

Exploring Subjective Career Success Among Blue-Collar Workers: Motivators That Matter

Eileen Koekemoer¹, Hendrik Le Roux Fourie¹, and Lene Ilyna Jorgensen²

Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to explore the experience of subjective career success among an understudied population such as blue-collar workers (BCWs) in a South African context. Employing a qualitative approach, a nonprobability, purposive voluntary sample of 20 workers were drawn from a manufacturing industry. Semistructured interviews were conducted and examined through a comprehensive thematic analysis. The analysis revealed that BCWs experience career success when certain needs are fulfilled in their careers. According to the findings, participants highlighted specific aspects in their work (e.g., support from the organization, aspiration for progression, working to provide, responsibility toward others, and work-related preferences). For BCWs, these aspects fulfill particular needs that lead to specific feelings of career success (e.g., recognition and value, competence and skills, performance, purpose and meaning, working in a conducive environment, and financial gain).

Keywords

blue-collar workers, subjective career success, work experiences, psychology of working theory

Understanding how employees experience their careers and the success they experience has become a major area of interest within the field of vocational psychology. This is especially the case in light of the new career landscape presented by contemporary and/or boundaryless careers (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). In recent years, several scholars on this topic have advocated for and shifted their attention from objective career success to increased subjective experiences of such success (*see* Mulhall, 2011, for an overview of studies on subjective career success). Although this line of research has progressed significantly, most of the studies in the field of vocational behavior and

¹ Department of Human Resource Management, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa

² School of Industrial Psychology and Human Resource Management, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, North-West University, Potchefstroom, North West, South Africa

Corresponding Author:

Lene Ilyna Jorgensen, School of Industrial Psychology and Human Resource Management, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, North-West University, Hofmannstreet Building E3, Potchefstroom, North West 2520, South Africa.

Email: lene.jorgensen@nwu.ac.za

career development that investigate *subjective* career success refer to educated white-collar workers, mainly managers, professionals, and consultants (Arthur, 2008).

As early as 2001, Blustein observed that “vocational psychology has developed into an elegant science about the work lives of a small proportion of individuals who live in relative affluence in Western countries” (p. 171). Most recently, Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, and Autin (2016) confirmed this line of thought: Although previous career-related theories do capture essential psychological elements of career development and work, they do not adequately explain the work-based experiences of people on the “lower rungs of the social position ladder.” These are individuals for whom contextual elements are often primary determinants of how they experience their work. One such group of employees are the so-called blue-collar workers (BCWs). Thomas (1989) explains that BCWs are often considered to have jobs instead of careers, since their occupations are typically not tied to an ascending ladder of career development. He continues to argue that although their work experiences do not align with white-collar criteria for career and success, these workers still enjoy meaningful work experiences and accumulate various skills over time.

BCWs have a pivotal role to play in the economy of South Africa. These employees form a major part of the country’s economy as constituting almost one third of the workforce (Statistics South Africa, 2015). This category of workers can be characterized as individuals performing “relatively unskilled or semi-skilled labour of a manual nature” and who mostly are employed in industries such as mining, construction, electrical, transport, and security (Lee & Mohamed, 2006, p. 46). Duncan (2013) reports that blue-collar work is traditionally perceived as less prestigious, not as valuable and less rewarding. The devaluation and stigmatization of manual labor do damage to the broader economy to which these workers contribute significantly. Moreover, historically, the South African education curriculum tended to deemphasize practical skills, which has left South Africa with a manual labor workforce deprived of vital skills that individuals require to succeed in their jobs (Duncan, 2013; Kanye & Crous, 2007).

In considering research on career success, scholars have largely ignored the BCWs. As a result, much is still to be learned about the careers and employment experiences of this societal category (Hu, Kaplan, & Dalal, 2010). For instance, Lucas (2011) studied workplace dignity among BCWs and reveals three key issues, namely, all work is valuable and important, dignity is based on the quality of work performed, and dignity is manifested in the way in which people interact with others. This research indicated that for BCWs, workplace dignity is vitally important and is shaped largely by the contours of individual employers’ unique work experiences.

Lucas and Buzzanell (2004) also found that BCWs (specifically miners) find meaning in their work despite outsider’s perceptions. Furthermore, these workers construct exemplars of career success based on the specifics of their occupation, community, and the work itself. A more recent study on career and work attitudes among BCWs (Baruch, Wordsworth, Mills, & Wright, 2016) suggests that these employees’ careers should be understood in terms of the wider context of their lives. The reason is that such individuals may experience the conditions of employment differently depending on each workers’ employment priorities. In the well-cited study of Hennequin (2007), findings also indicate that experience of career success for BCWs do not depend primarily on monetary factors. Other facets also may lead to career success such as task enrichment, continuous training, reputation of the organization, autonomy, challenge, and relationships with colleagues.

The Present Study

In light of the background mentioned above, the present research was motivated by our observation of the gap in the literature on the subjective experiences of career success among BCWs. This study also builds on the observation of Sullivan (1999) and Sullivan and Baruch (2009) that although significant progress have been made in studies on boundaryless, protean, and other nontraditional career concepts,

further research is still needed on underrepresented populations such as BCWs. Responding to these observations, our goal was to explore BCWs' conceptualization and experience of career success within a non-Western context, such as South Africa. We expect the results of this study to expand our knowledge and understanding of how employees in different career contexts view their career success, especially employees in blue-collar work occupations.

We based the present study on the notions of the psychology of working theory (PWT; Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016), which focuses on the understanding of the work lives of all who seeks employment (regardless of their level of access to financial and social capital). We also expect this research to shed light on the motivating factors driving these workers and the impact authentic perspectives of personal work experiences has on individuals' views of career success. This research is based on the following research question: How do BCWs conceptualize and experience their subjective career success within their work environment? Answers to this question will help both individuals and organizations develop improved strategies to manage careers of BCWs more effectively.

Subjective Career Success

Career success concerns the outcomes and achievements accumulated as a result of one's work experiences (Seibert & Kraimer, 2001). Literature suggests that career success has a dichotomous nature, indicating an objective and subjective dimension (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; Mulhall, 2011). Although these dimensions are found to be positively correlated, they also are empirically distinct (Abele & Spurk, 2009).

Subjective career success relates strongly to the understanding of a career as the "evolving sequence of work experience over time" (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989) and implies an individual's subjective judgment/evaluation (Abele & Spurk, 2009; Dries, Pepermans, & Carlier, 2008; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). Such subjective success may include intrinsic elements such as job satisfaction, work-life balance, self-enhancement, and work orientation (Heslin, 2005). Some of the most widely accepted demographic predictors of subjective career success are gender, marital status, age, and language groups (Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995; Ng et al., 2005, Park, 2010). Typically, other factors that could be significant contributors are human capital (e.g., work experience, level of education), organizational (opportunity for training and development, support), and motivational (networking and ambition) aspects (Ballout, 2007; Judge et al., 1995; Ng et al., 2005; Park, 2010).

Contemporary Careers, New Careers

Certain periods are characterized by blurring boundaries between organizations, industries, and occupations. This also entails escalating technological advancements and developments as well as rapid globalization. During these periods, established ideas about work and careers are challenged continually (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). As a result, further dynamic career concepts are being introduced which reflect "the change from individuals relying on organisations for career development to individuals assuming responsibility for their own career management and employability" (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009, p. 1563). Some of these new developments and concepts describe the protean and boundaryless careers as well as hybrid careers.

Initially, boundaryless careers were defined as career opportunities beyond the boundary of a single employer (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Later on, such careers were reconceptualized as varying levels of physical and psychological career mobility between successive employment situations (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). According to the concept of a protean career, the individuals, not the organization, are in control their own career management and development (Hall, 1996). In this regard, protean orientation is defined by two dimensions, namely, career management as value driven and as self-directed focus (Briscoe, Hall, & Du Muth, 2005). Granrose and Baccili (2006) argue that no distinction can be drawn

between the concepts of protean and boundaryless career. These concepts are merely the reflections of the new, more ambiguous employer–employee relationship. Alternatively, Sullivan and Baruch (2009) typify hybrid careers as an emergent concept, defining careers and which contains aspects of concepts from both traditional and boundaryless careers.

Limited studies are available on BCWs; therefore, little is known about the application of theories and concepts relating to the so-called new careers, regarding this specific work segment of employees. Baruch et al. (2016) recently attempted to understand BCWs from the orientation of protean careers. However, these scholars found that blue-collar work situations are more complex, seeing that the findings did not support certain relationships in terms of the protean career notion. They argue that blue-collar career behavior needs to be understood within the context of the larger picture of workers' life stage, health, and private circumstances.

Related to the line of reasoning above, career scholars have focused their attention on explaining the work experiences of those individuals utilizing the psychology of working perspective. This approach suggests that work potentially fulfills three fundamental human needs, namely, for survival, relatedness, and self-determination (Blustein, 2008). Based on this approach, the PWT was developed to explain important elements in the process of securing decent work and how performing such work may lead to need satisfaction, work fulfillment, and well-being (Duffy et al., 2016). This theory offers alternative perspectives for understanding the work lives of individuals who have an occupation or seek it. In this regard, the perspective incorporates the influence of contextual factors and highlights the securing of decent work as the central goal of the career development process.

We believe that this line of research is relevant to the present study as the theory underscores two specific aspects reflected in this study. Firstly, the study investigated a sample of BCWs. The PWT was developed especially to explain the work experiences of all individuals, particularly people near or suffering poverty, those who face discrimination and marginalization in their lives (Duffy et al., 2016).

Previous literature has already indicated that BCWs face threats of stigmatization, encounter issues of middle-class social status, and are often regarded as “sitting on the opposite side of management at the bargaining table” (Lucas, 2011, p359). Secondly, the present study focused on subjective experiences of BCWs, which could include contextual factors. The PWT stresses that sociocultural factors must be treated as primary to understand individuals' career decisions and their work experiences. This is especially relevant to BCWs, since previous literature indicated that the characteristics, assumptions, and language of conventional career models, and the traditional and current definitions of career success do not consider the aspects of BCWs' work and their work experiences (Baruch, Wordsworth, Mills, & Wright, 2016; Hu et al., 2010; Lucas, 2011). We believe that the present study will not only contribute to the PWT; an understanding of blue-collar work will provide clear insights into this context and prove useful for future initiatives regarding career aspects.

Method

Research Approach

The general aim of the present study was to explore the concept of career success among BCWs. Thus, we as the researchers opted for a qualitative approach. A descriptive form of research was employed by focusing on observing and describing events as it occurred in order to capture the richness of individuals' everyday experiences (McLeod, 2013).

Participants and Sampling Methods

A nonprobability, purposive and voluntary sample was taken of 20 BCWs from a manufacturing plant situated in Gauteng, South Africa. The organizations' workforce of 150 employees comprises 80%

BCWs who perform most of their duties within a factory and 20% white-collar workers who operate within their offices. For the organization under investigation, BCWs refer to individuals working on the factory floor in a position that requires mostly manual labor such as technicians, mechanics, and machine operators. The researcher was known to the organization as a part-time employee. He initially held information sessions with the employees, explaining the research and its purpose, thereby inviting them to take part in the study. Thereafter, employees indicated their willingness to partake in the study voluntarily. The inclusion criteria for participants were based on the definitions obtained from literature on BCWs, related to the topics of career success (Arthur et al., 2005; Dries et al., 2008; Hall, 2002; Ng et al., 2005) as well as that of tenure (Ballout, 2007).

The sample included 75% male participants, of whom 40% were married parents with children and 15% included married mothers with children. Of the participants, one was a single mother, while eight did not disclose their family status. As many as 70% of the participants were between 20 and 39 years of age. In terms of tenure, 70% of the participants were permanently employed, and 45% indicated between 3 and 8 years of experience as BCWs, while 55% attested to between 9 and 26 years of experience. The language groups of the participants were 35% West Germanic, 25% Sotho-Tswana, 25% Nguni, and 15% Xitsonga.

Interview Procedure

Data were collected through semistructured interviews based on an interview protocol. This protocol consisted of interview questions compiled by the researcher according to the work and guidelines of Hennequin (2007). The schedule included questions posed in a flexible manner, as answers were frequently followed up with probing or clarifying questions to explore responses in depth. Sample questions determined how BCWs define and experience their career success. Examples read: What do you see as a successful day at work? What makes you feel successful in your career? (feelings, physical aspects, and events), If you sometimes feel unsuccessful in your career, what makes you feel this way? Please explain your work environment to me. Are there any specific things that you like very much about your working environment? And that you don't like?

Semistructured interviews were held until data saturation was reached. Data saturation is the point in data collection where no new information is found that adds to the conceptual category (Francis, Rolph, Rolph, & Robbins, 2010). An initial sample consisting of 15 participants was included in the study, and an additional five interviews were conducted as saturation criterion. The interviews focused on how participants defined and experienced their career success, viewed their work environment, and envisaged future career prospects.

The participants were given the choice to be interviewed in either Afrikaans, English, or Sepedi based on the demographics of the working group at the organization. All of the participants opted to be interviewed in English. It is significant that no one indicated that they would prefer the interview to be conducted in an African language, even after it was stated explicitly that a fluent field worker would be able to translate.

The interviews were recorded, with the consent of the participants, which gave the researchers the opportunity to transcribe each interview verbatim afterward. During the interview, and directly after the interview, the researchers made field notes. These notes served as helpful tools to revisit the interviews at a later state (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché, & Delpont, 2011). The notes included observations and interpretations that provide additional insight when data needed to be analyzed and interpreted.

Strategies Employed to Ensure Data Quality and Integrity

Particular attention was paid to fulfilling the conditions of trustworthiness, which can be explicated as transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability (McLeod, 2013). Strategic measures were

followed to ensure trustworthiness in the present study. These include pilot interviews, peer examination, reasoned consensus, co-coding, reflexivity, and proper training of researchers and field workers (McLeod, 2013). The pilot interviews consisted of three preliminary sessions that were conducted prior to the actual data collection. This was done to eliminate possible issues or problems related to the specific questions that would be posed during the interview.

After the pilot interviews, minor adjustments were made by phrasing questions to simplify the content. The questions' meanings were not altered after the pilot interviews, but the researcher decided to adopt a more conversational approach toward participants. The interview questions were supplemented by slightly extended introductory explanations for intelligibility and to elicit the richest possible responses.

The researchers furthermore facilitated opportunities where fellow researchers assessed the data-gathering process regularly to ensure that peer examination took place. Reflexivity was applied to help increase the trustworthiness of the study. This entails evaluating the possible impact of the researcher's personal background, perceptions, and interests on the study (Krefting, 1991). Regarding personal reflexivity, the researchers had to identify and be conscious of their own assumptions, potential reactions, and expectations toward the topic under investigation. This is done to expose areas that may lead to potential bias during both the interview and the analysis phases. Therefore, the researchers consistently strived to consider the responses as objectively as possible, while being aware of the abovementioned assumptions that could surface. In the present study, the researchers were particularly attentive to avoid potential preconceived notions on the nature of manual labor—and those individuals who perform (and prefer) this type of work—from introducing bias into the study.

Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, data were processed through a thematic analysis, which is a process of “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2008, p. 79). A theme is defined as “a coherent integration of the disparate pieces of data that constitute the finding” (Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p. 402). As guidelines for analyzing the qualitative data, the study followed steps proposed by Terblanche et al. (2010) as a starting point. These steps are elucidated below.

Firstly, the researchers read through a transcribed interview repeatedly to familiarize themselves with the information. Secondly, initial coding took place. Coding entails a process of labeling sections of the text with concise, meaningful units, which simplifies categorizing later on in the analysis (Frost, 2011). This step can be taken both on a *manifest* as well as a *latent* level (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2008). This implies that the meanings derived from the text were mentioned explicitly by the participants (manifest) or they referred to a particular concept implicitly (latent).

These mentioned levels required the researchers to interpret the words of the participants carefully in order to understand correctly (and thus code accordingly) the more latent meanings of certain sections in the transcribed interviews. Second-order coding was also done to generate subthemes within a number of the extracted themes. The various codes generated under a specific theme were stored in a large data pool. The codes within this pool, which were strongly related—that is, the concepts dealing with similar matters—were grouped together to create preliminary subthemes. This process was completed until every code was placed in a meaningful subtheme.

Thereafter, the subthemes were examined to determine the relevance of its contents. Thus, certain codes were removed or moved to more relevant subthemes, where applicable. The aim was to ensure all elements within a subtheme were strongly related. Once the process was completed, each subtheme was refined to ensure the name given to that particular subtheme describes its contents accurately. In this case, no predetermined themes or categories existed before analysis but were derived

from the text instead (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Thus, the analyses consisted of generating, reviewing, defining and naming these themes, and producing a final report (accompanied by mind maps) of the extracted themes.

Two of the researchers simultaneously completed the data analysis. One researcher is well versed in qualitative data analysis and provided training and assistance to the coresearcher. This was done combined with expert training in research methodology. The data analysis was conducted in an attempt to reach consensus on the meanings derived from the text. This consensus functioned as validation measure to implement triangulation (Blanche et al., 2010). Triangulation (as utilized in the present study) refers to “the process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation” (Stake, 2000, p. 443).

Results

During the interviews, participants regularly described aspects which they regard as important in their working lives and to which they attach considerable worth (described as Theme 1). These aspects ultimately influenced and shaped their subjective meanings of career success (described as Theme 2). Table 1 below illustrates these two themes together with its subthemes.

Theme 1: Aspects That BCWs Value

This theme describes the work experiences of BCWs and how they value specific aspects in their work.

Support from the organization (and or manager). Employees expect and value loyalty from the organization. Participants emphasized the need that their company shows respect to them and are commitment to address their needs and protect their interests. Furthermore, they indicated a deep-felt need that someone in a higher position identifies them as efficient performers. Seemingly participants expected that those in higher positions should allow them the opportunity to progress in the hierarchy and fill more responsible roles within the organization. They indicated that they value the career support from their managers due to the large impact such recognition has on their careers. There seemed to be a common belief among participants that the fate of the workers’ careers is in the hands of their superiors and that their future to a large degree is determined by the latter. This is illustrated in the response below from a single mother who is employed temporarily:

Someone will one day acknowledge my potential—maybe not here, maybe not within the next five years—but someone will recognize it and I will reach my goal. I just have to keep on trying, and continue to prove myself. Somewhere, any time soon, someone will recognize my potential. (Participant 4, 22-year-old mother)

In terms of the tasks they perform, participants stressed that they value challenges in their work and expressed the desire to be provided with difficult tasks that extend their abilities and challenge them to an extent. They seem to attach high value to a technical mentor who provides them with on-the-job training. These participants clearly are aware of the urgent need for technical training in order to be competent in their jobs. Therefore, they attach particular value to technical training.

Aspirations for progression. Several participants indicated high aspirations for progression, both as self-development and hierarchical promotion. They identified two forms of self-development: personal growth due to the effect their work has on them as well as the opportunity to educate themselves and thereby reach their full potential. Workers, therefore, indicated that they are ambitious and seek opportunities for personal development. This is demonstrated by the following excerpt:

Table 1. Aspects That Blue-Collar Workers (BCWs) Value and Subjective Meanings Attached to Career Success.

Theme 1: Aspects That BCWs Value		Theme 2: Subjective Meanings of Career Success	
Subthemes	Associated Meaning	Subthemes	Associated Meaning
Support from the organization	Expect and value loyalty from the organization, and value the support they get from managers	Recognition and value	Feeling valued and being recognized by one's manager, being identified for promotion, and feeling appreciated
Aspirations for progression	Ambitious and seek opportunities for personal development (personal growth) and hierarchical promotion	Competence and skills	Performing tasks efficiently, being known as a technical expert, expanding one's knowledge and experience, and being a fast learner
Work to provide	Strong sense of being a provider and the responsibility to provide to their families, which serves as a strong motivator for work	Financial gain	Being able to provide for one's family financially, being employed and earning an income
Responsibility toward others	Responsibility to pass on their own knowledge, skills, and experience to others	Performance	Being able to perform one's work, work delivered at a higher level of quantity and quality than expected, and achieving personal standards of high performance
Work-related preferences	Preferences related to the actual work tasks such as preference for manual labor, feeling competent in an array of areas, having a passion for their work, working for a reputable company, taking pride in quality work and clean environment, and learning while working	Purpose and meaning	Fulfilling a role that provides one with a sense of purpose and adds meaning and performing a job that adds value to the company and to its clients
		Working in a conducive environment	Working in an environment free of conflict or difficulties, having a degree of autonomy in one's job, and performing well in teams and completing duties adequately

Personally, I'm planning on studying next year. Maybe a project management course. I am not one who likes being at one place. I want to develop further on. I don't want to spend the rest of my life packing bottles. Maybe there are people who feel that they would do this job for the rest of their lives, but personally, no. (P1, 25-year-old father)

Closely related to the aspirations for self-development is the need for hierarchical progression through promotions as the following response attest to:

The eventual goal that I want to reach is just to show the guys—and it's just a bit of capital holding me back—but it's a one-year Packaging Diploma that I want to follow But my goal is to become a production manager. Just to show the guys: you can work yourself up from the bottom. (P10, 32-year-old father)

From the response above, it is evident that hierarchical progression and personal development are closely related, seeing that the one aspect occurs as a result of the other. Consequently, workers attach

high value to both these aspects. Hierarchical progression, furthermore, is linked to individuals' purpose for working since a large number of participants indicated that they perform their work with the aim of progressing through the ranks and eventually providing for others.

Working to provide. In the present study, BCWs attested to performing their jobs based on a strong sense of being providers and looking after their families as a strong work motivator. They often have the responsibility to provide in their family's basic needs as stated by the following married father who is temporarily employed:

But because I have children and responsibilities, I have to come to work. It doesn't matter if you like the work or not, you have to work because you have the responsibility to provide for them. That is what drives me on every day. (P19, 35-year-old father)

Responsibility toward others. Participants commonly mentioned the responsibility to pass one's knowledge, skills, and experience on to others. In this regard, participants especially identified new job entrants as intended recipients of this acquired wealth of knowledge. It was pointed out that when a worker acquires success in any form, this individual has the responsibility to share his or her empowerment, so that others may also benefit. Evidently for the sample of BCWs in the present study, a sense of sharing and distribution is deeply embedded in their values, and they enjoy these actions. An excerpt below from the responses describe this notion:

I like showing other people, if it is a new worker, I'll show him how to do the job. (P17, 29-year-old male)

Work-related preferences. Participants referred to a number of common preferences that relate to the actual job tasks they perform physically. They seem to prefer manual labor—a large number of interviewees confirmed this choice by emphasizing that they perform jobs for which they have a passion. Participants also expressed enthusiasm for personal development through training opportunities and confirmed their openness to learn new things. Several of the interviewees expressed pride in their ability to switch between departments and comfortably perform different types of technical tasks while working for a reputable company. Participants made it clear that they take pride in the cleanliness of the working environment where they perform their tasks daily. Therefore, they personally ensure that the area is kept clean as explained by the following married father who is temporarily employed:

We make sure that our surroundings are very clean. And keep it clean for anyone from outside to come into our surroundings. It wouldn't be fair for someone who knows nothing about the place and find it upside down while we are working. (P6, 23-year-old father)

From Theme 1, it is evident that the work experiences of BCWs are shaped by the aspects which they value in their work environment. It is also these aspects that shape the meaning they attach to career success, which are elaborated on in Theme 2.

Theme 2: Subjective Meanings of Career Success

The six distinct subthemes (i.e., their personal meanings) that report on participants' subjective experiences of career success are recognition and value, competence and skills, financial gain, performance, purpose and meaning, and working in a conducive environment.

Recognition and value. Participants emphasized that when their managers took an interest in and recognized their work, they as employees felt successful in their occupation. The managers' interest included showing appreciation and providing verbal recognition for the tasks that employees performed. This finding also links closely with participants' expressed need to be recognized by a superior in order to progress in the hierarchy as a single mother explains:

When the general manager says, "You know what, I've heard all these good things about how wonderful you are, and I just want to say thank-you." . . . Personally . . . Words of appreciation can make a person feel more successful than money. (P4, 22-year-old mother)

However, the opposite is also true—the lack of appreciation from management and others made employees feel unsuccessful, as indicated by the following excerpt:

Sometimes, you find that you work hard; you work that you sweat, but at the end of the day—no appreciation. So, it feels like I'm doing nothing—I don't make any difference. (P2, 32-year-old female)

Competence and skills. The employees' willingness and eagerness to learn and improve their competence by acquiring new skills and experience were highlighted as aspects contributing to their career success. The participants reported that being regarded as a technical expert by others added to their sense of being successful in their jobs. Participants mentioned specifically that responding as a fast learner when being taught contributes largely to how successful they feel. They furthermore indicated that occupying a leadership position (i.e., supervisor) among their peers provides them with a sense of success. The reason is that they are viewed as competent and skilled enough to lead others. A married father, who is temporarily employed, shared the following anecdote of a learning opportunity that made him feel successful:

There's this machine that is the most difficult machine in this plant. And packers they always complain and run away from that machine. Then, this one packer said, "Come here and let me show you how to work this machine." He showed me only once, and I did it, and he just looked at me and said, "Who are you?" (P6, 23-year-old father)

Often BCWs are employed in technical environments where they have to perform highly mechanical tasks; therefore, being regarded as a technical expert by others adds to their sense of being a success in their jobs as the following response illustrates:

In labeling I achieved success because I was the one who knew the machine best, and the one for whom work was important, and it was important to do my work perfectly. (P11, married, 45-year-old mother, permanent worker)

The opposite, however, was also mentioned as participants indicated that they feel unsuccessful in their careers if others get the impression that they are not competent enough. Participants also indicated that they need additional support from their companies in order to feel more successful in their careers. Several interviewees mentioned the need for financial support to help fund their personal studies as well as the increased support provided by training opportunities. The following response illustrates this need:

There is nothing more important than training the people about the thing that they do daily. It must be made clear that they understand the importance of what they have to do at every step of the production process. The training must be very wide . . . That means from product knowledge to housekeeping, even behavior . . . It does make us feel successful. (P9, married, 43-year-old mother)

Financial gain. The participants emphasized that their salaries helped ensure their children's education, which made them feel successful in their own careers. Furthermore, permanent employment added to the participants' experience of success, as it gave them the security that they can provide for their families at least for a considerable period in the future.

To be honest, a job is a job. It doesn't matter if you are sweeping . . . at least they are giving your something and with that you are able to put food on the table, and you can buy your kids something. So, for me, I don't care about which position I have, as long as I know I have a job, I say thank-you. I am receiving an income and I can do something for my family so that we are happy at the end of the day. (P19, married, 35-year-old father, temporary worker)

Interviewees further stressed that seeing progression in their lives, particularly a visible increase in their quality of living, made them feel successful in their careers. Receiving a secure monthly salary, therefore, makes it easier for employees to plan for and afford a higher standard of living. In this regard, a married mother confirmed:

I would say it's something that makes me feel more successful because I've worked here for 22 years and I managed to send my child to do media studies and she's going to graduate now.

Interviewer: That must make you feel proud.

Participant: Yes, very much. It's my greatest success. (43-year-old mother, permanent worker)

Performance. Being able to perform well in their jobs seemingly also make BCWs feel successful in their careers. Participants indicated that high performance provided them with the possibility of being promoted as the result of efficient work. For certain participants, high performance implies work delivered at a higher level of quantity and quality than what is expected; for others, it means reaching specific job targets, which they viewed as highly challenging. Thus, the findings suggest that individuals' achieving personal standards of high performance leads to their feelings of career success.

Purpose and meaning. BCWs expressed the desire to fulfill a role that provides them with a sense of purpose and adds meaning to their lives. Participants stated that they want to feel they are performing a job that adds value to their company and thereby to their clients. Thus, their contribution would make them feel successful. This finding underscores the high preference workers showed for being employed in a reputable company. According to them, working for a company that is well known for delivering products or services of substantial value strengthens the impression that they are making a significant contribution to society. This view is demonstrated by the following excerpt:

When I do my shopping at the big stores, I check my bottles—I go in every store, in fact, and check my bottles—and it's there. When Company X's name is there, in fact, I feel successful. I feel, "Yes, this is the company I work for. This is the company that makes me feel proud not only of myself but for them as well." Because the store is full of their products, meaning they are very successful, making me successful. The company's success makes me feel success. (P6, married, 23-year-old father, temporary worker)

Participants further noted that having a clear purpose in their career through a job they regard as significant ultimately provides them job satisfaction and/or success. However, being employed as a contract worker—not permanently—influenced the BCWs perceived career success. They stated that temporary employment deprives them of a sense of certainty and stability in their careers and thereby makes them feel unsuccessful.

Working in a beneficial work environment. Interestingly, participants stated that they experience feelings of career success when they perform their work free of difficulties. They listed the absence of conflict and complaints as factors contributing to their experience of career success. For them, this means that they are performing well within their teams and have completed their duties adequately. Participants also mentioned that they experience increased feelings of career success when they are given a degree of autonomy in their jobs for personal decision-making. This experience is evident from the response below:

I started working in the injection department. So, I worked on my own, running a shift on my own, without being supervised. That was one of my highlights. Because at the end of the day, I could manage running the machine and meet the customer requirements without needing someone to (supervise me). Because the department where I came from I was being supervised. Now there was no supervision. So, that's one of my highlights. (P15, 35-year-old male, permanent worker)

Others also indicated that a degree of autonomy allows them to establish their own working pace, which reduces the amount of stress they would suffer under commanding supervisors.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to explore BCWs' conceptualization (i.e., attributed personal meanings) and experience of career success. The results provided more detail on ways in which BCWs' work experiences, particularly aspects they value in their work environment, shape and influence the meanings they attach to career success. This article contributes in four major ways to the growing body of literature covering career success. Firstly, the study answers the calls for increased research on the understudied population of BCWs. Secondly, unlike previous research that focused predominantly on objective career success, the focus was on employees' subjective experience of career success. Thirdly, the findings provide valuable insights regarding the concepts of protean or boundaryless careers as experienced by BCWs. Finally, the present study used the PWT as framework to elucidate the research findings.

In considering previous studies among BCWs, the focus was on measuring work-related aspects such as job performance, job satisfaction, workplace dignity, and burnout and workplace issues (Arnolds, Boshoff, Mazibuko, & Klemz, 2010; Baruch et al., 2016; Brand-Labuschagne, Mostert, Rothmann, & Rothmann, 2012; Hu et al., 2010; Lee & Mohamed, 2006; Lucas, 2011). In this regard, only one study (Hennequin, 2007) actually investigated the career success of BCWs. The mentioned study elaborated on three basic dimensions of career success among BCWs. These are *material* (e.g., monetary awards, fringe benefits, hierarchical progression, and number of promotions), *psychological* (e.g., career satisfaction, job success, interpersonal success, and life balance), and *social* (e.g., social status, reputation, and recognition).

Following Hennequin (2007), the present study also identified recognition and financial gain as indicators of career success. However, notably, BCWs in the present study emphasized competence, skills, and performance. For BCWs in this study, particular motivators contribute to feelings of career success: being known as an expert and fast learner, being able to deliver work at a higher level of quantity and quality than expected, and expanding personal knowledge or skills.

A further interesting finding emerging from the present study, was having purpose and finding meaning in one's work, viewed as career success. Participants pointed out and elaborated on how a role or job that provides a sense of purpose or meaning adds to their feelings of success. Furthermore, participants stated that they experience career success when being able to add significant value to the lives of others (e.g., their external clients). This finding relates strongly to the work of Poon, Briscoe, Abdul-Ghani, and Jones (2015, p. 25), who defines career success among other matters as

“making a difference.” Poon et al. found that individual employees’ perceived success in their career impact positively on others either by helping someone, sharing knowledge, or assisting through charity. Additionally, participants emphasized that by just being employed, they already feel successful. This finding is understandable in light of the South African context, considering that as many as 25% of the country’s population is unemployed and earns no fixed income (Statistics South Africa, 2015).

Furthermore, in light of the continually changing world of work, our findings suggest that BCWs in this study explore ways to manage their career and deal with challenges they face. They accomplish this by acquiring expert knowledge of their work and being fast learners. It was insightful that BCWs typically reported strong ambitions and actively seek opportunities to develop themselves through hierarchical promotion in order to become known as technical experts in a fast-changing technological world.

When considering the new developments and concepts described as the protean and boundaryless careers, the participants indicated high aspirations for progression both in terms of self-development and hierarchical promotion. Personal growth as well as the opportunity to educate themselves and reach their full potential (e.g., becoming more employable) seem highly important for the participants. A number of individuals specifically emphasized their ambition to progress in their work and not remain in their current work indefinitely as a participant asserted, “I want to develop further on. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life packing bottles.” This is in line with the contemporary conceptualizations of boundaryless careers as varying levels of physical and psychological career mobility between successive employment situations (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006).

Our findings clearly illustrate how BCWs understand this abovementioned notion and they seek opportunities to empower themselves by increased mobility between organizations. As was pointed out previously, the concept of a protean career implies that the individual, not the organization, controls the management and development of his or her own career (Hall, 2002). This is confirmed in our findings where the BCWs indicated how they seek opportunities to acquire new skills and experience. These opportunities are not necessarily provided by the organization only but include self-initiated further development outside of the work environment, which confirms the need to pursue further studies.

Furthermore, literature indicates that a protean career focuses on the drive by personal needs. As a result, employees self-determine the direction of their career rather than depending on the organization to provide such direction and/or mobility (Briscoe et al., 2005; Hall, 2002). The findings from our study confirmed this trend, seeing that the BCWs emphasized the desire to have particular needs fulfilled, which will lead to specific feelings of career success (e.g., competence and skills). The notion of having these needs fulfilled is expounded in our final contribution on the PWT.

Given the PWT as framework, one of the most profound findings in the present study was how the meanings BCWs attach to career success are shaped by their work experiences. In this sample, participants explained explicitly how they value aspects such as support from the organization, aspirations to progress, their responsibility toward others, ability to provide, and work preferences (all aspects described as Theme 1). These aspects resonate strongly with the three fundamental human needs that individuals potentially fulfill when working as described in the PWT (i.e., need for survival, relatedness, and self-determination). BCWs in the present study indicated a strong sense of being a provider and the responsibility to provide for their families (i.e., survival need), which seemingly are a strong motivator for work. A further critical need that working provides is access to social support and relational connections (Duffy et al., 2016), which were also mentioned as important aspects for BCWs in this sample. Participants especially indicated their need for the support from their organization and manager (e.g., taking a personal interest in them). They also emphasized their responsibility to pass on their knowledge, skills, and experience to others (i.e., need for relatedness). Furthermore, working for a reputable company seems to be a work aspect they regard highly.

Participants evidently took pride in working for what they regarded as one of the top companies in the country. This relates strongly to the social connection need that Bluestein (2011) points out:

“Working can foster social connections indirectly by linking workers to the broader society. This allows an opportunity for workers to feel that they are contributing to their larger economic, political, and social worlds” (p. 139). BCWs also indicated their aspirations for progression and work-related preferences such as feeling competent in an array of areas, having a passion for their work, and taking pride in quality work, which all relate to the human need for self-determination. According to Ryan and Deci (2002), work provides a pathway for self-determination. This entails the experience of being engaged in activities that are intrinsically or extrinsically motivating in a meaningful way.

According to the PWT, this cluster of needs—survival, social connection, and self-determination—are outcomes of decent work, which leads to work fulfillment and well-being. Our findings expand on this line of reasoning by suggesting that these needs are not only leading to work fulfillment but especially to feelings and meanings of subjective career success. Evidently, by valuing these aspects, BCWs attempt to fulfill specific needs through their work, which if fulfilled will lead to feelings of career success. For instance, BCWs value support from the organization, especially their managers. Should this need be fulfilled (i.e., if BCWs feel they are being valued and recognized by their manager), they are identified for promotion, or feel they are appreciated, this amounts to experiences of success in their career. Similarly, BCWs are ambitious and seek opportunities for personal development (personal growth) and hierarchical promotion. Their aspirations will be met when they perform tasks efficiently, are known as technical experts, or their knowledge and experience are expanded. In such cases, they also feel successful in their career.

Collectively, our findings suggest that for BCWs to experience career success, certain needs should be fulfilled through their work. One of the key aspects of the PWT is the focus on securing *decent* work, which entails the following motivators: physical and interpersonal safe working conditions, hours allowing for free time and rest, organizational values that complement family and social values, adequate compensation, and access to health care. Evidently, investigating ways to secure decent work among BCWs was not the main objective of this study. Nevertheless, it was interesting to discover our findings indicate that being employed (irrespective of it being labeled as “decent” work) already lead to basic feelings of career success.

Implications for Practice

It is important to note that apart from recognition and financial gain as indicators of career success for BCWs, emphasis should also be placed on competence, skills, and performance. The findings from our study suggest that career initiatives should focus on training BCWs in technical as well as multiple skill-sets. Such training should also provide opportunities for personal development and focus on high-performance job targets that can be considered highly challenging.

The abovementioned training opportunities could be formalized through policies directing formal study plans to fund the studies of talented employees. Such policies should guide the inclusion of a job-related clause in the BCWs’ contracts, thus ensuring top talent are retained after the study period. In this way, both the organization and the employee benefit.

Furthermore, organizations should recognize and encourage BCWs who show potential to mentor and supervise colleagues. This could be achieved through formalized mentoring plans that help BCWs feel valued and enhance their personal development. By including personal development plans and arranging periodic feedback sessions, the organization creates the opportunity for BCWs to focus on personal career discussions and reflect on job-related issues together with their managers. Thus, to empower BCWs with a sense of responsibility and achievement, organizations can consider policies that facilitate job enrichment and direct job rotation. In this regard, employees will be able to perform various tasks that are more demanding and which add meaning and purpose to their careers.

Taking the economic constraints of the organization into account, managers should focus on providing full-time employment for this working group. The reason is that BCWs in the present study indicated that the mere fact of being employed leads to feelings of career success.

Limitations

The present study also needs to factor in certain limitations. Firstly, it is important to consider that the participants were only employed from a single company in one region of South Africa. This may mean the findings only represent the employees of the particular company (or BCWs employed specifically in the manufacturing industry). Secondly, since our study was conducted in South Africa, the findings are geographically restricted to non-Western countries. It is therefore recommended that future studies focus on a comparative study of diverse companies. Thirdly, similar to the limitation identified by Poon et al. (2015) when conducting research on career success, data from the present study may also be subject to social desirability.

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Author Biographies

Eileen Koekemoer is an associate professor at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. She is a registered industrial psychologist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). In 2010, she obtained her PhD in industrial psychology at the North-West University in South Africa. Her areas of research include work–life interaction, career success, and the well-being of employees. She is involved in various research projects investigating the interaction between employees’ work and family life and how it influences their career success and/or well-being. She is the mother of three daughters and constantly juggles her own work–life balance between her children and her career as academic and researcher.

Hendrik Le Roux Fourie completed his master's degree in industrial and organizational psychology at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. As a student, his research focused on career success, specifically among the blue-collar workforce. He is currently employed as a management consultant at an international professional service firm, focusing on strategy consulting in the financial services industry. In his free time, he is a keen traveler and photographer.

Lene Ilyna Jorgensen is a registered industrial psychologist and professor at the North-West University's Potchefstroom Campus. Her teaching expertise include applied counseling, trauma management in the workplace, and psychometric assessment. Her research mainly focuses on the development of psychometrists, Human Resource personnel, and industrial psychologists in the skills they need to address the human capital needs in South Africa. She consults in her private practice on a regular basis including assessments, team development, and counseling. Leisure time is preferably spent as often as possible in the South African bushveld for game viewing.