



Complementary person–culture values fit and hierarchical career status

Claudia Holtschlag^{a,*}, Carlos E. Morales^b, Aline D. Masuda^b, Alberto Maydeu-Olivares^{a,1}

^a University of Barcelona, Faculty of Psychology, P. Valle de Hebrón 171, 08035, Barcelona, Spain

^b EADA Business School, C/Aragó 204, 08011 Barcelona, Spain

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ABSTRACT

Although career success is an issue of global concern, few studies have examined the antecedents of career success across cultures. In this study we test whether the relationship between individuals' self-enhancement values (achievement and power) and hierarchical status differs across 29 countries and whether this variation depends on countries' cultural value orientations. The results of the multilevel regressions indicate that the relationship between self-enhancement values and hierarchical status varies across the 29 countries and that the cultural value orientations of egalitarianism and hierarchy moderate this relationship. In line with trait-activation theory, individuals with high self-enhancement values were most likely to obtain hierarchical status if their values differentiated them from the other members of the culture.

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1. Introduction

Are ambitious and achievement-seeking individuals generally more likely to make it to the top – or does their career advancement depend on the national culture in which they live? Until now, most career research has implicitly assumed that there are universally applicable predictors of career success (Briscoe, Hall, & Mayrhofer, 2012). In this respect, the fact that ambitious career goals and aspirations were shown to predict career advancement in the US (Howard & Bray, 1988), Australia (Tharenou, 2001) and Germany (Abele & Spurk, 2009b; Spurk & Abele, 2011) would indicate that ambition is also a predictor of objective career success in other cultures. This implicit assumption, however, not only lacks theoretical and empirical evidence (Briscoe et al., 2012), but also contrasts with a substantial amount of research that has emphasized the contextual nature of careers (e.g., Mayrhofer & Schneiderhofer, 2009). Further, despite the fact that culture is singled out as uniquely important to career research (Thomas & Inkson, 2007), no study so far has looked into whether the relationship between individual differences and objective career success may be contingent on national culture.

The joint analysis of individual and contextual variables is, however, particularly important for advancing our knowledge of career success because careers are shaped not only by individuals' characteristics and actions, but also by the organizational and societal contexts in which they are embedded (Grandjean, 1981). For advancing career theory, it is therefore necessary to build more culturally sensitive theoretical models that can better explain when and where individual differences affect objective career success across diverse cultural contexts.

The present study addresses the call for multilevel career research that analyzes careers across cultural contexts (Khapova, Vinkenburg, & Arnold, 2009). Using data from individuals in 29 countries, we examine how the match between individual (Schwartz, 1992) and cultural values (Schwartz, 1999) affects objective career success. Specifically, in line with the abovementioned research

* Corresponding author. Fax: +34 934 021 362.

E-mail addresses: claudia.holtschlag@ub.edu (C. Holtschlag), cmorales@eada.edu (C.E. Morales), amasuda@eada.edu (A.D. Masuda), amaydeu@ub.edu (A. Maydeu-Olivares).

¹ Fax: +34 934 021 362.

about aspirations and career success, we examine in which cultures individuals with pronounced achievement and power values are most likely to attain hierarchical status. Based on trait-activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000), we argue that if the national culture does not encourage and reward ambition-related behavior, these values are more important for understanding hierarchical status. Adopting a cross-cultural approach to objective career success makes a number of contributions to the career literature. Theoretically, it allows us to examine culture as a national boundary condition that influences the value-career success relationship. Practically, it draws attention to the cultural differences that influence career outcomes across countries, providing implications for individuals' career management and organizations' global HR practices.

1.1. Career success across cultures

Career success is widely conceived as a multi-faceted concept that comprises both subjective (e.g., career satisfaction) and objective components (e.g., pay, hierarchical status and promotions) (Gunz & Heslin, 2005). In cross-cultural research, measures of career success need to fulfill additional methodological criteria that do not arise in non-comparative research. The main challenge in cross-cultural research is that the indicators of career success need to assure measurement equivalence, which requires that the concept under investigation is equally understood across cultures (Thomas & Inkson, 2007). In this respect, previous research has outlined that people of different countries ascribe varying meanings to the notion of careers and also differ in their conceptualizations of career success (Briscoe et al., 2012). This, in turn, suggests that indicators of subjective career success, which are commonly derived from individuals' level of satisfaction with the success in their careers, are likely to lack the conceptual equivalence that is an essential assumption in cross-cultural research. Thus, although we acknowledge that career success is a multi-faceted concept, we focus in this study on objective career success, particularly hierarchical status.

Hierarchical status, which is a commonly used indicator of objective career success (Abele & Spurk, 2009a; Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999), refers to individuals' career achievements with respect to their managerial level and managerial responsibilities (Abele & Spurk, 2009b; Abele & Wiese, 2008). The use of hierarchical status has the advantage that its dimensions are objectively defined, facilitating the measurement equivalence across countries that is required for conducting cross-cultural research. Additionally, hierarchical status is an adequate cross-cultural indicator of career success because status is considered to be one of the most universal features of career success across national contexts (Nicholson & De Waal-Andrews, 2005).

1.2. Individual values

In the last few decades, a wide range of variables has been discussed as antecedents of objective career success. These predictors can be classified into four categories: namely, human capital, organizational sponsorship, socio-demographics, and individual differences (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). Individual values belong to the last category; they are overarching goals that act as guiding principles across contexts, reflecting what individuals want in their lives (Schwartz, 1992). According to Schwartz's *value theory* (1992), human values can be categorized into a circular system organized into two poles. The first pole consists of *self-enhancement values* (power, achievement), which support the pursuit of individual interests, as opposed to *self-transcendence values* (universalism, benevolence) that encourage the well-being of others. The second pole consists of *openness values* (e.g., self-direction, stimulation, hedonism), which encourage change and the pursuit of new experiences and ideas, as opposed to *conservation values* (security, conformity, tradition), which emphasize the maintenance of the status quo (Schwartz, 2011).

In the current study we focus on self-enhancement values, which comprise achievement and power values, because previous studies have shown that these values are particularly conclusive for understanding objective career success (e.g., Frieze, Olson, Murrell, & Selvan, 2006). People with high self-enhancement values greatly appreciate the attainment of social status, prestige, and domination over people and resources; they generally aim for social power, authority, and wealth, and find it important to demonstrate competences according to social standards. Individuals who value self-enhancement are also described as ambitious, capable, successful, and influential. Schwartz (1992) has shown that individuals generally seek out work environments that support their individual values. Thus, based on Schwartz's values theory, we expect self-enhancement values to predict hierarchical status because individuals with high self-enhancement values are likely to seek managerial jobs that allow them to exercise power and to demonstrate their competencies. In fact, several empirical studies have shown that power and achievement values are positively related with indicators of career advancement. In a longitudinal study of MBA graduates, Frieze et al. (2006) showed that individuals with high power values were more likely to be promoted to higher-level positions. Further, several studies have shown that ambitious people tend to be more successful in their careers in terms of salary, job position, and occupational prestige (Howard & Bray, 1988; Jansen & Vinkenburg, 2006; Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). These findings are also consistent with research showing that graduates who found it important to advance in their careers were more likely to attain an elevated hierarchical status in their early and mid careers (Abele & Spurk, 2009b; Spurk & Abele, 2011).

Hypothesis 1. Self-enhancement values are positively associated with individuals' hierarchical status.

1.3. Cross-moderated effects of cultural values

Despite the increasing number of studies on individual differences as antecedents of career success, current research falls short of testing the generalizability of these relationships across cultures, neglecting the idea that country-level variables such as

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