would agree with or disagree with this definition? Why?

#### Wrap-Up and Conclusion

- Thank you for your insights. Before we conclude, I want to remind you that no names or identifying information will be revealed in any reports of this interview. Only pseudonyms will be used. Is there a particular pseudonym that you would like me to use when reporting your responses?
- Lastly, I asked you a lot of questions today. Is there anything else about careers, career success, or any other topic, that you would like to share?
  - Do you have any questions for me?

#### End Interview

- Thank you so much for participating in this study. Your time and insights are greatly appreciated!

## Revised Interview Guide for Pilot Study

*[Note to interviewer: When asking participants to define or evaluate career success for a particular person, be sure that you ask them about the success of the person's career, not the success of the person him/herself.]*

### Introduction

- Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Before we get started, do you have any questions about the consent form?
  - *[Answer any questions that arise]*
- I want to remind you that you are a volunteer in this study, which means that your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may stop at any time. You will not be treated any differently if you decide to stop once you have started.
- If it is acceptable to you, today's interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed. I want to let you know that any identifiable information that you provide will be removed from the interview transcript and will not be provided in any reports of this research.
- Is it okay with you if I audio record this interview?
- *[If granted permission, turn on recorder now.]*

### Rapport Building & Career History

- Thank you. To begin, I was hoping you could tell me a little bit about yourself. In particular, what do you do and how did you get to where you are today?
  - *[It helps to take a few notes here to keep track of important information—e.g. two distinct career paths—for use later during the interview.]*

### Definitions of Career Success

- Thank you for telling me your story. I want to shift gears now. What comes to mind when you hear the words “career success”?
  - *[Probe for clarification and elaboration when needed.]*
- How do you define career success for yourself?
  - *[Write down definition in order to revisit it later.]*
- How do you think most people define career success?
- Who do you know that has a successful career?
  - What is it about this person's career that you think is successful?
  - Are there any unsuccessful aspects of this person's career? Please explain.
- Who do you know that has an unsuccessful career?
  - What is it about this person's career that you think is unsuccessful?
  - Are there any successful aspects of this person's career? Please explain.

- Do you feel that you have had a successful career? Why or why not?
  - Do you feel that your career has been successful compared to the careers of others? Why or why not? *[Allow participant to determine who is represented by “others” at this point. More specific questions will be asked later.]*
  - Considering your current aspirations, do you feel that your career is successful? Why or why not?
  - How about past aspirations? Considering aspirations you have had in the past, do you feel that your career is successful? Why or why not?
  - Do you feel that your career is successful for your age? Why or why not?
- How is career success defined in your occupation?
  - *[If applicable]* How do your work peers or colleagues define career success?
  - Do you feel that your career has been successful compared to the careers of your work peers or colleagues?
- How is career success defined in your family?
  - How did (or do) your parents define career success?
  - Did (or do) your parents have successful careers? Please explain.
  - Do your (or would your) parents think *you* have had a successful career? Why or why not?
  - How do you (or would you) define career success for your children?
  - *[If the participant has children of working age...]* Do you feel that your children have successful careers? Why or why not?
  - Do you feel that your career has been successful compared to the careers of your family members? Please explain.
- How is career success defined by your friends?
  - Which of your friends do you feel have successful or unsuccessful careers? Please explain why you feel this way.
  - Do you feel that your career has been successful compared to the careers of your friends? Why or why not?
- Has your perspective on career success changed over time?
  - If so, please explain.

#### Other Concepts of Success

- What is the difference (if any) between career success and personal success (or life success)?
  - Please explain.
- Setting aside your career, do you feel that you have been successful? (Why or why not?)

### Revisit Career Success Definition

- Let's revisit one of the first questions I asked. Recall that I asked you how you define career success for yourself. You said you would define it as *[INSERT DEFINITION HERE]*.
  - I asked you this at the beginning of our discussion, likely before you had given much thought to career success. Now that we have discussed career success at length, what do you think about this definition? Do you like it or would you like to revise it?
  - *[Once participant settles on a definition he/she likes...]* Who do you think would agree with or disagree with this definition? Why?

### Wrap-Up and Conclusion

- Thank you for your insights. Before we conclude, I want to remind you that no names or identifying information will be revealed in any reports of this interview. Only pseudonyms will be used. Is there a particular pseudonym that you would like me to use when reporting your responses?
- Lastly, I asked you a lot of questions today. Is there anything else, about careers, career success, or any other topic, that you would like to share? *[Allow time for the participant to reflect here before moving on.]*
  - Do you have any questions for me?

### End Interview

- That wraps up the questions that I have for you. Thank you so much for participating in this study. Your time and insights are greatly appreciated. To thank you for your time, all participants are eligible to win one \$50 Amazon.com gift card. Would you like to be entered into the drawing for this gift card?
  - *[If yes.]* Okay, I will enter you in the drawing. If you win, you will be contacted via email.
- Also, we are trying to recruit additional participants for this study. Can you think of two or more people (adults who have work experience) who might be willing to be interviewed?
  - *[If yes.]* Would you be willing to provide their names and email addresses?
  - *[If applicant does not have email addresses handy.]* If you do not know their email addresses, just the names will be fine for now. I can email you later and ask for email addresses when it is convenient for you to look them up.
- Thank you again and have a great day!

## APPENDIX D: INSTRUMENTS

### Online Survey

*[Note: Each participant is randomly assigned to one of the following questions.]*

Q1a. What comes to mind when you hear the words career success?

Q1b. Think of someone you know who has a successful career. What is it about their career that makes it successful?

Q1c. How do you define career success for yourself?

Q1d. How do you think most people define career success?

*[Note: All participants see the following questions.]*

Q11. Do you personally know the researcher conducting this study (Katherine Frear)?

Yes

No

*[Note: Only participants who do not know the researcher see the following questions.]*

Q2. I am also interviewing people to better understand career success. Interviews are expected to last about one hour (or shorter, depending on your schedule) and will take place over the phone. As a thank you, everyone who is interviewed will be entered into a random drawing for one \$50 Amazon.com gift card.

Would you be interested in participating in a phone interview to share your thoughts about career success?

Option 1: Yes, I would like to help out by being interviewed

Option 2: No, thank you

If yes, please provide your email address so I can contact you to set up an interview.  
Thank you!

Email:



*[Note: Only participants who do not know the researcher see the following questions.]*

### Demographics

The following questions are optional and will be used for descriptive purposes only.

Q3. What is your occupation?

Q4. What is your age?

Q5. What is your gender?

Q6. Which of the following best describes your family status? (Select all that apply)

1. I do not have children
2. I have children age 12 or under
3. I have children between the ages of 13 and 18
4. I have children age 19 or older

Q7. How would you describe your marital status?

Q8. How would you describe your race or ethnicity?

Q9. How would you describe your household's current financial status?

Q10. Please list or describe anything else you think is relevant.

*[Note: All participants see the following information.]*

To thank you for your time, all participants are eligible for a drawing to win one of five \$10 Amazon.com gift cards. If you would like to be entered in the drawing, please provide your email address below. Email addresses will only be used to notify winners of the drawing.

Email:

## Revised Interview Guide

*[Note to interviewer: When asking participants to define or evaluate career success for a particular person, be sure that you ask them about the success of the person's career, not the success of the person him/herself.]*

### Introduction

- Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Before we get started, do you have any questions about the consent form?
  - *[Answer any questions that arise]*
- I want to remind you that you are a volunteer in this study, which means that your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may stop at any time. You will not be treated any differently if you decide to stop once you have started.
- If it is acceptable to you, today's interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed. I want to let you know that any identifiable information that you provide will be removed from the interview transcript and will not be provided in any reports of this research.
- Is it okay with you if I audio record this interview?
- *[If granted permission, turn on recorder now.]*

### Rapport Building & Career History

- Thank you. To begin, I was hoping you could tell me a little bit about yourself. In particular, what do you do and how did you get to where you are today?
  - *[It helps to take a few notes here to keep track of important information—e.g. two distinct career paths—for use later during the interview.]*

### Definitions of Career Success

- Thank you for telling me your story. I want to shift gears now. What comes to mind when you hear the words “career success”?
  - *[Probe for clarification and elaboration when needed.]*
- How do you define career success for yourself?
  - *[Write down definition in order to revisit it later.]*
- How do you think most people define career success?
- How would you describe the characteristics of a successful versus an unsuccessful career?
- If you were asked to evaluate the success of a stranger's career, what information would you need to do so?
- Do you feel that you have had a successful career? Why or why not?
  - Do you feel that your career has been successful compared to the careers of others? Why or why not? *[Allow participant to determine who is*

*represented by “others” at this point. More specific questions will be asked later.]*

- Considering your current aspirations, do you feel that your career is successful? Why or why not?
- How about past aspirations? Considering aspirations you have had in the past, do you feel that your career is successful? Why or why not?
- Do you feel that your career is successful for your age? Why or why not?
- How is career success defined in your occupation?
  - *[If applicable]* How do your work peers or colleagues define career success?
  - Do you feel that your career has been successful compared to the careers of your work peers or colleagues?
- How is career success defined in your family?
  - How did (or do) your parents define career success?
  - Did (or do) your parents have successful careers? Please explain.
  - Do your (or would your) parents think *you* have had a successful career? Why or why not?
  - How do you (or would you) define career success for your children?
  - *[If the participant has children of working age...]* Do you feel that your children have successful careers? Why or why not?
  - Do you feel that your career has been successful compared to the careers of your family members? Please explain.
- How is career success defined by your friends?
  - Do you feel that your career has been successful compared to the careers of your friends? Why or why not?
- Has your perspective on career success changed over time?
  - If so, please explain.

#### Other Concepts of Success

- What is the difference (if any) between career success and personal success (or life success)?
  - Please explain.
- Setting aside your career, do you feel that you have been successful? (Why or why not?)

#### Revisit Career Success Definition

- Let's revisit one of the first questions I asked. Recall that I asked you how you define career success for yourself. You said you would define it as *[INSERT DEFINITION HERE]*.
  - I asked you this at the beginning of our discussion, likely before you had given much thought to career success. Now that we have discussed career

success at length, what do you think about this definition? Do you like it or would you like to revise it?

- *[Once participant settles on a definition he/she likes...]* Who do you think would agree with or disagree with this definition? Why?

#### Wrap-Up and Conclusion

- Thank you for your insights. Before we conclude, I want to remind you that no names or identifying information will be revealed in any reports of this interview. Only pseudonyms will be used. Is there a particular pseudonym that you would like me to use when reporting your responses?
- Lastly, I asked you a lot of questions today. Is there anything else, about careers, career success, or any other topic, that you would like to share? *[Allow time for the participant to reflect here before moving on.]*
  - Do you have any questions for me?

#### End Interview

- That wraps up the questions that I have for you. Thank you so much for participating in this study. Your time and insights are greatly appreciated. To thank you for your time, all participants are eligible to win a \$50 Amazon.com gift card. Would you like to be entered into the drawing for this gift card?
  - *[If yes.]* Okay, I will enter you in the drawing. If you win, you will be contacted via email.
- Thank you again and have a great day!

## APPENDIX E: OPEN CODED CAREER SUCCESS CONCEPTS

Able to Save	Career Change	Dislike Job
Accomplishments	Challenges	Do Something
Achieve Goal	Changing Definition(s)	Do the Minimum
Achievement	Changing Goal	Doing What You Want
Acknowledgement	Character	Education
Add Value	Cognitive Dissonance	Engagement
Advancement	Collaboration	➤ Unengaged
➤ Promotion	Colleagues	Enjoy Work
Affirmation	Comfortable	➤ Do Not Really Enjoy (Apathetic)
Age	Compare to Others	➤ Dread Work
Ambition	Compensation	Enjoy Work Environment
American Dream	Competence	Enthusiasm
Appreciation	Conscientiousness	Entrepreneurship
Aspiration	Content	Excitement
➤ Unmet	Continuous Improvement	Exclusivity
Authority	Contribute to Family	Experience
Autonomy	Contribute to Org or Workplace	Expertise
Awards	Contribute to Society	Exposure
Balance	Control	Fame
Be the Best	➤ Beyond Control	Family
Behind Schedule	➤ Lack of Control	Feel Needed, Wanted, or Important
Benefits	Counterproductive Work Behaviors	Feel Successful - Self
➤ Health Insurance	Create Things	Feel Successful Compared to Others
➤ Paid Time Off	Creativity	Fit
Bitter	Credentials	Flexibility
Burnout	Defy Norms	➤ Take Time Off
Business Success	Depressed	For the Soul, Mind, and Heart
Busy	Despair	Freedom
Calling	Disability	

Frustration			
Fulfillment		➤ External Benchmarks	➤ Repetitive
➤ Not Fulfilled		➤ Feeds the Soul	Job Fit
Full-Time Work		➤ Feel Good	Job Loss
Fun		➤ Focused on the Numbers	Job Performance
Gender		➤ Getting Out of the House	Performance Ratings
Getting or Having a Job		➤ Good for You	Job Quality
Give Up or Quit		➤ Have a Good Time	Job Security
Good at Job or Work		➤ How You Get There	➤ Insecurity
Good Boss		➤ Inadequate	Job Specific Outcomes
Good Job		➤ Inner Peace	Keep or Maintain Job
Good Things Happened		➤ It Keeps You Going	Leadership
Gratification		➤ It's Not Work	Learning
Growth		➤ It's Ok	Legacy
Happiness		➤ Make It	Legal
➤ Happiness Above All Else		➤ Master of Your Own Destiny	Life Events & Influences
➤ Unhappy		➤ Mind is Free of Work	Lifestyle
Helping People		➤ One-Way Street	Longevity
Hierarchy		➤ Retirement	Love Work or Career
High Stakes		➤ Self-Made	Loyalty
Honesty		➤ Slaves to the Grind	Made Mistakes
Honor or Privilege		➤ Super Star	Make a Difference
Housing		➤ What You're Supposed to Do	Making Progress
Identity		Inability to Do Job	Manage Others
➤ Identity Conflict		Indecisive	Managerial Level
Immoral		Independence	Meaningfulness
In Vivo Codes		Influence	➤ Meaningful Work
➤ At Peace		Integrity	Meet Expectations
➤ Be Your Own Person		Intellectual Engagement	Meet or Overcome Challenges
➤ Being a Good Role Model		Intrinsic Need or Desire	Miss Previous Career
➤ Came Out of the Ashes		Job (Work) Characteristics	Mobility
➤ Doing Well		➤ Boring	Money & Financial Concepts
➤ Easy Road		➤ Challenging Work	➤ Able to Provide
		➤ Not Challenging	➤ Able to Satisfy Needs

➤ As Much Money as Possible	Not Working	Rare
➤ Debt	Occupational Status	Recognition
➤ Financial Growth or Advancement	Opportunities	Regret
➤ Financial Hardship	Others' Definition	Reinforcement
➤ Financial Level	Overworking	Relates to Job
➤ Financial Security	Own Business	Relationships
➤ Financial Success	Part of Greater Plan	Reputation
➤ Financial Survival	Passion	Resentment
➤ Financially-Based Social Comparison	Perks	Resilience
➤ In It for the Money	Personal Compromise	Resources
➤ Make Money	Personal Growth	Respect
➤ Money Above All Else	Personal Interest	Responsibility
➤ More Money	Personal Mastery	Results
➤ More to Life Than Money	Personal Success	Retire
➤ Not About Money	Personal vs. Career Success	Revise View of Career Success
➤ Not in It for the Money	Perspective	Rewards
➤ Not Making Money	Physical Work	Risk
➤ Pay Cut	Pioneer	Safety
➤ Potential to Make Money	Plateau	Satisfaction
Motivation	Please Others	➤ Career Satisfaction
Move On	Positive Attitude	➤ Life Satisfaction
Multidimensional	Possessions	➤ Not Satisfied
➤ Profile Model	Potential - Achieving	➤ Satisfaction is Distinct from Success
Multiple Careers	Potential - Not Achieving	Satisficing
Neat, Cool, Interesting, Fascinating	Power	Satisfy Needs
Neighborhood	Prestige	See Results
Network or Connections	Pride	Self-Actualization
Niche	➤ Lack of Pride	Self-Confidence
Not Successful	Pride - From Others	Self-Evaluation
Not Successful - Viewed by Others	➤ Shame - From Others	Self-Perceived Success
Not What Most People Do	Progress	Seniority
	Psychological Success	Serving Others
	Raising a Family	

Skill Mismatch	Time Off
Social Comparison	Time Outside of Work
Social Environment	Title
Social Esteem	Trapped
Source of Enjoyment	Travel
Stability	Treat Others Well
Stagnation	Try or Do Your Best
➤ Progress (Not Stagnation)	Type of Work
Starting Over	Unclear Expectations
Status	Unintended Outcomes
➤ Status is Unimportant	Unmet Goal(s)
Stimulating	Unsuccessful Aspects
Stress	Unsure if Successful
Stuck	Using Skills
Success Depends on Perspective	➤ Not Using Skills
Success is Complicated	Variety
Success is Personal	Virtue
Success with Caveats	Want Different Job, Occupation, or Career
Success with Regard to Age	Want More
Successful - Others	Want to Work
Successful -- Viewed by Others	Watch the Clock
Successful Aspects	Work Environment
Support	Work Hours
Survival	Work Load
Talent or Skill	Work Outside Home
Team	Work Tasks
Things Disliked	Working Hard
Threshold for Evaluating Success	Working within Abilities
Time	Worth While
➤ Accumulation	Wrong Path or Career
➤ At the Moment	
➤ Career Path	
➤ Success as Discrete Events	



## APPENDIX F: SUPPLEMENTAL EXAMPLES OF METHODOLOGICAL RIGOR

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), one thing to note while evaluating and defending the rigor of a grounded theory study is that the purpose of the research is to *generate* theory rather than to verify it. Thus, the types of rigor used to verify theory—such as random sampling, random assignment, inferential statistics, etc.—are usually not appropriate for a grounded theory study. Instead, it is important that the researcher: (1) acknowledge and attempt to overcome bias, (2) introduce theoretically-relevant variation into data collection and analysis, (3) privilege insights that come from the data above all other sources, (4) systematically and continuously use the data in an attempt to refute emerging hypotheses, and (5) continue data collection and analysis until the proposed theory is saturated.

To achieve these goals, various aspects of methodological rigor were used throughout this research. Such aspects include recognition of author positionality, theoretical sampling, negative case analysis, and theoretical saturation. Each aspect is described in detail below.

*Recognition of author positionality prior to the research.* As a researcher, I follow Hughes' (1958) notion of a career, in which a career includes unpaid work and avocations in addition to paid employment. Similarly, I believe that anyone who works has a career, even though not all individuals who work feel they have a career, per se. Furthermore, I do not currently think that there is just one “career success” construct or phenomenon; at this point, I am not sure if I came to this conclusion before beginning this study, or if the research up to this point (the literature review and pilot study) caused

me to think this way. Either way, I acknowledge that I will be entering into further data collection and analysis with this bent. More importantly, however, my position on each of these topics is flexible; it is a priority to me to understand how career success is perceived, interpreted, and experienced by career actors.

On that note, I acknowledge that I am a career actor myself and thus, I have my own personal concept of career success. Personally, at this point in time, I define career success for myself as becoming an established, productive, and respected researcher. I will feel I have achieved career success when I have advanced knowledge in an important and meaningful way. Money and satisfaction are not salient to me at this time, though I doubt I would feel successful if I experienced a dearth of either one. I do not believe that this definition is (or that there exists) a “correct” way to define career success, nor do I have any expectations regarding whether or not this definition is shared by others. Thus, I do not expect that I will impose this definition on the data; however, I will search for cases in the data that contradict my personal definition in order to learn from and overcome my potential bias.

*Author positionality throughout the research.* During the research I noticed two biases that I attempted to overcome. The first bias stemmed from my original research questions. I had set out to develop “the construct” of career success and answer a set of research questions based on Suddaby’s (2010) elements of construct clarity. While this limited my view to some extent, I overcame the limitation by setting time aside to examine and develop a finding that did not address construct development.

The second bias was my subconscious focus on work outcomes for the first half of my data analysis. On the one hand, this bias slowed down my ability to observe and

develop a theoretical construct. On the other hand, it sensitized me to the distinction between personal definitions and how participants thought “most people” defined career success, which turned out to be a meaningful finding. Thus, while each of my biases limited my view for a period of time, together they enabled me to observe more than I would have otherwise.

*Theoretical sampling.* Theoretical sampling is “the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his [or her] data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967: 45). While the decisions for the initial sampling strategy was guided by the previous literature and the current state of knowledge, decisions for later sampling were guided by the insights gained and the theory developed throughout the research process. This is an important aspect of the current research because I did not have enough information to know all of the theoretically-relevant career actor characteristics, nor did I claim to know the best questions to ask participants, at the start of the research.

After I gained insight from career actors, and once I refined some of my core categories, I realized that diversity of career experiences was more meaningful to my study than diversity on demographic characteristics. Once I learned this, I recruited people with career experiences that were lacking in my sample (e.g., people who did not feel their career was successful).

I also used theoretical sampling while deciding which data to collect when revising my interview guide. For example, I wanted to learn more about the implications and outcomes of self-evaluated career success. As a result, I added questions like the following: “Tell me about a time you felt your career was not successful.”

*Negative case analysis.* During theoretical sampling and constant comparison analysis, I developed some competing hypotheses from the data. For instance, throughout the research process, I had several hypotheses to explain why participants provided different definitions for themselves than they did for “most people”. To determine which explanation was most valid based on the data at hand, I examined the data with the explicit goal of identifying exemplars that refuted each of the definitions. In other words, I searched for negative cases in order to refine my hypotheses related to the developing theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This process helps to ensure that the theory presented at the end of the research is indeed grounded in the data that were collected.

*Theoretical saturation.* Lastly, I continued to engage in each stage of the research—data collection, analysis, constant comparison, theoretical sampling, etc.—until I reached theoretical saturation as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). In general, theoretical saturation occurs when new, theoretically-relevant insights are no longer emerging from the data, despite continued efforts to observe them. In the current study, I reached theoretical saturation at two points: 1) when I refuted competing explanations for the pluralistic ignorance finding and 2) when I faithfully represented the data and answered all of my research questions regarding the development of self-evaluated career success. As mentioned in the description of my methodology, I continued to collect data, compare categories, revise the interview guide, and search for negative cases until saturation was achieved.