THEORISING ACADEMIC CAREER 'SUCCESS'

Get dressed, get blessed. Try to be a success (Bob Dylan, 1965)

Introduction

The purpose of this short piece is to examine literature exploring the concept of 'success'. Drawing on my research examining how female professors construct their career success, the aim is to highlight the contested nature of what constitutes 'success', and to consider how this knowledge could be drawn on by policy-makers to better inform attempts to improve academic outcomes for all children, regardless of their background.

I concur with Bradford and Hey (2007: 26) who argue that 'discourses of success mesh with other discursive fields and sites of identity and belonging'. Success in contemporary western societies, whether characterized as a continuum, a road or a series of moments of ever more complex accomplishments or events has several key dimensions that might operate either individually or collectively within a particular context. Key dimensions, or levers, of success include (i) aptitude (Kristoff, 2009); (ii) executive function (Carey, 2008); (iii) propensity for hard work (Brooks, 2009); (iv) luck (Gladwell, 2008); (v) serendipity (Prestine, 2009); (vi) social patterns and culture (Gladwell, 2008), and (vii) circumstantial factors (including historical context) (Gladwell, 2008). I now take each of these dimensions in turn.

Turning first to (i) aptitude, Kristoff (2009: 2) has argued that:

> while I.Q. doesn't measure pure intellect — we're not certain exactly
> what it does measure — differences do matter, and a higher I.Q.
> correlates to greater success in life.

Higher I.Q. (however contentious) might facilitate success because, for example, of the increased possibilities for gaining formal qualifications and subsequent higher status and better rewarded employment. Indeed, doing well academically in school also takes its place alongside luck, hard work and creativity as a further ingredient of success for my cohort. All of the five women interviewed for my Masters research (Hoskins, 2007), who were all educated in the 1950s, reported that they were 'good' at school in terms of being academically able and consequently spent the majority, if not all, of their school lives in the top sets. Academic ability was an attribute highly

valued by 1950s grammar schools, particularly 'traditional grammar schools […] with [their] single–minded pursuit of success in exams' (Evans, 1991: 40). Yet arguably aptitude alone will not ensure success – whilst my earlier research found it to be a lever of success, it was coupled with luck and hard work (Hoskins, 2007).

Carey (2008: 1) has suggested that a more significant ingredient of success is what he terms (ii) executive function which involves three key skills: first, 'the ability to resist distractions or delay gratification to finish a job'; second, it involves 'working memory, the capacity to hold and manipulate multiple numbers or ideas in the mind'; and third, what he explains as the 'cognitive flexibility, the ability to appreciate another person's point of view and to adapt when demands change'. Carey (2008: 1) claims that executive function 'is more strongly associated with school success than I.Q.'; success, it seems, breeds success.

However, Brooks (2009) has argued that (iii) propensity for hard work may trump aptitude, executive function and even talent when it comes to understanding success. According to Brooks (2009: 1):

> the key factor separating geniuses from the merely accomplished is not
> a divine spark. It's not I.Q., a generally bad predictor of success even
> in realms like chess. Instead, it's deliberate practice. Top performers
> spend more hours (many more hours) rigorously practicing their craft.

Similarly Gladwell (2008: 39, italics as original) has suggested that the 'people at the very top don't work harder or even much harder than everyone else. They work much, *much* harder'. Gladwell (2008) invokes what he calls the 10,000 hour rule, which is described as being the magic number of hours that an individual needs to build up in a particular area, for example, computer programming, in order to achieve expertise; but arguably working long hours alone will not guarantee success.

It seems that (iv) luck and serendipity might also play a part. According to Gladwell (2008), luck is also required for career success. That is, being in the right place at the right time and taking lucky breaks as they present themselves. I found that luck was perceived to be one of the most important ingredients in the respondents' perceptions and constructions of their career success – but this is problematic, as some women are

inclined to play down more 'assertive' behaviours like careerism, managerialism and power (Hoskins, 2010).

A further, and related, lever of success might be (v) serendipity (Prestine, 2009), that is some success may be attributable to elements of chance, destiny and/or accident. My doctoral research found that 5 of the 20 respondents interviewed accounted for some aspects of their academic career success as serendipitous and due to being in the right place at the right time. According to Prestine (2009: 115), an academic woman reflecting on her career experiences:

> as I now reflect on it, it seems to me that my career path has been characterized to a large extent by chance, fate, serendipity, or what you will, rather than cool calculation or careful plotting. I have watched others carefully calculate what needs to be done […] to gain prominence, identify, and then ally themselves with what topics are 'hot,' and plot their moves from position to position and university to university. That is simply not me.

Yet combinations of hard work, luck, aptitude and/or serendipity are not necessarily enough to ensure a successful academic career. Some female academics with aptitude do not become 'successful' in terms of achieving occupational promotion (Hoskins, 2014). So, what of the role of social and cultural patterns in achieving success?

Gladwell (2008: 105) argues that the very successful, the 'outlier', benefits from (vi) social patterns and culture that 'interlock to form a culture of achievement'. Gladwell (2008: 54) cites the example of Bill Gates' success evoking luck and social patterns to account for his achievements, arguing that 'he was lucky enough to go to a private school with its own computer at the dawn of the information revolution'. This raises a question - what role is played by the 'fixed' elements of success, i.e. an individual's cultural background and circumstance (e.g. family background and the historical moment an individual is born into)?

A significant tenet of Gladwell's (2008) argument is his assertion that the final factor, (vii) culture and history, will significantly shape an individual's possibilities for success. Brooks (2009: 1) has argued that 'exceptionally successful people are not lone pioneers who created their own success'. Rather, success, according to Brooks

(2009) is seen as mediated by a combination of levers including an individual's I.Q., environment, attitude to work and ability to convert 'lucky' breaks. In sum:

> genius does find a way of rising to the surface. Culture, zeitgeist, family, genes, history and chance help carry it along (Halpern, 2009: 5).

There is, perhaps, a critical tension between 'individualised' accounts of success and 'sociologically' inflected accounts of how, why and what success is.

In my view we need to view success relationally, that is, in particular situated contexts, as one way of beginning to understand it. Indeed, whilst exploring academic literature examining career success, as well as mainstream, management and popular psychological literature on career success, I was struck by its contextual and historically-specific nature; success means different things to different people at different moments in time. What an individual or institution might have constituted as a success previously, may no longer count because of shifting parameters and changing conceptualisations - and that has never been more apparent than in the current COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, as a conceptual starting point, two aspects of success might be the ways in which it is historically specific and socially constructed and the ways in which it is inextricably linked to the context in which it is sought and achieved (thus contingent) and is consistent with an individual's habitus (Bourdieu, 1977).

A further consideration of success relates to its attributes; success can be viewed as an unfolding and continuous process, a story that is told over periods of time. As such, success is frequently conceptualised in popular psychology as a road to be travelled, a journey with the promise, ultimately, of arriving at a destination with the realisation of achievement (Leatz, 1993). Success is characterised as the fulfilment of individual goals. Success has also been understood as a continuum as in Jones' (2004) *Success Continuum*, a popular psychology book, which 'shares the secrets' of the immensely successful (e.g. Bill Gates). Jones (2004: 14) argues that success is:

> not a destination… it is an ongoing process; what you achieve today builds off of successes you have had in the past and of lessons from your failures; luck may present an opportunity; you must take action to realise success.

Yet in mainstream, management literature that explores occupational success (see for example Kossek and Lambert 2005), the notion of a ladder, characterized by achieving a series of goals or meeting certain criteria, is a recurring metaphor for conceptualising what success *should* mean to individuals and institutions (both private and public sector institutions). In my view, encouraging employees to view their employment success as a ladder is arguably a useful way for employers to maintain staff engagement, but not always of great benefit to the individual staff member.

If success is contextual, historical and inscribed by habitus, the current education system emphasis on academic attainment in England is mis-placed. For many students, academic success as it is constructed by policy-makers is not the measure of success that applies or is relevant to their aspirations and personal circumstances (Hoskins and Barker, 2016: 2020). A broader view of success is needed that takes account of the ways in which success is constructed in both subjective and objective ways. In my research with 20 female professors from working- and middle-class backgrounds to understand how they constructed career success, all of the respondents, but especially those from working-class families, had felt that they were not worthy of their carer success. They had felt like frauds, interlopers at both grammar school and whilst working in the academy. Yet I kept pondering that these women are undeniably successful, so why do they construct themselves in self-deprecating ways? Perhaps these women, similarly to Reay (1997: 27), are engaged in a process of:

> reconciling what I have become with what I was, while simultaneously
> trying to carve out a self that I can feel at ease with.

Perhaps as educators this process of finding ways to fit, when socio-culturally we might feel we stand out, is an important area of focus that we need to engage with to really help our students achieve success in their future lives?

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