COGNITIVE SCIENCES AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

The Relationship between Career Aspirations, Self-Efficacy, and Subjective Career Success in Sarawak Public Service Department

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing interest in career development within public service sectors, the interactions between career aspirations, self-efficacy, and subjective career success remain underexplored. This descriptive-correlational study aimed to examine the relationship between career aspirations, self-efficacy, and subjective career success within the Sarawak Public Service Department. A total of 191 employees, from grade N27 and above, were selected using a non-probability convenience sampling method. The survey instrument was adapted from the Career Aspirations Scale, General Self-Efficacy Scale and Career Satisfaction Scale. The reliability of the scales was confirmed, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.7 for all variables. The results indicated a significant positive relationship between career aspirations and self-efficacy with subjective career success. Notably, self-efficacy has a dominant influence on subjective career success, surpassing the impact of career aspirations. These findings provide valuable insights into the factors influencing employee motivation and career development within public sector organisations, offering a foundation for enhancing career success strategies.

Keywords: career aspirations, self-efficacy, subjective career success, public service

1 INTRODUCTION

Career success is often regarded as the "Holy Grail" in the field of career studies, as it offers valuable insights into an individual's internal standards, aspirations, and motivations. This concept is intricately linked to an individual's motivation, satisfaction, performance, and commitment, making it a crucial construct for understanding and measuring career trajectories (Abele & Spurk, 2009; Dries et al., 2008; Gunz & Heslin, 2005; Ng et al., 2005; Seibert et al., 2001). Career success is generally defined as the accumulation of favourable experiences and achievements gained throughout one's professional journey, alongside the accompanying process of goal setting over the course of life (Hupkens et al., 2021; Maurer & Chapman, 2013).

A key distinction in career success research is between objective and subjective career success, with the majority of studies focusing on these differing dimensions of success (Abele & Spurk, 2009; Arthur et al., 2005; Gunz and Heslin, 2005). Objective career success can be evaluated based on externally observable factors such as pay levels, promotions, and job status (Guan et al., 2016). In contrast, subjective career success refers to the personal assessment of one's career achievements and overall satisfaction with one's job, including factors like job fulfilment and personal growth (Smale et al., 2019). The subjective approach is particularly significant, as it allows for the inclusion of individual perceptions, ambitions, and life stages in assessing career success (Gaile et al., 2022).

Career success is also viewed as a social construct, rather than a static or objective reality, and it evolves in line with historical, societal, and cultural contexts (Dries et al., 2008; Evetts, 1992). While previous research has deviated from the idea of a universally agreed-upon measure of career success, it is increasingly understood that career success is a dynamic, evolving concept, influenced by the surrounding environment and individual perceptions. Given these complexities, the present study focuses on subjective career success to explore the nuanced and multifaceted nature of career achievements.

Career aspirations, one of the variables often examined as a predictor of subjective career success, are a central focus in this research. Career aspirations can be understood as a person's desire for professional advancement, leadership opportunities, further education, and personal growth (Hartman & Barber, 2020; Strauss et al., 2012). These aspirations not only reflect an individual's professional ambitions but also their alignment with roles that resonate with their self-perception (Al-Bahrani et al., 2020). Early career aspirations can shape career decisions, motivating individuals to remain focused on their objectives and adjust their trajectory accordingly (Ahmed & Mudrey, 2018). As such, understanding career aspirations is crucial for gaining insights into how they influence career success, particularly in the context of public sector employees in Malaysia, an area that remains underexplored (Mohd Rasdi et al., 2009).

Another important factor affecting career success is self-efficacy, which refers to an individual's belief in their ability to perform specific tasks and achieve desired outcomes (Farmer et al., 2021). People who possess high self-efficacy tend to set higher personal standards, demonstrate greater persistence, and take more initiative in overcoming challenges (Abele & Spurk, 2009; Smidt et al., 2017). Low self-efficacy, on the other hand, can lead to avoidance of tasks, reduced performance, and quicker disengagement when facing setbacks (Carter et al., 2019).

In the context of Malaysia's public sector, job performance is a key area of focus, with various initiatives aimed at improving civil servants' productivity (Mohamad Hajari, 2020). The present research seeks to investigate the role of career aspirations, self-efficacy, and subjective career success in enhancing job performance within a public sector department in Kuching, using an evidence-based framework to test the interrelationships among these variables.

1.1 Career Aspirations and their Impact on Career Success

Feldman and Bolino (1996) argue that individuals often have a primary career aspiration, complemented by one or two secondary aspirations. This combination allows for a richer understanding of individual career trajectories. Runcan and Golan (2013) suggest that this integration of multiple career aspirations offers a more nuanced view of career development, illuminating the interplay between career goals, personal values, and responses to job experiences. Furthermore, individuals who possess a strong belief in their abilities and attribute their success to personal effort tend to have more ambitious career goals (Al-Bahrani et al., 2020). According to Mohd Rasdi et al. (2009), internal factors such as career aspirations, personal values, and beliefs significantly influence career happiness and job commitment, ultimately affecting an individual's satisfaction with their career.

Gender also plays a role in shaping career aspirations. While research suggests that male and female career aspirations are comparable in many ways (Datta & Agarwal, 2017), other studies have indicated that women tend to be more attracted to organisations with a higher proportion of female senior managers (Madera et al., 2019). Additionally, women with high career aspirations are more likely to manage multiple responsibilities both within the family and in leadership roles in the workplace (Hartman & Barber, 2020). Men, by contrast, are more inclined to pursue leadership roles with an emphasis on financial rewards, often influenced by societal expectations (Gregor et al., 2017). These gender differences in career aspirations can have a significant impact on career satisfaction and professional achievements.

Career aspirations serve as a powerful motivator, driving individuals to achieve excellence in their job performance and progress within their careers (Gregor et al., 2017). Strong career aspirations are linked to increased opportunities for career advancement and professional growth (Sharma & Srivastava, 2020), which often leads to higher levels of subjective career success.

1.2 The Role of Self-Efficacy in Career Success

Self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their ability to perform tasks successfully, plays a crucial role in career development (Dan et al., 2018). In a professional context, self-efficacy influences how individuals approach their work and their ability to persevere in the face of challenges. Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to tackle difficult tasks with determination, showing resilience and a proactive approach (Aloysius & Velnampy, 2020). High self-efficacy is also linked to improved career satisfaction, as individuals are better able to cope with the challenges of the workplace and achieve their career goals (Ngo & Hui, 2017).

Psychological empowerment, which is closely related to self-efficacy, also plays a significant role in shaping job satisfaction. Employees who perceive themselves as capable and empowered are more likely to view challenges as opportunities for growth, while those with low self-efficacy may become disheartened by setbacks, leading to decreased job satisfaction (Audenaert et al., 2021; Lange & Kayser, 2022). Empirical studies have shown that individuals with high self-efficacy put more effort into achieving their career goals and are more likely to perceive their work as meaningful and fulfilling (Sharma & Akram, 2023).

1.3 Subjective Career Success

Subjective career success refers to an individual's personal evaluation of the attainment of their career goals Subjective career success is defined as an individual's personal evaluation of their career achievements and overall satisfaction with their professional life (Gaile et al., 2022). This subjective assessment is shaped by various factors, including job satisfaction, career satisfaction, and emotional fulfilment. According to Hupkens et al. (2021), five key components of subjective career success include: (1) a shift away from the pursuit of financial success and recognition, (2) a focus on personal growth, (3) a desire for work-life balance, (4) a mindset focused on serving others, and (5) maintaining consistent subjective criteria for career success. These components highlight the dynamic and multifaceted nature of career success as experienced by individuals.

Self-referent and other-referent factors also play a critical role in determining subjective career success. Self-referent success refers to an individual's evaluation of their career based on personal standards and intrinsic values, while other-referent success involves comparing one's achievements to external benchmarks such as industry norms or societal expectations (Heslin, 2003). Both dimensions contribute to how individuals assess their career success, influencing their job satisfaction and overall career fulfilment (Benson et al., 2020).

1.4 Relationship between Career Aspirations, Self-Efficacy, and Subjective Career Success

Recent studies have revealed a significant relationship between career aspirations and subjective career success. For instance, Hamzah et al. (2022) found that individuals with high career aspirations are more likely to perceive themselves as successful in their professional pursuits. Similarly, Qamar et al. (2023) emphasised that career aspirations, including desires for leadership roles and continuous learning, have a profound impact on subjective career success and overall workplace well-being. The relationship between career aspirations and subjective career success, however, may differ across genders due to factors such as societal expectations and organisational structures (Hartman & Barber, 2020).

Self-efficacy also plays a critical role in influencing career success. Research by Hartman and Barber (2020) suggests that individuals with higher self-efficacy are more likely to persist through challenges and actively engage in behaviours that contribute to career success. Rigotti et al. (2018) further supported this notion, highlighting a positive correlation between self-efficacy and subjective career success. The findings indicate that self-efficacy is a key predictor of career satisfaction and overall success, particularly in environments where individuals are highly committed to their careers (Schultheiss et al., 2023).

1.5   Theoretical Framework

A robust theoretical framework is essential in guiding research and linking it to existing knowledge. The present study draws on two key theories: social comparison theory and Bandura's social cognitive career theory.

Social comparison theory posits that individuals assess their success by comparing their outcomes with others, particularly in the absence of objective performance metrics (Gerber et al., 2018). In the context of career success, individuals often compare their professional achievements to those of their peers, which can influence their subjective evaluation of success (Spurk et al., 2018). This theory highlights the importance of social comparison in shaping individuals' perceptions of their career success, especially when personal achievements are evaluated against the achievements of others in similar professional environments (Heslin, 2003).

Bandura's social cognitive career theory, on the other hand, emphasises the role of self-efficacy in career development. According to Bandura (1997), individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to engage in goal-directed behaviours, persist in the face of challenges, and ultimately achieve career success. Bandura's social cognitive career theory suggests that career-related self-efficacy influences both career satisfaction and subjective career success by shaping individuals' attitudes towards their jobs and their commitment to achieving career goals (Rigotti et al., 2018).

1.6   Problem Statement

The relationship between career aspirations and subjective career success is complex and under-explored (Girouard & Forest, 2018). While career aspirations are recognised as significant in shaping professional journeys, the precise impact they have on subjective career success remains unclear (Gorbatov et al., 2019). Previous studies have identified various factors influencing subjective career success, such as organisational commitment and proactive personality (Ngo & Hui, 2017), but the specific nature of career aspirations remains uncertain (Wicht et al., 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic has further complicated this issue, with concerns over job loss leading to increased uncertainty and insecurity. This, in turn, has negatively affected career aspirations and subjective success (Bozkurt et al., 2020), making it harder for individuals to achieve their career goals (Lin et al., 2021). Moreover, the difficulty in translating career aspirations into action is a major barrier to achieving subjective career success (Matthews et al., 2017). Self-efficacy plays a critical role in overcoming these challenges (Linge et al., 2021); however, both low and high self-efficacy do not always guarantee positive career outcomes (Guillén, 2020). Recent studies have questioned the assumption that high self-efficacy always leads to career advancement, suggesting potential negative effects on salary and career progression (Guillén, 2020; Singh et al., 2019). While self-efficacy is widely recognised as positively correlating with career success (Rigotti et al., 2018), its influence appears stronger in career choice than in subjective career success (Chang et al., 2018).

Understanding the relationship between career aspirations, self-efficacy, and subjective career success is crucial for developing effective career interventions. However, this study is limited to public servants in Kuching, Sarawak, which restricts its generalisability. Further research on

subjective career success in the public sector could provide valuable insights to inform HRD strategies and policies that address career success definitions and measurements, particularly within public service departments.

1.7 Research Aim and Hypotheses

The present study aims to explore the relationships between career aspirations, self-efficacy, and subjective career success. The following hypotheses have been formulated to guide this investigation:

    i.   There is a significant relationship between career aspirations and subjective career success.

    ii.   There is a significant relationship between self-efficacy and subjective career success.

    iii.   Career aspirations significantly influence subjective career success.

    iv.   Self-efficacy significantly influences subjective career success.

2 METHODS

2.1 Design and Participants

This quantitative study adopted a cross-sectional survey design to explore the relationships between career aspirations, self-efficacy, and subjective career success. Data was gathered from employees in a public service department in Kuching, Sarawak, specifically those in service grades N27 and above. A non-probability convenience sampling method was used to select participants for this study. This approach was chosen for its practical advantages, as participants were selected based on their accessibility and willingness to participate (Fink, 2011). At the time of data collection, approximately 320 employees were eligible to participate. According to Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size guidelines, a minimum of 175 respondents was required. A total of 191 completed surveys were collected, exceeding the minimum required sample size.

2.2 Instrument

The survey instrument was adapted from the Career Aspirations Scale (Gray & O'Brien, 2007), the General Self-Efficacy Scale (Chen et al., 2001), and the Career Satisfaction Scale (Greenhaus et al., 1990). It consisted of four sections: Section A to Section D. Section A collected demographic data through a series of questions. Section B included five questions measuring career aspirations, rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all true of me) to 5 (very true of me). Section C contained eight questions assessing self-efficacy, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (5). Section D comprised five questions evaluating subjective career success, also employing a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (5).

Several modifications were made to the survey questionnaire from its original source. For example, the scale value of "3" for "Uncertain" was changed to "3 (Somewhat Agree)" for the subjective career success items. Additionally, for the career aspirations items, the term "my organisation" was used instead of "my business". For the self-efficacy items, all statements were framed positively, in contrast to the original scale. These modifications were made based on suggestions from an expert panel to ensure the instrument met the specific needs of the study, particularly in the context of the research conducted in a public service department.

The validity of the instrument was assessed through face validity testing, with an expert review ensuring its relevance and appropriateness. Each item received approval from at least two experts, confirming its validity. Additionally, feedback from respondents was collected to refine the instrument, clarify any ambiguities, and align it more closely with the research objectives. The reliability of the instrument was assessed using SPSS 27.0, yielding Cronbach's alpha values of 0.854 for career aspirations, 0.716 for self-efficacy, and 0.700 for subjective career success, all of which exceed the 0.7 threshold, indicating reliable measurement (Sharma & Srivastava, 2020).

2.3   Procedure

The first step in the data collection process involved preparing a consent letter to obtain approval for conducting the study and distributing the questionnaires. Once approval was granted, an online survey questionnaire, created using Google Forms, was distributed. Participants were given a two-week period to complete the questionnaire. The study placed significant emphasis on ethical considerations, confidentiality, and safeguarding participants' rights throughout the research process. Ethical issues were comprehensively addressed, including obtaining permission from the organisation and ensuring informed consent was obtained from participants prior to data collection.

3   RESULTS

The data analysis commenced with descriptive statistics, including frequency analysis and measures of central tendency, to examine the demographic data. The results were presented in tables, graphs, and charts. Subsequently, exploratory data analysis was conducted to identify patterns and outliers. Parametric tests, such as Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis, were then applied to examine the relationships and influences between career aspirations, self-efficacy, and subjective career success. Additionally, before hypothesis testing, a normality test was conducted using Q-Q plots. The normality test for all research variables indicated that the data points were closely aligned with the theoretical normal quantile, with only minor or non-significant deviations. This suggests that parametric tests, specifically Pearson's correlation, are suitable for further analysis (Hugo, 2021). The majority of respondents were male (51.8%), of Iban ethnicity (43.5%), aged between 31 and 40 years (28.8%), and in positions N37 to N46 (41.4%).

3.1   The Relationship Between Career Aspirations, Self-Efficacy and Subjective Career Success

Table 1 shows that the correlation between career aspirations and subjective career success is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), with a positive correlation ($r = 0.215$) between the two variables. Similarly, the correlation between self-efficacy and subjective career success is also statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), indicating a positive relationship ($r = 0.358$). However, the strength of the

relationships between the variables is relatively weak. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 are accepted.

Table 1. Relationship between career aspirations, self-efficacy, and subjective career success.

	Pearson correlation, r	Significance value, p
Career aspirations and subjective career success	0.215	0.003
Self-efficacy and subjective career success	0.358	0.000

3.2 The Influence of Career Aspirations and Self-Efficacy on Subjective Career Success

The regression analysis results in Table 2 indicate that the model is significant, with F = 16.258, R = 0.384, R² = 0.147, Adjusted R² = 0.138, and p = 0.000. These values suggest that the slope of the estimated regression is linear. The findings confirm the existence of a linear relationship between subjective career success and the independent variables in the study. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4 are accepted.

Table 2. Multiple regression analysis on the influence of career aspirations and self-efficacy on subjective career success.

Independent Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Standardized Coefficients B	t	Sig.
Constant	2.201		7.250	0.000
Career aspirations	0.095	0.142	0.003	0.041
Self-efficacy	0.357	0.327	0.000	0.000

Dependent Variable= Subjective Career Success in Overall
F= 16.258, R= 0.384, R^2= 0.147, Adjusted R^2= 0.138, p= 0.000
Note:
P value< 0.05 (two tailed)

Furthermore, the R^2 value of 0.147 indicates that 14.7% of the variance in subjective career success is explained by career aspirations and self-efficacy. Moreover, career aspirations and self-efficacy separately has significantly contributed to the variance of the subjective career success. The career aspirations contributed to the variance of subjective career success with positive influence where β= 0.142 and p< 0.05. However, the most dominant factor affects subjective career success was self-efficacy with β= 0.327 and p< 0.05.

4   DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research, such as that by Hamzah et al. (2022), which found a positive correlation between career aspirations and subjective career success. Furthermore, ambitious career aspirations were found to be significantly linked to career satisfaction and motivation, as demonstrated by Sharma and Srivastava (2020). The results indicated that employees with more intrinsic and self-determined career aspirations experience a stronger positive impact on their psychological needs, leading to enhanced subjective career success and overall well-being (Girouard & Forest, 2018). In contrast, when employees' career aspirations are not intrinsic and are driven by external goals, the influence on their psychological needs is negative, which can have detrimental effects on both their subjective career success and well-being. In other words, an employee's professional aspirations drive them to strive for excellence in job performance and results (Hirschi & Spurk, 2021).

Additionally, the social comparison theory explains that people assess the outcomes they have achieved by comparing themselves to others in similar professional fields (Gerber et al., 2018). Once career aspirations are formed, individuals compare themselves to others to evaluate their career satisfaction and accomplishments (Spurk et al., 2018). This comparison process helps them assess whether they are meeting their career goals and how successful they feel in their professional journey. The significant influence of career aspirations on subjective career success observed in this study thus supports the social comparison theory.

A similar finding was reported by Murwani and Caesar (2016), who found that individuals with high career commitment are more likely to set career goals and perform well within their organisations. Schunk and DiBenedetto (2020) also showed that individuals with high self-efficacy tend to set ambitious goals and exhibit persistence in the face of challenges. This characteristic not only enhances their career performance but also contributes significantly to overall career satisfaction, a critical element of subjective career success.

Furthermore, Spurk et al. (2018) highlighted that self-efficacy beliefs are crucial predictors of subjective career success. They observed that individuals who have strong beliefs in their abilities tend to perceive higher levels of career achievement and satisfaction, emphasising the influential role of self-efficacy in shaping career outcomes. This suggests that self-efficacy is a key psychological factor influencing both the perception and achievement of career goals, thereby contributing positively to overall career development and well-being (Ahmed & Mudrey, 2018). In contrast, low self-efficacy can impede career advancement and lead to decreased subjective career success, underscoring the negative impact of self-doubt on professional outcomes (Honicke et al., 2023).

The results of this study are also consistent with the social cognitive career theory, which suggests that self-efficacy has a substantial impact on behavioural changes (Schultheiss et al., 2023), job performance (Spurk et al., 2018), career achievements, self-evaluation of career progress, and overall career satisfaction (Rigotti et al., 2018). Therefore, individuals who are highly committed to their jobs and exhibit high self-efficacy tend to experience beneficial outcomes in terms of dedication to achieving objectives and engaging in demanding tasks (Bandura, 1997). This finding supports the significant influence of self-efficacy on subjective career success.

In conclusion, this study highlights a significant positive relationship between career aspirations, self-efficacy, and subjective career success among employees in a public sector organisation in Sarawak. These findings align with the predicted relationships and influences between the variables, as outlined in the research hypotheses based on past studies. The results contribute to theoretical understanding by shedding light on the complex connections between these variables, supported by the frameworks of social comparison theory and Bandura's social cognitive career theory. Given the limited empirical research in this area, this study underscores the important role of career aspirations and self-efficacy in influencing employee career success, particularly within the public sector.

In terms of theoretical implications, this research provides a deeper understanding of how career aspirations and self-efficacy interact to influence career success, thereby enriching the existing literature in organisational psychology. The study extends the application of social comparison theory and social cognitive career theory, demonstrating their relevance within public sector contexts. By highlighting the interconnectedness of career aspirations and self-efficacy, the study contributes to the broader theoretical frameworks of career development. From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that public sector organisations should prioritise the development of career development programmes that foster self-efficacy and align employees' aspirations with their personal values and goals. Such initiatives can contribute to improved job satisfaction, increased motivation, and enhanced overall performance. Additionally, human resources departments could implement mentorship and support systems aimed at strengthening self-efficacy and helping employees set achievable career goals, further enhancing career success and employee engagement.

However, there are additional factors that should be considered in future research, such as organisational culture, growth opportunities, and social factors like supportive networks. Future research should also address the limitations of this study by incorporating these other relevant elements. Furthermore, it would be beneficial for future studies to explore individual factors such as intelligence, personality, and other interacting variables to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between career success and these elements. These limitations provide opportunities for further exploration of career success.

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. It primarily focused on career aspirations, self-efficacy, and subjective career success among public sector employees in Sarawak, without considering other potentially influential factors such as organisational culture, growth opportunities, and social support networks. Additionally, individual variables like intelligence and personality traits were not explored, which may also play a significant role in shaping career success.

Future research should address these limitations by incorporating these additional factors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of career success. For instance, investigating the impact of organisational culture, leadership styles, and support systems on career aspirations and self-efficacy would be valuable. Longitudinal studies could also explore how career aspirations and self-efficacy evolve over time and influence long-term career outcomes. Furthermore, examining career success across different geographical or organisational contexts would help determine whether the findings of this study are applicable in other settings. Additionally, research

exploring individual characteristics, such as intelligence and personality, alongside contextual factors, would provide a deeper.

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