



## Synchronous and time-lagged effects between occupational self-efficacy and objective and subjective career success: Findings from a four-wave and 9-year longitudinal study<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

We integrated research on the dimensionality of career success into social-cognitive career theory and explored the positive feedback loop between occupational self-efficacy and objective and subjective career success over time (self-efficacy → objective success → subjective success → self-efficacy). Furthermore, we theoretically accounted for synchronous and time-lagged effects, as well as indirect reciprocity between the variables. We tested the proposed model by means of longitudinal structural equation modeling in a 9-year four-wave panel design, by applying a model comparison approach and indirect effect analyses ( $N = 608$  professionals). The findings supported the proposed positive feedback loop between occupational self-efficacy and career success. Supporting our time-based reasoning, the findings showed that unfolding effects between occupational self-efficacy and objective career success take more time (i.e., time-lagged or over time) than unfolding effects between objective and subjective career success, as well as between subjective career success and occupational self-efficacy (i.e., synchronous or concurrently). Indirect effects of past on future occupational self-efficacy via objective and subjective career success were significant, providing support for an indirect reciprocity model. Results are discussed with respect to extensions of social-cognitive career theory and occupational self-efficacy development over time.

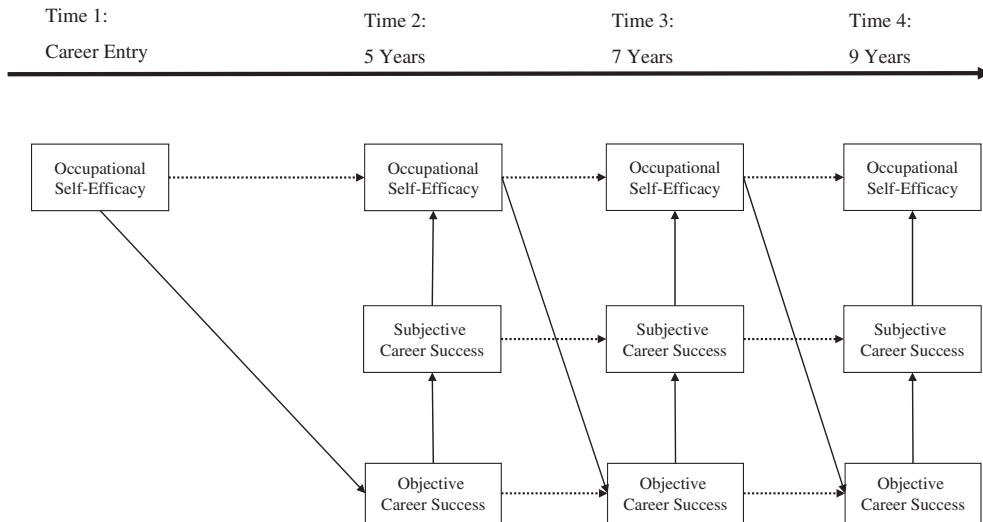
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Social-cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) explains how social-cognitive variables, like self-efficacy, dynamically relate to career development. At the same time career success theories focus on interdependent relationships between objective (e.g., salary, promotions) and subjective career success (i.e., a self-evaluation of career progress by an individual, like perceived career success; Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; Hall & Chandler, 2005; Heslin, 2005; Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995; Turban & Dougherty, 1994). The aim of the present research is to integrate theory and findings on both SCCT and interdependent relationships between objective and subjective career success over time. We will analyze the indirect positive feedback loops between occupational self-efficacy, as a specific type of career self-efficacy, and objective and subjective career success. Moreover, we will be concerned with an approximate duration of time single components of this feedback loop need to unfold. Specifically, we will investigate synchronous (i.e., appear concurrently) vs. time-lagged (i.e., appear over time) effects within the positive feedback loop.

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**Fig. 1.** Time-based model of the positive feedback loop between occupational self-efficacy, objective career success, and subjective career success. Note. The time bar at the top of the figure represents the time intervals of the current study; first measurement point: career entry; second measurement point: 5 years after career entry; third measurement point: 7 years after career entry; fourth measurement point: 9 years after career entry; dotted arrows represent the fact that the same variables relate to each over time.

Our theoretical framework is graphically depicted in Fig. 1. We argue that the dynamic relationship between occupational self-efficacy and career success can only be comprehensively understood if objective and subjective dimensions of career success are considered. We assume that persons who are high in occupational self-efficacy will become objectively successful; however, for developments in occupational self-efficacy to unfold, it is not enough to be objectively successful, but rather, to have people to translate their objective attainments (i.e., salary) into subjective success. Building on these assumptions we propose a model in which occupational self-efficacy, objective career success, and subjective career success are dynamically related within a positive feedback loop. Moreover, we integrate the role of time and state that the effect of occupational self-efficacy on objective career success is time-lagged (i.e., over time) and not synchronous (i.e., concurrently); Whereas the effect of objective career success on subjective career success and of subjective career success on occupational self-efficacy takes less time, i.e., is synchronous and not time-lagged. For a better understanding of the described model, we also refer to the time intervals, realized in our four-wave study design. These intervals consisted of 5 years between Time (T) 1 (career entry) and T2, 2 years between T2 and T3, and again 2 years between T3 and T4.

An analysis of this model contributes to existing research in several ways. First, empirical research on SCCT focused on the one hand on the relationship between self-efficacy, vocational interests and career choice behaviors (e.g., Betz & Hackett, 2006; Sheu et al., 2010). On the other hand, relationships between self-efficacy and academic or work performance were investigated (Brown, Lent, Telander, & Tramayne, 2011; Brown et al., 2008). Although SCCT postulates self-efficacy–success dynamics studies that investigate time-related phenomena in phases after career exploration are still scarce (Abele & Spurk, 2009a). Second, SCCT does not explicitly address the dimensionality of career success. An analysis that explicitly accounts for objective and subjective career success dimensions, and possible indirect effects that can be derived from our theoretical model, generates knowledge about the differential roles of career success dimensions within social-cognitive career development. Third, SCCT refers to past and future attainments as predictors and consequences of self-efficacy. However, a strict test of relevant time frames for these relations was not provided within one single study. The here presented model tests duration of effects (a) to variations in time itself (i.e., synchronous vs. time-lagged effects for the same variables) and (b) in relation to each other (i.e., effects of self-efficacy on objective success vs. effects of objective success on subjective success) (Frese, Garst, & Fay, 2007; Zapf, Dormann, & Frese, 1996). As careers develop over several years, it is additionally important to test whether self-efficacy–success dynamics can be found over longer time spans (Hall & Chandler, 2005). Finally, this study generates knowledge about the nature of the understudied concept of occupational self-efficacy. The study clarifies the role of this concept within SCCT and sheds light upon the mechanisms underlying the development of occupational self-efficacy (e.g., Jaeckel, Seiger, Orth, & Wiese, 2012).

## 1. Theoretical background

### 1.1. Positive feedback loop between occupational self-efficacy and objective and subjective career success

SCCT was originally developed to explain developments in career-related interests and career-related choice behaviors from childhood to career entry. Furthermore, career-related choice behaviors are assumed to be a function of different personal and contextual factors. In a sub-model, the performance model, SCCT also assumes dynamic feedback loops between self-efficacy and

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