



How to measure career success.

Conceptual considerations and empirical findings in
different fields of employment.

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Conference: Career Success
Perspectives from Economy and Psychology
Nuremberg, December, 3/4, 2009



What is career success?

- Imagine that somebody asks you the following question: “How successful do you feel in your occupational career”?
 - What would you say?
 - Which criteria would you apply?
 - Would it be easy for you to answer this question?
 - Would others evaluate your career in the same way as you do?

The construct of career success

- Fuzzy, multifaceted and important
 - with respect to individuals
 - with respect to organizations
 - with respect to counsellors
 - with respect to politics

The meaning of career success

- Career: from latin „carrus“ (carriage) and „carraria“ (road for carriages)
 - Three meanings:
 - Descriptive term for occupational life course
 - Evaluative term for upward development
 - A subjective construction
- Success: from latin „successus“ (progress)
 - Three meanings:
 - Descriptive term for development and change
 - Evaluative term for positive outcomes
 - A subjective construction

Objective vs. subjective career success

- Old distinction introduced by Hughes (1937)
- Objective career success:
 - directly observable, measurable, and verifiable by an impartial third party ---- „real“ achievements
- Subjective career success:
 - an individual's reactions to his or her unfolding career experiences --- “perceived” achievements
- Specific emphasis, not strict distinction

„Objective“ career success: measures

■ Measures are mainly salary, promotions and status

– Advantages:

- Can be directly observed and verified
- Allow direct comparisons between people
- Refer to a basic affordance of career success, i.e. need fulfillment
- Reflect societal norms
- Are a proxy to performance

– Disadvantages:

- They may not be generally suited as indicators of career success
- They may be insensitive to new developments on the labor market
- They may be refined to employees with high human potential and do not enough cover more precarious employments

„Subjective“ career success: measures

- Measures are often job satisfaction and career satisfaction
 - Advantage
 - Job satisfaction and career satisfaction are desired states and people strive for satisfying states
 - Disadvantage
 - People can feel satisfied, but at the same time they need not feel successful (and the other way round)
- Satisfaction is not enough to cover the meaning of subjective career success

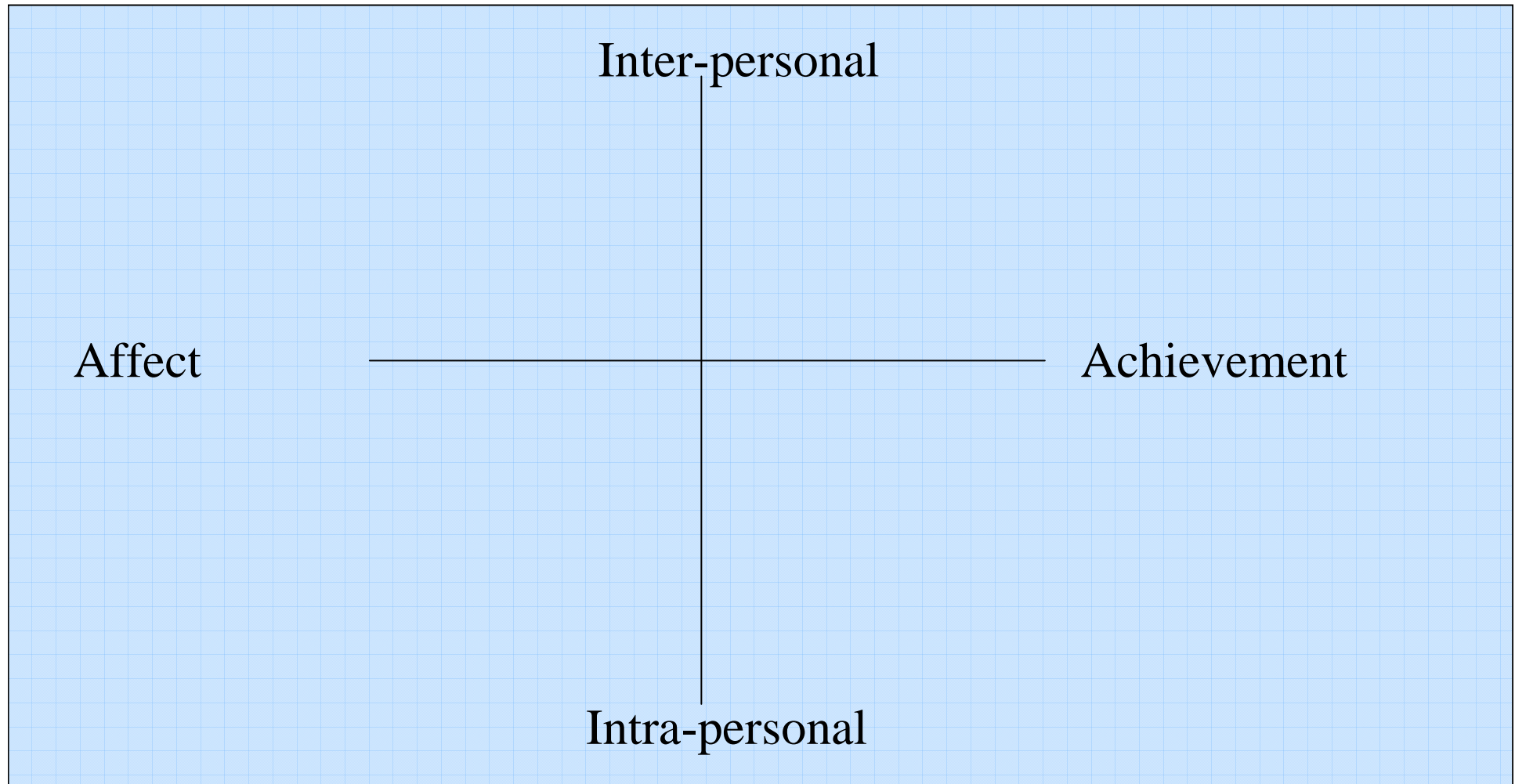
„Subjective“ career success: approach from the standard of comparison

- The standard of comparison, i.e. the referent of one's judgment, is the self or another person or group
 - Satisfaction judgments are so-called „self-referent“ subjective success measures, because people assess satisfaction with respect to themselves („how satisfied am I?“)
 - Other-referent judgments refer to comparisons with significant others („compared to my former classmates, I am“; e.g., Heslin, 2005)
 - They are extremely important in areas in which standards are ambiguous or lacking (Festinger, 1954)

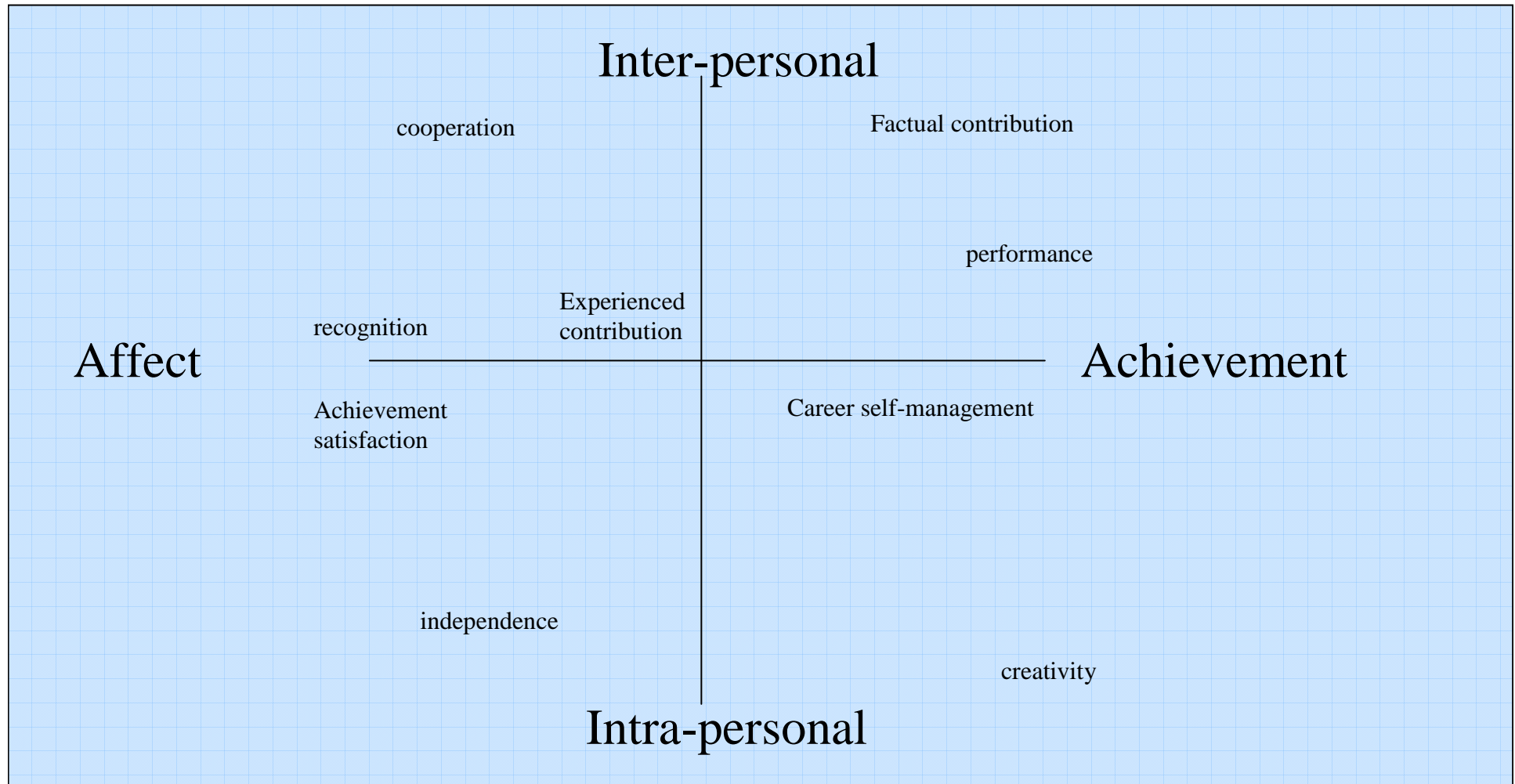
Conceptualizing career success from an „objectivistic“ vs. a „subjectivistic“ approach

- Objectivistic approach:
 - People are asked predetermined questions in order to assess their career success
- Subjectivistic approach:
 - People define themselves what they regard as career success; they subjectively „construct“ their meaning of career success
 - Assumption that the meaning of career success is different between individuals, may change over time, may change in an individual's life course, is „contextualized“
- Important: „subjectivistic“ and „objectivistic“ approaches do not exclude each other!

Example for a subjective space of career success; excerpt from DeDries et al., 2008



Example for a subjective space of career success; excerpt from DeDries et al., 2008



Summarizing so far...

- Career success can be differentiated into
 - more „objective“ career success
 - more „subjective“ career success
 - Self-referent vs. other-referent
- Approaches to the study of career success are differentiated into
 - more objectivistic vs. more subjectivistic
- Career success is a contextualized phenomenon

How do objective and subjective success relate to each other?

- Theoretically, for instance, „calling modell of career success“ (Hall & Chandler, 2005): Cyclical process by means of which objective success is turned into „psychological success“ which may lead to further objective success
- Empirically:
 - Meta-analytical correlations between objective and subjective success: around .30 (Dette et al., 2005; Ng et al., 2005)
 - Objective on subjective
 - Salary has an influence on career satisfaction
 - Salary has an influence on other-referent subjective success
 - The impact on job satisfaction is equivocal
 - Subjective on objective: Little research
 - Objective – subjective – objective: Abele & Spurk (2009): support and refinement of the calling model

An empirical example

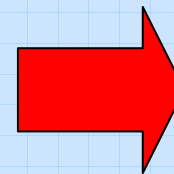
- Interrelationship between objective and subjective career success in different fields of employment (careers are „contextualized“)
- Association of objective success with self-referent success (satisfaction) vs. with other-referent success (comparative judgment)

Method

- Questionnaire study with 510 women and 715 men (mean age 37 years) with about 10 years of professional experience
- All with a university degree (law, medicine, arts and humanities, natural sciences, economics, engineering, teaching)
- Measures:
 - Salary, status („objective success“)
 - Job satisfaction, satisfaction with occupational tasks, career satisfaction („self-referent subjective success“)
 - Relative success compared to: former fellow students; other professionals with a university degree; age group („other referent subjective success“)
- Field of employment:
 - Self-employed (lawyers, medical doctors, entrepreneurs, etc.)
 - Private-company-employed (engineers, bankers, librarians, etc.)
 - State-employed (doctors in hospitals, judges, attorneys, teachers, etc.)

Findings: Influence of objective success on self-referent vs. other referent success dependent on field of employment

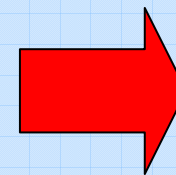
	Self-employed
Other-ref.: Former fellow students working hours salary status R ²	$\beta = .03$ $\beta = .49^{***}$ $\beta = .05$.28***
Self-ref.: Job satisfaction working hours salary status R ²	$\beta = -.10$ $\beta = .35^{***}$ $\beta = .03$.11***
Self-ref.: Task satisfaction working hours salary status R ²	$\beta = -.05$ $\beta = .27^{***}$ $\beta = -.05$.06*
Self-ref.: Career satisfaction working hours salary status R ²	$\beta = -.03$ $\beta = .43^{***}$ $\beta = .10$.22***



Generally high
impact of salary,
no impact of
status

Findings: Influence of objective success on self-referent vs. other referent success dependent on field of employment

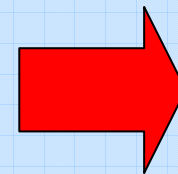
	Private company employed
Other-ref.: Former fellow students working hours salary status R ²	$\beta = -.08$ $\beta = .35^{***}$ $\beta = .25^{***}$.23***
Self-ref.: Job satisfaction working hours salary status R ²	$\beta = -.16^{**}$ $\beta = .22^{***}$ $\beta = .01$.04***
Self-ref.: Task satisfaction working hours salary status R ²	$\beta = -.17^{**}$ $\beta = .23^{***}$ $\beta = .02$.04***
Self-ref.: Career satisfaction working hours salary status R ²	$\beta = -.17^{**}$ $\beta = .35^{***}$ $\beta = .11^{**}$.13***



Impact of salary and
status

Findings: Influence of objective success on self-referent vs. other referent success dependent on field of employment

	State-employed
Other-ref.: Former fellow students working hours salary status R ²	$\beta = .10^*$ $\beta = .00$ $\beta = .20^{**}$.08***
Self-ref.: Job satisfaction working hours salary status R ²	$\beta = -.03$ $\beta = -.14$ $\beta = .02$.02
Self-ref.: Task satisfaction working hours salary status R ²	$\beta = -.03$ $\beta = -.12$ $\beta = .10$.02
Self-ref.: Career satisfaction working hours salary status R ²	$\beta = .08$ $\beta = -.01$ $\beta = .00$.01

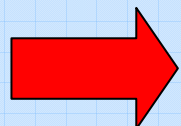
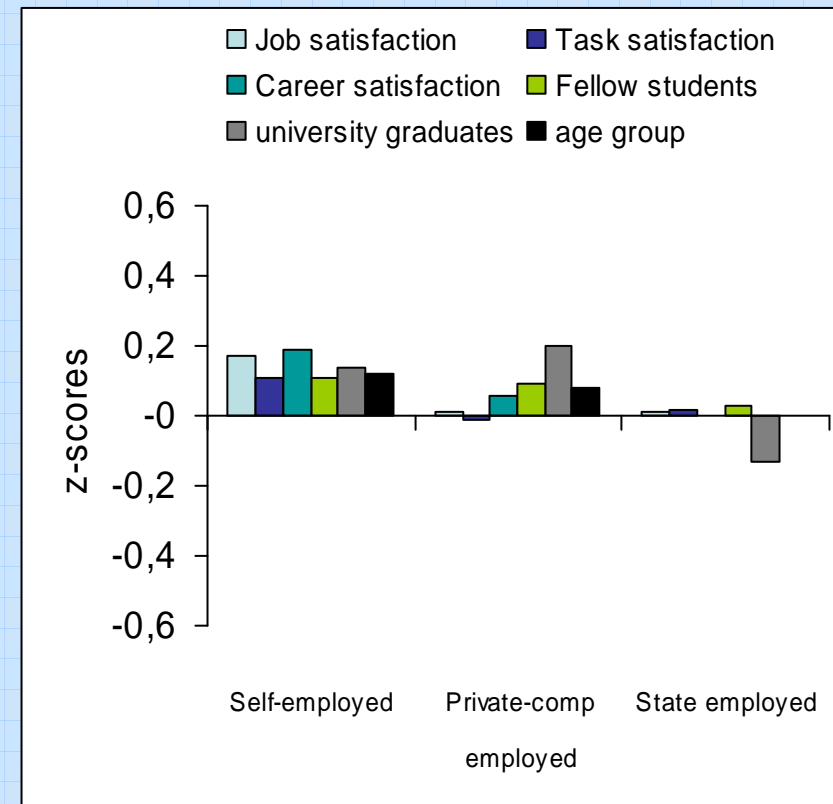
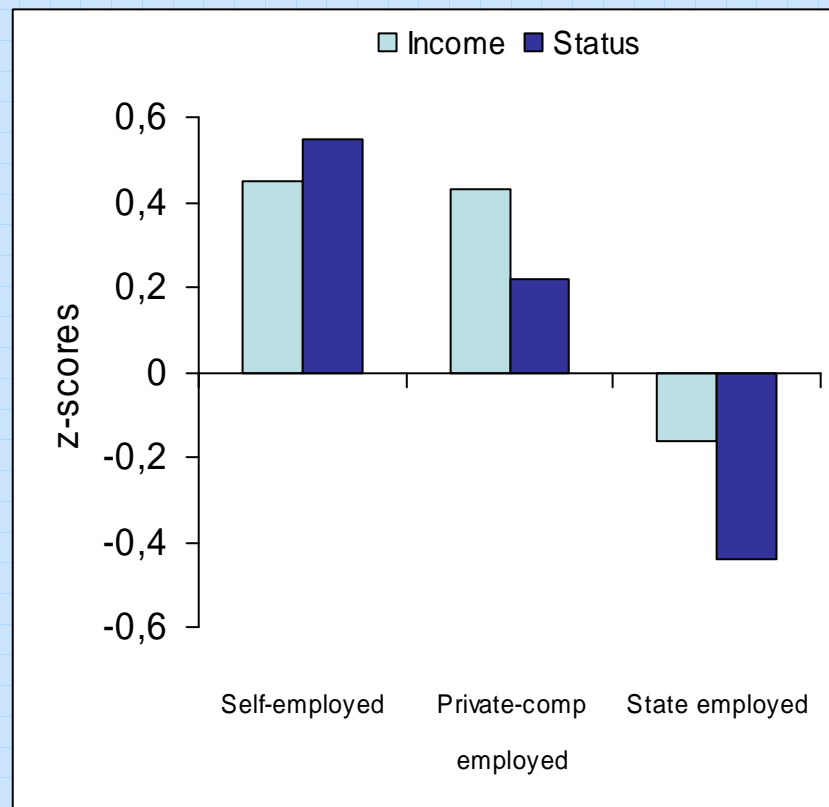


Only small
impact of status,
no impact of
salary

Findings: Influence of objective success on self-referent vs. other referent success dependent on field of employment

	Self-employed	Private company employed	State-employed
Other-ref.: Former fellow students working hours salary status R ²	$\beta = .03$ $\beta = .49^{***}$ $\beta = .05$.28***	$\beta = -.08$ $\beta = .35^{***}$ $\beta = .25^{***}$.23***	$\beta = .10^*$ $\beta = .00$ $\beta = .20^{**}$.08***
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Findings: Means



State-employed objectively less successful, but not subjectively

Conclusions

- Objective success measures are differentially suited to predict subjective success dependent on field of employment
 - Self-employed: salary is a good proxy for subjective success (both satisfaction and comparison); status is irrelevant
 - Private-company employed: salary is a good proxy for subjective success, status relevant for comparative judgment, and for career satisfaction
 - State-employed: salary and status by and large irrelevant for subjective success
- Differences in objective success between the three groups, but no differences in subjective success

Conclusions

- Research into career success should measure the construct by means of multiple operationalizations
- Subjective success is NOT only a by-product of objective success
- The distinction between satisfaction (self-referent) and comparison (other-referent) is fruitful
- Subjective success instigates motivational forces that may also enhance performance and objective success.

Thank you!
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