

Running head: EXPLORING FOUR GENERATIONS' BELIEFS ABOUT CAREER

Dries, N., Pepermans, R., De Kerpel, E. (2008). Exploring four generations' beliefs about career: Is 'satisfied' the new 'successful'?. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 23 (8), 907-928.

Abstract

Purpose – To examine whether four different generations (Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y) hold different beliefs about career. Career type, career success evaluation and importance attached to organizational security were scrutinized for each generation.

Design/methodology/approach – 750 people completed a vignette task, rating the career success of 32 fictitious people. Each vignette contained a different combination of five career features (functional level, salary, number of promotions, promotion speed and satisfaction) at two levels (low and high). Furthermore, several items were added in order to determine each participant's career type and the extent to which they attached importance to organizational security.

Findings – The majority of participants still had rather “traditional” careers, although younger generations seemed to exhibit larger discrepancies between career preferences and actual career situation. Overall, satisfaction appeared to be the overriding criterion used to evaluate other people's career success. No significant differences were found between generations. With regard to importance attached to organizational security, the Silent Generation and Generation Y scored significantly higher than the other generations.

Research limitations/implications – The convenience sampling strategy led to large differences in sample size per generation. Using a vignette design limited the amount and richness of information that could be offered to participants. Perhaps other criteria relevant to real-life career success evaluation were not incorporated in this study.

Originality/value of paper – This study raises questions about the validity of career success operationalizations frequently used in research. It is the first study that examines career success evaluation by means of vignettes.

Keywords Career theory, Career success, Generational differences, Vignette study

Paper type Research paper

Exploring four generations' beliefs about career: Is “satisfied” the new “successful”?

Introduction

Career as a dynamic social construct

Careers are not free of social context (Higgins, 2001). Rather, they are influenced by political, economic, historical and socio-cultural developments in society (Chen, 1997; Collin and Young, 1992; Herr and Cramer, 1992; Zunker, 1994). Over the last couple of decades, phenomena such as economic globalization, organizational restructuring (mergers, horizontal and vertical integrations, re-engineering) and the growth of services have, indeed, drastically altered the face of careers (Barley, 1989; DeMeuse and Tornow, 1990; Mirvis and Hall, 1994; Rousseau, 1990). As a result the recent “post-modern” career literature has focused, for the most part, on the shift from traditional (organizational, linear) careers to more “boundaryless” (non-linear) career types (e.g. Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Briscoe and Hall, 2005; Collin, 1998). While the old, linear career focused on progressive steps upward in an organizational hierarchy to positions of greater authority (Brousseau *et al.*, 1996), the new career defies traditional employment assumptions, emphasizing continuously changing career paths and possibilities (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Littleton *et al.*, 2000).

When considering the definitions given to the social construct that is “career” (Arthur *et al.*, 2005) over the years, it is noticeable that, parallel to the changes going on in society, there has been a shift in terminology: Wilensky (1961) referred to career as a succession of related *jobs*, arranged in a hierarchy of prestige, through which persons move in an ordered (more-or-less predictable) sequence (p. 523); Super (1980) defined

career as the combination and sequence of *roles* played by a person during the course of a lifetime (p. 282); Arthur et al. (1989) defined career as the evolving sequence of a person's work *experiences* over time (p. 8) – the latter definition being most frequently used today.

The evolution from “jobs” to “experiences” was reflected in the post-modern turn in the social sciences during the late 1980s (Savickas, 1995), when attention increasingly shifted from the objective to the subjective world of work. While the objective career is publicly accessible (Arthur *et al.*, 2005), as it is expressed by symbols such as more or less identifiable positions, offices, statuses and situations serving as markers for assessing a person's movement throughout society (Barley, 1989; Ng *et al.*, 2005), the subjective career relies on individuals' internal apprehensions and evaluations of their own career, across any dimensions that are important to them (Arthur *et al.*, 2005; Bozionelos, 2004). When assessing, then, the amount of success there has been in a career, one must consider first who is doing the assessing (Jaskolka *et al.*, 1985).

Since traditional public symbols of career (i.e. job titles referring to hierarchical positions, continuity and pace of promotions, salary) are losing relevance in the post-modern world of work, however, reference points for career success evaluation are disappearing, and it seems that a clear and comprehensive understanding of what “career” and “career success” mean is no longer self-evident (Adamson *et al.*, 1998; Osterman, 1996; Spilerman, 1977). There has been surprisingly little research, however, devoted to the *nature* of career success (Greenhaus, 2003; Heslin, 2003; Sturges, 1999), although the construct itself has often been used as a research variable (e.g. Eby *et al.*, 2003; Kirchmeyer, 1998, 2002; Ng *et al.*, 2005; Wayne *et al.*, 1999).

There are, however, some exceptions. Cangemini and Guttschalk (1986) discovered that, based on a survey of 35 000 employees, what employees most desired (i.e. appreciation for their work, being involved, and receiving a personal treatment) differed substantially from what supervisors thought they wanted (i.e. money). Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) let over 800 professionals rate the relative importance of 15 potential indicators of their career success. Five dimensions of career success were established: status, time for self, challenge, security and social. With the exception of status, these results reveal a considerable emphasis on subjective criteria rather than focusing on objective indicators of career success such as prestige, power, money and advancement. Finally, Finegold and Mohrman (2001) concluded that among 4 500 knowledge workers and managers from eight countries, work-life balance was considered most important out of all aspects of a career. Although these studies have all made significant contributions to the career literature, it is clear that they focus mostly on the increasing diversity in idiosyncratic evaluations of what career success means to the individual, rather than looking at societal trends, the collective, or reference groups and subcultures (Barley, 1989; Chen, 1997; Shibutani, 1962).

Alternatively, the current study aims to call attention to the shared social understanding of what “career success” means (Arthur *et al.*, 2005) and to the question as to whether this understanding, too, has shifted. Although individuals tend to see themselves as operating within structures that have an objective existence, these structures are actually constituted by their own “instantiation” of the social reality of career – i.e. the collective underwriting of its terms. In that way, career structures are reproduced in the minds, actions and interpretations of the people that have the careers (Evetts, 1992). In order to be able to investigate whether the shared social understanding

of what career success is has shifted during the last few decades, this study turns to the literature on generations and their differences. Generations' beliefs and value systems are believed to epitomize societal trends; as a result of the experiences that have been shared by people from the same generational cohort it is, indeed, plausible that they would develop a so-called "peer personality" or certain shared "generational characteristics", at least to some extent (De Kort, 2004; Kupperschmidt, 2000).

Looking at career through a generational lens

A generation is defined as "an identifiable group that shares birth year, age location, and significant life events at critical development stages, divided by five-seven years into the first wave, core group, and last wave" (Kupperschmidt, 2000, p. 364). Our society has labelled the generations of the 20th century – however, these labels and the years they represent are not always consistent among authors (de Kort, 2004; Smola and Sutton, 2002). Table I provides an overview of the four generations that will be the focus of the current study: the Silent Generation, the Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y, together making up the vast majority of the world's currently living population. This study has opted for these specific labels and time periods based on a thorough search of the literature (e.g. de Kort, 2004; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Lankard, 1995; Parker and Cusmir, 1991; Smola and Sutton, 2002) – however, a list of other frequently used labels was added for each generation.

Furthermore, Table I offers an overview of the salient events experienced by people from the same generational cohort, beginning with the Silent Generation, which entered the workforce in the post-World War II era, when the notion of "career" was forged. The increase in opportunities for advancement, and the broadening of

occupations to choose from appealed greatly to this generation that had grown up experiencing or hearing about the Great Depression and the Great War (Barley, 1989; Mirvis and Hall, 1994). Following this era of economic prosperity, the late 1970s and 1980s were characterized by economic recession. Organizational restructuring and downsizing caused the first cracks in the image of the lifetime career with one employer (Mirvis and Hall, 1994). As a result, Baby Boomers are often portrayed as “free agents” in the workplace, i.e. “radical individualists who advocate individual rights over family needs and the rights of the team or organization” (Kupperschmidt, 2000, p. 69). This trend of employees distancing oneself from organizations persisted in Generation X and Y. These generations have learned not to take anything for granted, as the future is unpredictable. They do not count on organizations to take care of them and offer them security and stability in their career; rather, they tend to seek out employers that offer challenging jobs and sufficient training so that they gain “employability” in the job market – thus acquiring *career security* in lieu of *job security* (Kupperschmidt, 2000).

Finally, Table I lists the general and work-related values attributed to the different generations in the literature (e.g. de Kort, 2004; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Lankard, 1995; Parker and Cusmir, 1991; Smola and Sutton, 2002). Employees from different generations are believed to have different value systems and react differently to common life events (Kupperschmidt, 2000). Especially the experiences and events that occur during the formative years of development would influence individuals during subsequent life experiences (Super *et al.*, 1996). It is thus well possible that peoples’ beliefs about career and career success reflect the social context in which they have developed as adults (Sturges, 1999).

Take in Table I

Research questions

Based on the foregoing review of the literature on careers, career success and generations, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Do people from different generations have different career types?
2. Does the importance attached to organizational security differ between generations?
3. Do people from different generations evaluate career success differently?

The first research question stems from the need to examine whether there has, indeed, been a shift in society from “traditional, linear” career types to “new, non-linear” career types (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Briscoe and Hall, 2005; Brousseau *et al.*, 1996; Collin, 1998; Littleton *et al.*, 2000); the second research question scrutinizes each sub sample’s preference vis-à-vis organizational security, which is also believed to differ between generations (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Mirvis and Hall, 1994); finally, the third research question aims to examine whether the shared social understanding of what career success means has shifted throughout the four generations under study in this paper (Barley, 1989; Mirvis and Hall, 1994; Sturges, 1999). It may be interesting to note that the first research question focuses on the *actual* career of the participants, while the second and the third research question centre around *preferences* and *beliefs* regarding career.

Subsequently, the study will check if gender, functional level and career type also influence how people make career success evaluations. Women have been found to view career success more as a process of personal development, involving interesting and challenging work and an acceptable work-life balance, rather than salary and rank that have been shown to correlate with career satisfaction for men (Asplund, 1988; Hennig and Jardim, 1978; Nicholson and West, 1988; Marshall, 1984; Russo *et al.*, 1991). Women managers’ different ideas about career success are likely to be

influenced both by their socialization as women (Chodorow, 1974; Gallos, 1989; Gilligan, 1982) and the constraints they perceive as likely to affect their careers (Davidson and Cooper, 1992). With regard to functional level, two outcomes are possible. On the one hand, people who are successful in hierarchical terms may value the “traditional” criteria for success less once they have achieved them – in accordance to goal setting theory (Locke and Latham, 1990). However, people who have not achieved this kind of career success may still judge such criteria as important (Sturges, 1999). On the other hand, Festinger’s (1957) cognitive dissonance theory gives input to the opposite hypothesis: that people will adjust their personal definition of what career success is based on their actual situation, allowing them to feel good about themselves. If this is the case, then people at higher functional levels as well as people in more traditional career types will indicate to attach more importance to “traditional” markers of success than people at lower levels or in “newer” career types. Gunz and Heslin (2005) have raised a similar point in questioning how easy it is for people to develop their own personal standards in the face of pervasive social influences. They hypothesize that maybe people “manipulate their feelings of subjective success in the light of their objective situation” (p. 106).

Methodology

Participants

An online survey was set up, investigating four different generations’ beliefs about career and career success. In order to obtain the largest possible sample, a strategy of convenience (snowball) sampling was employed. All students and all employees of a large Belgian university received an e-mail asking for their participation in the study.

Each e-mail contained a URL to the online survey. Furthermore, participants were informed of the fact that this study sought to collect data from four different generations, and requested to forward the e-mail to family members and acquaintances of various age groups.

A total of 750 individuals completed the online survey in a valid manner. 349 respondents were male (47%) and 401 were female (53%). Of these 750 respondents, 437 (58%) indicated to be working at the time of survey administration. For the career type variable the sample size was 380 due to missing data.

The average age of the study sample was 36.51 ($SD = 15.51$) – one must take into account, however, that there were more participants in the Generation Y respondent category than in the other categories. Further inspection of the background variables revealed that the majority of the study sample (67%) had completed secondary school and received some form of higher education (i.e. a Bachelor's or Master's degree). In the subsample of the “working people”, 219 respondents were male (50%), and 218 female (50%); 64 were employed in the industrial sector (15%), 186 in services (43%) and 148 in the non-profit sector (34%) (39 unreported).

In Table II, more detailed information is provided on the sample's composition by crossing the “generation” variable with gender, functional level and career type respectively.

Take in Table II

Procedure and measures

Career type. In analogy with Verbruggen *et al.* (2007), this study used several variables to determine which of six career types fit each respondent's career best. The

authors distinguish between bounded, staying, homeless, trapped, released and boundaryless careers as they believe simply categorizing careers as “traditional” versus “new” would be overly simplistic – a point raised earlier in this paper (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). The “bounded” follow the traditional career path: they work for only one or two organizations during the course of a lifetime, expect their employers to offer them job security and standard career tracks, and derive career satisfaction from pay, promotion and status. On the other hand of the spectrum are the “boundaryless”, who work for multiple firms, have transferable skills, manage their own careers and feel rewarded by psychologically meaningful work. Between these two extremes are the other four career types that are all characterized by some sort of discrepancy between their career aspirations and their actual career path. The “staying” have changed employers regularly although they long for security and stability. However, they expect this discrepancy to be solved as they believe they will be able to stay with their current employer. The “homeless” are in the same situation, but do not expect to be able to stay with their current organization. The “trapped” and the “released” build their careers under opposite circumstances: they have been working with the same employer over a long period of time, although they aspire change. While the former feel they are “trapped” with their current employer, the latter believe they will be able to solve the discrepancy between their aspirations and their actual career in the future.

In order to classify every working respondent into one of the six career types, we first categorized them as having either *stable or multiple-employer careers*. In order to do so, participants to the survey were asked how often they had changed employers during the last five years. Answer categories were “never”, “once”, “twice” and “three times or more”. Following Verbruggen *et al.* (2007), all persons who indicated to have

changed employers at least once over the last few years were categorized as having a multiple-employer career. Although rather strict, this measure does represent an easy way to assess the extent to which a person has demonstrated mobility in his or her career.

Secondly, we drew on the five Security/Stability items of Schein's Career Orientation Inventory (1990) so as to obtain a score of (*importance attached to organizational security*). Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement to the items on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from "Totally disagree" to "Totally agree". A sample item is "I am most fulfilled in my work when I feel that I have complete financial and employment security". Internal consistency of the scale proved high ($\alpha=0.83$). This variable was included in the analyses as both a continuous variable (organizational security scale score) and a categorical variable (high vs. low value attached to organizational security, which was operationalized by recoding the scale scores to 10 and categorizing values lower than or equal to 5 as "low" and higher than 5 as "high").

Thirdly, the survey also assessed respondents' *expectation to leave their employer* within the next five years. Three items assessed this variable: "Do you expect to change employers in the next five years?", "Do you expect to become self-employed in the next five years?", "Do you expect to become unemployed in the next five years?". Answering categories were "yes" or "no". A positive answer to at least one of these questions would lead to the categorization "expects to leave" (as opposed to "expects to stay").

Combining the three measures above then made it possible to determine each participant's career type as described in Verbruggen *et al.* (2007):

1. Bounded: Stable career; High importance attached to organizational security
2. Staying: Multiple-employer career; High importance attached to organizational security;
Expects to stay
3. Homeless: Multiple-employer career; High importance attached to organizational security;
Expects to leave
4. Trapped: Stable career; Low importance attached to organizational security; Expects to stay
5. Released: Stable career; Low importance attached to organizational security; Expects to leave
6. Boundaryless: Multiple-employer career; Low importance attached to organizational security

Evaluation of career success. In order to assess whether people from different generations hold different beliefs about what “career success” entails, a series of vignettes was incorporated in the online survey. Vignette (or: factorial) surveys are generally considered to be effective for assessing judgments on a wide array of complex issues (Ganong and Coleman, 2006), and to have high internal and external validity (Ludwick and Zeller, 2001; Lee and Stolte, 1994).

The design of this part of the study was a 4 (generation: Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X or Generation Y) x 5 (career feature: functional level, salary, number of promotions, promotion speed or satisfaction) x 2 (career feature level: high or low) mixed design, in which “generation” was the between-subjects factor and the “career feature” and the “career feature level” factors were within-subject. Functional level, salary, number of promotions, promotion speed and satisfaction were chosen as the career features since these are, by far, the most frequently reported measures of career success in literature (Arthur *et al.*, 2005; Greenhaus *et al.*, 1990; Hurley & Sonnenfeld, 1998; Hurley-Hanson *et al.*, 2005; Judge *et al.*, 1995; Kirchmeyer, 1998; Orpen, 1998; Seibert *et al.*, 1999; Tharenou, 1999; Wayne *et al.*, 1999). While functional level, salary, number of promotions and promotion speed represent rather “traditional” markers of career success (Adamson *et al.*, 1998), satisfaction is the post-

modern career success criterion of choice, as it may incorporate a whole range of different opinions as to what career success means (Arthur *et al.*, 2005; Bozionelos, 2004; Greenhaus *et al.*, 1990).

Participants were told that the vignette task was designed to assess how people evaluate other people's career success based on a limited amount of information available about that person's career. Specifically, they were instructed to imagine that they would meet the people described in each of the vignettes, and so infer how they would evaluate their career success in a real-life situation. Their final evaluation of career success then needed to be indicated on a 7-point Likert scale going from "This person's career is, in your opinion, very unsuccessful" to "This person's career is, in your opinion, very successful". The instructions stressed that the study was interested in their own personal opinions, rather than there being an optimal solution of some sort. Furthermore, the importance of subjectivity was underlined further by adding that participants should put one's own interpretation on what "high" or "low" is (i.e. in the career feature levels). We came to this conclusion as we found it very difficult to establish more objective levels (for instance, of salary) that would yield the same notion of "high" and "low" across all participants – unless very extreme values would be used, which would, ultimately, not improve the validity of the vignette task. The career features themselves, however, were clearly defined in the instructions, in order to ensure that all participants would make their evaluations departing from the same "mindset". Functional level was defined as "the level this person holds in the hierarchy of the organization by which he or she is employed, as associated with a certain status, power and influence"; salary as "the gross year salary this person receives for his or her work"; number of promotions as "the number of times this person has been promoted to a

higher functional level”; promotion speed as “the pace by which this person has climbed the ladder as opposed to stagnating in the same function for a long time”; and satisfaction as “the satisfaction this person feels when he or she considers all aspects of his or her career”. Finally, the two most extreme vignettes were presented and participants were instructed to rate all other combinations as lying between these two extremes:

“This person is at a low functional level and receives a low salary, has gotten promoted a small number of times, in a low pace, and is dissatisfied”

“This person is at a high functional level and receives a high salary, has gotten promoted a large number of times, in a fast pace, and is satisfied”

The 32 vignettes that resulted from all possible combinations of career features and career feature levels were presented in a randomly generated order to each participant (Ployhart *et al.*, 1999).

Background variables. All respondents were instructed to designate their year of birth. This data was then recoded into the categorical “generation” variable using the birth year ranges listed in Table I. Furthermore, gender, educational level, work status (working or not working), functional level and employment sector were surveyed in a multiple-choice format.

Results

Do people from different generations have different career types?

In order to assess whether working respondents from different generations reported having different career types, the data was analyzed with a Pearson chi-square test of independence. This analysis technique was the most appropriate as both the “generation” variable and the “career type” variable were categorical. The chi-square

test ($N = 357$) yielded a significant value ($\chi^2(15) = 52.91, p < .001$), indicating that the percentage of working people in each career type differed by generation. However, as can be inferred from the cross tabulation in Table II, the assumption of adequate cell frequencies was violated – over 50% of cells had an expected count lower than 5 – and so we must interpret these findings with caution. Moreover, the cross tabulation is difficult to interpret as the four generations differ strongly in terms of sample size. Nonetheless, we can observe some trends. Looking at the overall sample, it is clear that the vast majority of working respondents (57%) still have bounded career types; 13% are staying, 19% homeless, 3% trapped, 2% released and 6% boundaryless.

Does the importance attached to organizational security differ between people from different generations?

Analysis of the study sample's frequencies and descriptives revealed that, for the continuous 7-point organizational security variable, the overall mean was 5.33 ($SD = 1.40$); the means and standard deviations per generation are reported in Figure 1. With regard to the categorical variable, the data showed that 90% of the overall sample attached importance to organizational security. Looking at the data through a generational lens, we found that 92% of the Silent Generation attached importance to organizational security, as did 85% of the Baby Boomers, 84% of the Generation X-ers and 95% of the Generation Y-ers.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted in order to determine whether people from different generations attach significantly different amounts of value to organizational security. As the assumption of homogeneity of variances was violated (possibly due to the fact that the sample size differed strongly per generation) only Scheffé corrected values are reported. There was, indeed, a small significant difference ($\eta_p^2 = 0.04$)

between generations ($F(3,717) = 10.04, p < .001$). Figure 1 shows how the generations' mean scores differed. Post-hoc tests revealed that respondents from the Silent Generation attached significantly more importance to organizational security than did Baby Boomers and people from Generation X. Furthermore, Generation X had significantly lower scores than Generation Y. There were no differences between the Silent Generation and Generation Y, nor between the Baby Boomers and Generation X. There were no significant differences between men and women. We did find a small significant effect ($\eta_p^2 = 0.04$) for functional level, where inspection of the data revealed that people at management levels attach significantly *less* importance to organizational security than do employees and workers. This variable was not tested for career type, as it is one of the variables used to determine career type, as described in the Methodology section.

Take in Figure 1

Do people from different generations evaluate career success differently?

Several one-way repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted to determine how the different groups of respondents (the four generations, the two sexes, the four functional levels, the six career types) came to their evaluation of career success for each vignette. Main effects (“within” and between”) and interaction effects were scrutinized.

Figure 2 offers a visual presentation of the effects found in the repeated measures ANOVAs conducted for each generation. Below the graphs are the mean career success scores for each career feature (functional level, salary, number of promotions, promotion speed and satisfaction) at the “low” and the “high” level, as well as the F and η_p^2 (partial Eta squared) values for each career feature's main effect. All

career features demonstrated significant main effects ($p < .001$) for each generation; taking into consideration the η_p^2 values for each effect we can then infer the proportion of total variability in career success score attributable to each factor. When we rank these main effects from largest to smallest we achieve the following order for the overall sample, and for each generational subsample as well (although for the Silent Generation, satisfaction and salary, and functional level and promotions had equal effect sizes) :

1. Satisfaction (η_p^2 ranging from 0.69 to 0.81; 0.72 in the overall sample)
2. Salary (η_p^2 ranging from 0.69 to 0.74); 0.68 in the overall sample)
3. Functional level (η_p^2 ranging from 0.27 to 0.53; 0.38 in the overall sample)
4. Number of promotions (η_p^2 ranging from 0.27 to 0.41; 0.27 in the overall sample)
5. Promotion speed (η_p^2 ranging from .20 to .35; 0.22 in the overall sample)

Following the widely accepted guidelines of Cohen (1988, 1992) the main effects of satisfaction, salary and functional level on career success evaluation can be classified as medium to large and the effects of promotions and promotion speed as rather small.

Take in Figure 2

Closer inspection of the graphs and the η_p^2 values reveals that the main effects get more prominent with each generation. Furthermore, for the overall sample, all factors except salary display significant interaction effects with generation. However, these effects are quite small, with η_p^2 values around .02. No between-subjects effects were found for generation ($F(3, 708) = 1.61, ns$), nor for gender ($F(1, 710) = 1.38, ns$), nor for career type ($F(5, 351) = 0.28, ns$) or functional level ($F(4, 406) = 1.01, ns$).

Besides looking into the main effects of the career feature factors and the between-subjects effects for generation, gender, career type and functional level, we

carefully examined all interaction effects in the study's data – as such effects may be warnings that main effects may lack generality (Stevens, 2002). However, closer inspection of the significant interaction effects (at $p < .05$) reported in Table III revealed that all of the interaction effects were ordinal; this type of effects generally does not undermine or alter the findings of the main effects (Stevens, 2002). Ordinal effects signify that the effect of one variable intensifies the other. For instance, a strong interaction effect was found for each generation between functional level and salary, which is to be interpreted as follows: “the effect of a high salary, combined with a high functional level, on career success evaluation is larger than just the sum of both separate effects (i.e. a high salary always leads to a higher career success score than does a low one, but this effect is blown up at a higher functional level”). Inspection of Table III, however, discloses that the effect sizes of these interactions are quite small – definitely smaller than those of the main effects reported above. It is therefore questionable whether interpreting these interactions in addition to the main effects would add much valuable information.

Take in Table III

Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate whether people from four different generations (Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y) hold different beliefs about the meanings of “career” and “career success”. Three basic research questions arose from our review of the literature: do people from different generations have different career types; does the importance attached to organizational

security differ between people from different generations; and do people from different generations evaluate career success differently.

The answer to the first research question, about career type, appears to be a cautious “yes”. Questions may be raised about the chi-square analysis performed. There were, however, some observable trends. Remarkably, the three most prevalent career types in the study sample (bounded, staying and homeless) have in common that they all attach high importance to organizational security, indicating that the majority of respondents did find this very important (these results will be discussed below in light of the third research question). Furthermore, the relative decrease of bounded career types with generation and simultaneous increase of staying and homeless career types (Table II) may be evidence of the fact that although certain career *aspirations* (such as achieving organizational security) may not have changed much, career *reality* has – causing a shift from traditional, bounded career types to staying and homeless career types (where there is a multiple-employer career, but still a longing for stability and security). The numbers for trapped, released and boundaryless career types, on the other hand, appeared rather inconclusive.

The current findings are consistent with those of Verbruggen *et al.* (2007), who found that that only 6 percent of the 957 respondents in their study had a boundaryless career, while 60 percent still experienced bounded careers. Despite the growing popularity of the boundaryless career concept in literature (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Briscoe and Hall, 2005; Collin, 1998), several authors are now saying that the traditional career is “far from dead” and that one must be careful when making claims about the speed and inevitability of the shift from traditional to “new” career types (e.g.

Guest and Mackenzie Davey, 1996; Verbruggen *et al.*, 2007; Walton and Mallon, 2004).

The results for the second research question demonstrate that, if there is indeed something as a generational “shift” in beliefs about career, it does not necessarily have to be a linear one. Instead we found that a U-shaped function better captures the relationship between generation and importance attached to organizational security, implying that this “old-fashioned” belief or preference about career (i.e. that it is desirable to work for an organization that can offer long-term security and stability) does not only prevail in the Silent Generation, but also in Generation Y, the youngest generation of all. A possible explanation is that the Silent Generation grounds its beliefs in the past (a career reality that is long gone), and the Baby Boomers and Generation X in the present (as they represent the bulk of the present-day workforce), while Generation Y (for the most part) is just dreaming about their future career (not yet having been confronted with career reality today). It will be interesting to see future studies of Generation Y come about, as they are only just now entering the workforce and not much is known about their work values and career preferences (Jennings, 2000; Smola and Sutton, 2002).

The third research question was operationalized by offering a series of vignettes to respondents from different generations, which contained abstract descriptions of a fictitious person’s career (combining information about functional level, salary, number of promotions, promotion speed and satisfaction). No significant differences were found *between* generations (nor between sexes, nor between people at different functional levels or in different career types) when it comes to how they evaluate career success. The *within* effects, on the other hand, did have a story to tell. For the overall sample as

well as for each generational subsample we found quite large main effects for each career feature, “satisfaction” being the overriding criterion each time. This would mean that people of all generations, when evaluating other people’s career success, would rely primarily on those people’s own evaluations of their careers. However, it is noticeable that for the Silent Generation, the effect sizes for the main effects of satisfaction and salary are equal ($\eta_p^2 = 0.69$). Furthermore, the effect sizes of each of the main effects, including satisfaction, increase with generation. This could fit in with the literature stating that “free career agency” took off in the era of the Baby Boomers, and continued in Generation X and Y, when all career securities disappeared (Kupperschmidt, 2000) – which would imply that, although satisfaction is quite a universal concept, its prominence in career success evaluation increased as the traditional markers of career disappeared. It is clear, however, that also salary continues to play an important role when people evaluate other people’s careers.

Limitations and future research

Although vignette studies have proven to be effective for assessing judgments on a wide array of complex issues and to have high internal and external validity (Ganong and Coleman, 2006; Ludwick and Zeller, 2001; Lee and Stolte, 1994), they are not without disadvantage. One possible problem is the tendency of respondents to process the information in the vignettes less carefully and effectively than they would under real-life conditions (Lee and Stolte, 1994). Vignette characteristics such as the length, complexity and cognitive load of its content will, then, affect the quality of the data gathered (Esposito and Jobe, 1991; Krosnick, 1991). In the current study, the vignettes were not very long and simple language was used. However, the imagery that was

evoked was quite abstract, so that a fairly high cognitive load was placed on the study participants (Krosnick, 1991; Lee and Stolte, 1994). On the other hand, this load was the same for each participant as they all received the exact same vignettes. Furthermore, in a vignette study one must always choose, at least to some extent, between experimental control and realism. The use of vignettes restricts the amount and richness of information that can be offered to participants, so that it is often not possible to include all variables that may play a role in real-life decision making on the topic of study. Therefore, respondents often communicate finding the task very difficult, as they feel it cannot fully capture their opinions and beliefs (Furnham and Petrides, 2006).

Perhaps more differences would have been found between the four generations under study if a broader range of possible career success criteria would have been included in the survey. There may be other criteria that are very relevant to real-life career success evaluation that have not been incorporated in this study. It would be particularly interesting to explore the dimensions of career satisfaction (Arthur *et al.*, 2005) and to which extent these differ between different (sub) populations. Furthermore, future studies should try to attain a more balanced sample (so that sample sizes per generation would differ less) and more “working” people, so that the data for career type would be more reliable.

Further research is necessary in order to establish the extent to which evolving work values in society translate into shifts in beliefs about career and career success. It would be interesting to see if people are more influenced in this respect by the experiences they had growing up, or by the current economic climate. In the former case, one would expect to find inter-generational differences. Another viewpoint to consider in this respect is that of life-span, life-stage developmental theory, which

suggests that life-style priorities change with age and that consequently, individuals' career interests and aspirations evolve over time (Super *et al.*, 1996). A longitudinal design would be more appropriate to scrutinize such developmental processes. In the latter case, all people in the present-day workforce would hold similar opinions.

Conclusion

Previous studies have focused mostly on asking people what they *feel* is important in their *own* careers (e.g. Cangemini and Guttschalk, 1986; Finegold and Mohrman, 2001; Friedman and Greenhaus, 2000). It is quite logical that they have concluded that an increasing number of idiosyncratic opinions about what career success means is arising. However, these studies do not paint the whole picture, as they only focus on the *internal* aspect of career evaluation. We have attempted to avoid somewhat individuals projecting their feelings about their own career on our vignette task by instructing them to judge *other* peoples' careers. We used tangible (functional level, salary, number of promotions, promotion speed) as well as intangible criteria (satisfaction) of career success. Satisfaction came out as being "the" overriding criterion by which people evaluate others' career success.

If our design accurately presented the reality of career evaluation, then, this would mean that the shared social understanding agreed upon by all generations tends to validate the internal evaluations individuals make about their own careers, no matter what their objective characteristics ("if they are satisfied with their careers, who am I to say that they are not successful?"). This would, then, be evidence that the "new" career (in which everything goes) is well embedded in the shared social understanding of career and career success. But is this true in reality? We see two alternative explanations

for our findings. The first is that the lack of information presented in the vignettes causes people to rely upon the judgement of the fictitious career holder in the vignette (i.e. their career satisfaction); indeed, the instructions did say that satisfaction should be seen as “the satisfaction this person feels when he or she considers *all aspects* of his or her career”. In this case, our finding that satisfaction is the overriding criterion for career success evaluation might partly be an artefact of the study design. The second alternative explanation is that processes of social desirability (Phillips and Clancy, 1972) and cognitive dissonance reduction (Festinger, 1957) play a role when people make evaluations of career success. Indeed, agreeing to the statement “A cleaning lady that is satisfied with her career is more successful than a CEO that is not satisfied with her career” would seem to be induced by social desirability, and thus may not accurately reflect how one would really evaluate both careers in a real-life setting. Cognitive dissonance reduction, on the other hand, would occur when people would project their own career situation onto the vignettes they are asked to rate. What would happen is, then, that people would manipulate their feelings of what career success means in the light of their own objective situation (since no one likes to feel unsuccessful).

If anything, we must call into question whether the most frequently used operationalizations of career success (i.e. functional level, salary, promotions) are still adequate. How will we study this variable in the future when there is increasing evidence that satisfaction is generally considered as the overriding criterion for evaluating career success (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Arthur *et al.*, 2005; Bozionelos, 2004; Cangemini and Guttschalk, 1986; Finegold and Mohrman, 2001; Friedman and Greenhaus, 2000)? This notion may well be accepted by many post-modern career theorists, but recent studies using career success as a dependent variable are continuing

to operationalize it in terms of the traditional markers of career success (e.g. Seibert *et al.*, 1999; Tharenou, 1999; Wayne *et al.*, 1999). Using career satisfaction as a dependent variable would most likely yield very different study outcomes, as objective and subjective measures of career success have been found to be only moderately related (Arthur *et al.*, 2005; Boudreau *et al.*, 2001). Each of these facts must be considered when conducting studies about career success in the future, as they might gravely affect their (construct and external) validity.

Although studies about the career success construct in itself may not be directly applicable to practice, they might help organizations design career management programs and individuals manage their own career processes. Organizations in the present day still contribute considerably to the persistence of the more traditional (linear) career concept by the depreciation and inadequate rewarding of those in non-linear careers, e.g. experts in “lateral” career tracks, or those who take a break from paid employment for personal reasons. However, in the current reality, job security, advancement opportunities and regular salary increases are no longer available to all employees (Rousseau, 1990). Consequently, a more diversified perception of what career success might mean to different groups of employees (and how their careers should be managed accordingly) becomes inevitable.

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Table I. Synopsis of the four generations under study

Generation	Equivalent labels	Birth year	Salient events	General values	Work-related values	Credo
Silent Generation	Traditional Generation Conservatives Matures	1925-1945	Great Depression	Conformism	Obedience	“We must pay our dues and work hard.”
			World War II	Maturity	Loyalty	
				Conscientiousness	Obligation	
				Thrift	Security (Stability)	
Baby Boomers	Boom(er) Generation “Me” Generation	1946-1964	Kennedy-King assassinations	Idealism	Challenge	“If you have it, flash it.”
			Moon landing	Creativity	Workaholism	
			Vietnam War	Tolerance	Criticism	
			1960s social revolution	Freedom	Innovativeness	
				Self-fulfillment	Advancement Materialism	
Generation X	X-ers 13 th Generation	1965-1980	AIDS	Individualism	Free agency	“Whatever.”
			First oral contraceptive pills	Skepticism	Learning	
			1973 oil crisis	Flexibility	Entrepreneurship	
			Cold War	Control	Materialism	
				Fun	Balance	
Generation Y	Millenium Generation Generation Next	1981-2001	Fall of the Berlin Wall	Collectivism	Balance	“Let’s make this world a better place.”
			MTV	Positivity	Passion	
			Internet	Moralism	Learning	
			9/11-War on Terror	Confidence	Security (not Stability)	
				Civic mindedness	Willingness to work	

Table II. Cross-tabulation of generation, gender, functional level and career type frequencies

	Gender ^a		Functional level ^b					Career type ^c					
	Man	Woman	Not working	Executive	Management	Employee	Worker	Bounded	Staying	Homeless	Trapped	Released	Boundaryless
Silent Generation	<i>n</i> 73	13	62	6	7	8	3	10	0	0	0	0	1
	85%	15%	72%	7%	8%	9%	4%	91%	0%	0%	0%	0%	9%
Baby Boomers	<i>n</i> 109	62	27	36	46	59	3	89	12	7	8	3	3
	64%	36%	16%	21%	27%	35%	2%	73%	10%	6%	7%	3%	3%
Generation X	<i>n</i> 91	114	23	12	41	126	3	76	23	43	2	6	16
	44%	56%	11%	6%	20%	62%	2%	46%	14%	26%	1%	4%	10%
Generation Y	<i>n</i> 76	212	202	1	3	81	1	41	12	23	0	2	3
	26%	74%	70%	0%	1%	28%	0%	51%	15%	28%	0%	3%	4%
Total	<i>n</i> 349	401	314	55	97	274	10	216	47	73	10	11	23
	47%	53%	42%	7%	13%	37%	1%	57%	12%	19%	3%	3%	6%

Note: ^{a,b} *n* = 750; ^c *n* = 380

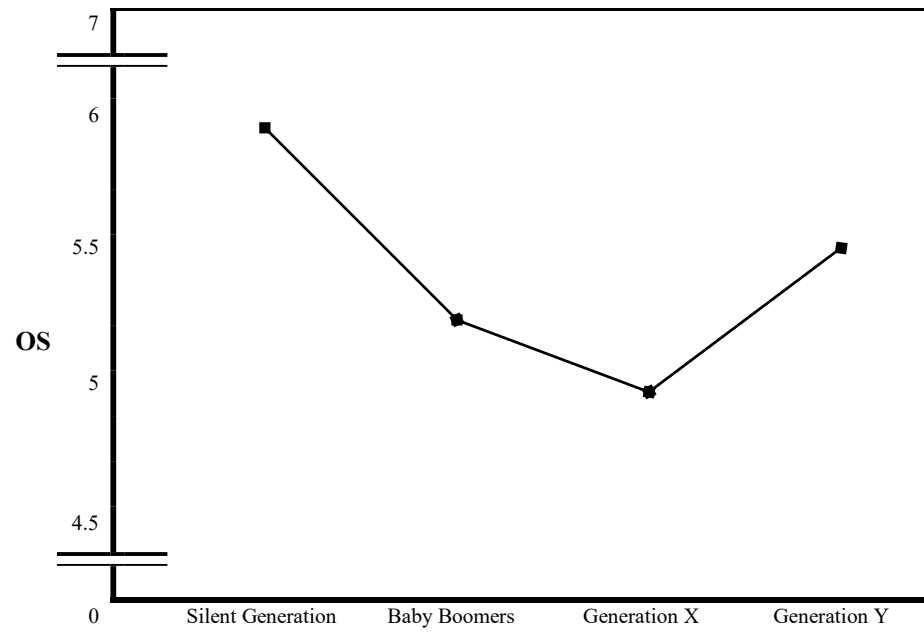
Table III. Significant interactions from the repeated measures ANOVAs ($p < .05$)

Sample	Interaction*	df	<i>F</i>	η_p^2
Overall sample	Fl x Sal	1,708	73.29	.09
	Fl x Sal x Sat		46.03	.06
	Fl x Sal x Pr		8.40	.01
	Ps x Sat		6.10	.01
	Fl x Sal x Ps		5.74	.01
	Sal x Ps		4.83	.01
	Sal x Ps x Sat		4.26	.01
Silent Generation	Fl x Sal x Ps	1,80	8.38	.10
	Fl x Sal		4.50	.05
Baby Boomers	Fl x Sal	1,158	21.59	.12
	Fl x Sal x Sat		15.24	.09
	Pr x Ps		4.22	.03
Generation X	Fl x Sal	1,188	41.06	.18
	Fl x Sal x Sat		19.65	.10
	Fl x Ps x Sat		4.49	.02
	Fl x Pr x Ps		4.16	.02
Generation Y	Fl x Sal	1,282	30.03	.10
	Fl x Sal x Pr		16.81	.06
	Sal x Sat		13.14	.05
	Fl x Sal x Sat		14.76	.05
	Pr x Ps x Sat		6.21	.02
	Ps x Sat		6.09	.02

Note: * Fl = functional level; Sal = salary; Pr = number of promotions;

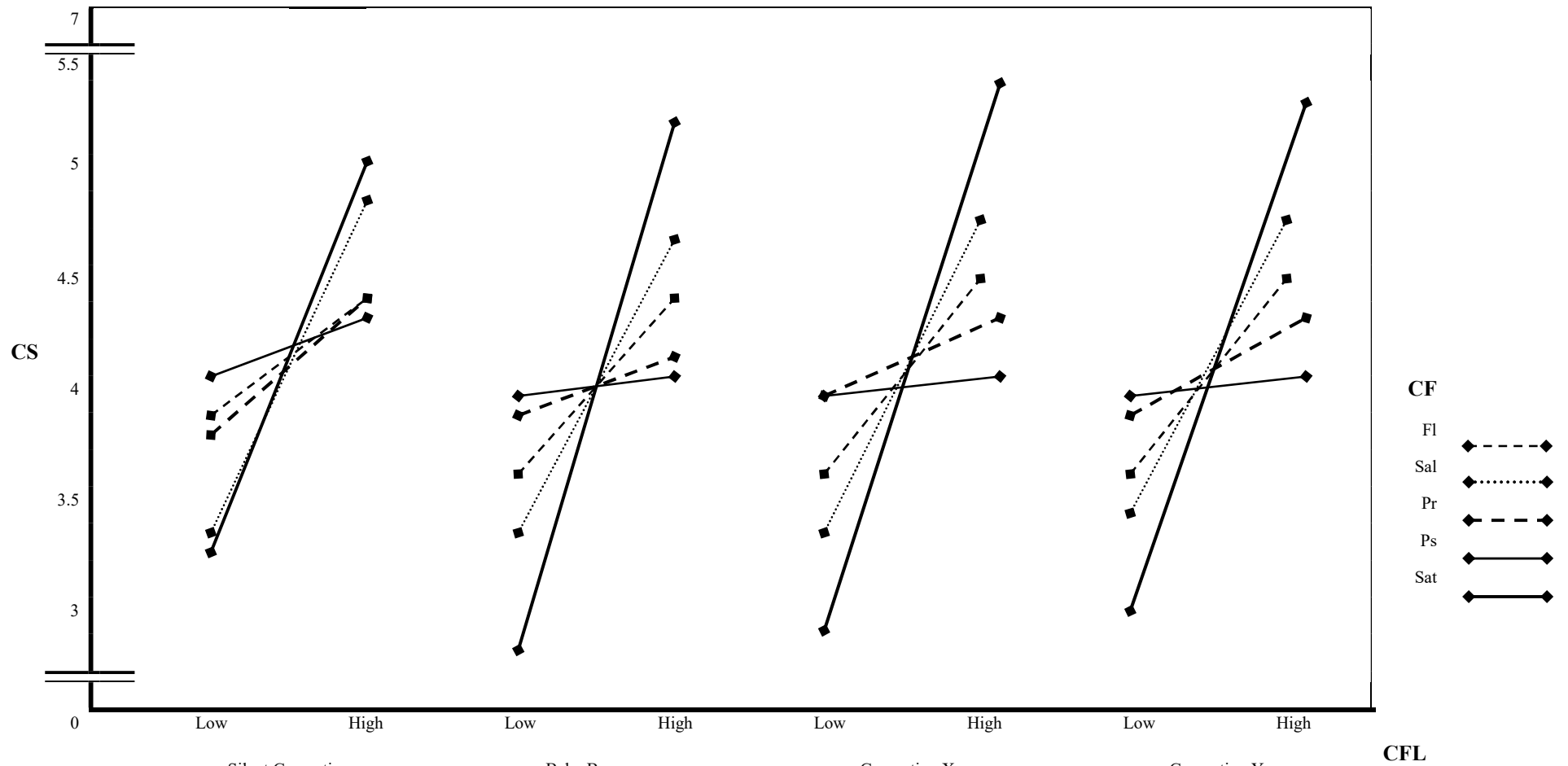
Ps = promotion speed; Sat = satisfaction

Figure 1. Means per generation for importance attached to organizational security (OS)



<i>M</i>	5.86	5.17	4.99	5.49	<i>F</i>	10.04
<i>SD</i>	1.42	1.56	1.53	1.11	η_p^2	0.04

Figure 2. Factorial plot for career success (CS) score as a function of career feature (CF) and career feature level (CFL) per generation



	Silent Generation				Baby Boomers				Generation X				Generation Y			
	M_{low}	M_{high}	F	η_p^2	M_{low}	M_{high}	F	η_p^2	M_{low}	M_{high}	F	η_p^2	M_{low}	M_{high}	F	η_p^2
FI	3.88	4.31	29.93	0.27	3.62	4.35	102.15	0.39	3.66	4.48	196.81	.51	3.65	4.47	312.69	0.53
Sal	3.37	4.82	180.54	0.69	3.33	4.64	387.91	0.71	3.37	4.78	459.02	.71	3.40	4.71	817.38	0.74
Pr	3.93	4.26	29.11	0.27	3.87	4.10	45.65	0.22	3.95	4.20	85.47	.31	3.87	4.24	195.01	0.41
Ps	3.98	4.20	20.03	0.20	3.90	4.08	38.76	0.20	3.99	4.16	54.45	.23	3.92	4.19	152.49	0.35
Sat	3.23	4.95	174.19	0.69	2.83	5.15	469.67	0.75	2.93	5.22	565.55	.75	2.95	5.16	1189.77	0.81