Introduction

Career success continues to be represented both in academic research (e.g. O’Reilly and Chatman, 1994) and popular literature (e.g. Mercer, 1994) as something which can be objectively determined, and is measured solely through external criteria such as hierarchical position and salary level. This view persists despite evidence to the contrary that managers do not regard their own career success in terms of these criteria alone (e.g. Gattiker and Larwood, 1988; Korman, Wittig-Berman and Lang, 1981) and regardless of changes in organizational career structures which make success by advancement less available to individuals than it was in the past (Arnold, 1997a).

The research findings reported in this article represent a response to the question of ‘what is success’ (Sekaran and Hall, 1989) for managers. They explore in depth managers’ personal definitions of career success, in order to provide the basis for a conceptualization of what success means to individuals: the ways in which people talk about career success were seen to provide a useful starting point from which a theory which encapsulates individual as well as organizational notions of career success might be developed.
The organizational context of career success

The death of the organizational career has been foretold with persistent regularity over the past five years. We are informed that careers in the future will not be predicated upon success within the organizational context, but will be protean, boundaryless (Mirvis and Hall, 1994) and portable (Kanter, 1989). While some now believe that the demise of the traditional career has been heralded prematurely (Guest and Mackenzie Davey, 1996), there is no doubt that careers in organizations have undergone a profound transformation (Arnold, 1997b), as organizations have reformed and reshaped, culling layers of the management hierarchy, rethinking employment contracts and revising what they are prepared to offer their staff in terms of career management and development.

Not least, success as hierarchical advancement is now assumed to be available to far fewer managers than it was in the past (Arnold, 1997a). Yet most organizations are at best struggling to develop ideas about what kinds of success they can offer their employees (Brousseau et al., 1996) or at worst pretending that nothing much has changed. While there has been an eagerness to endorse career self-management and the new psychological contract, the traditional model of external career success as represented by upward mobility and salary growth persists, both within the organization and outside it.

The need for the concept of what career success means to be revisited is even more critical in the light of evidence that delineating success in purely external terms does not actually match what many managers feel about their own success (Korman et al., 1981; Nicholson and West, 1988; Scase and Goffee, 1989). In particular, the conventional notion of success as pay and position does not correspond well with how women managers and older managers appear to define career success for themselves (e.g. O’Connor and Wolfe, 1987; Powell and Mainiero, 1992). The theoretical basis for this evidence will be discussed in detail in the next section. As a result, organizations have much to gain from a better understanding of how managers conceive career success, both as a means of constructing alternative career paths in an environment where hierarchical success is increasingly less available, and as an aid to securing the motivation and commitment of an increasingly diverse workforce (Mirvis and Hall, 1996).

The theoretical need for a conceptualization of career success

It is widely accepted that one of the shortcomings of career theory is the lack of an adequate conceptualization of career success from the individual’s perspective (Poole, Langan-Fox and Omodei, 1993). Managers’ personal conceptions of success have generally been excluded from research into careers (Herriot et al., 1994), and it is probably for this reason that career success is frequently presented as something which can be objectively quantified through external criteria such as hierarchical position and salary level (e.g. Melamed, 1995; O’Reilly and Chatman, 1994). It appears that it has proved easiest to assume ‘that external definitions coincide with internal ones’ (Bailyn, 1989).

Nevertheless, just as the career has an internal as well as an external dimension (Derr and Laurent, 1989; Gunz, 1989; Schein, 1978), so career success consists of a subjective internal dimension, as well as the objective external perspective from which it is generally viewed (Gattiker and Larwood, 1986). Therefore for managers, personal conceptions of career success are likely to be based on both objective external and subjective internal criteria, such as interest and work satisfaction (Gattiker and Larwood, 1988, 1990; Peluchette, 1993; Poole et al., 1993).

It has been suggested (e.g. Powell and Mainiero, 1993) that subjective internal success may in fact be a more important determinant of perceived career success for many people, especially women, than objective external success. For example, salary and rank have been shown to be correlated with career satisfaction for men (Russo, Kelly and Deacon, 1991), but not for women. Women managers have been found to view career success more as a process of personal development (Hennig and Jardim, 1978; Nicholson and West, 1988) which involves interesting and challenging work (Asplund, 1988; Marshall, 1984), and balance with the rest of their life (Powell and Mainiero, 1992).

Women managers’ different ideas about career success are likely to be influenced both by their...
socialization as women (Gallos, 1989; Gilligan, 1982) and the constraints they perceive are likely to affect their careers in organizations where they remain in a minority and where hierarchical success is seen to be very difficult to achieve (Davidson and Cooper, 1992; Poole et al., 1993). There is evidence that similar influences may also affect managers’ ideas about career success as they become older. The relative importance of external material criteria for career success seems to wane as managers age, with managers in their late thirties and forties becoming more concerned with criteria for success such as autonomy and influence (Kalleberg and Losocco, 1983; O’Connor and Wolfe, 1987). This suggests that definitions of career success are dynamic not static, reflecting the developmental stages through which managers pass (Levinson, 1978; Super, 1980), as well as a psychological adjustment to perceptions of the kind of success which is actually available to individuals.

Research methods

The research set out to explore managers’ personal descriptions of career success with the aim of addressing the following research questions.

1. What do managers conceive career success to be for themselves on their own terms?
2. Do women managers have different ideas about what career success is for them from men?
3. Do older managers have different ideas about what career success is for them from younger ones?

The research questions are essentially exploratory in nature and concern the values and beliefs of individuals, both of which indicate the utility of a qualitative approach (Marshall and Rossman, 1989; Silverman, 1993). It was decided therefore to use semi-structured interviewing as the method of collecting data for this research, in order to gain an ‘authentic’ understanding of the managers’ personal conceptions of career success (Silverman, 1993).

The research was conducted in a leading UK telecommunications company. A total of 36 managers were interviewed for the research – 18 women and 18 men, divided into three age groups, the twenties, the thirties and the forties. The strategy used in selecting the managers was to ensure that the sample represented a range of organizational divisions and managerial functions, as well as both genders and different ages. It was felt that this approach would elicit a wide spread of definitions of career success, and thereby aid the robustness of the conceptualization to be developed. The managers were chosen by the organization’s management development unit according to this brief, being drawn from all five of the company’s divisions, and representing the range of managerial functions present within the organization. Seven of the managers worked in general management positions; the rest worked in specialist managerial functions, including personnel, sales, IT and finance.

The research participants held jobs at a variety of managerial grades, from the lowest to the grade below director level. While career stage doubtless has an impact on the possible age-related changes in ideas about career success, selecting the managers according to career stage rather than age was rejected. This decision was made partly because of the difficulties of defining career stages in a managerial career, and partly because of the alleged breakdown in traditional career stages in organizations today. Thus the sample included managers in their forties who were still in junior management grades, and managers in their twenties who had already reached middle management.

Each manager was interviewed for approximately one-and-a-half-hours. The structure of the interviews was designed to enable the managers to reflect at length on what career success meant to them. It was developed with reference to relevant career theory; the participants were invited to talk about their career to date, their work values, their criteria for career success and the relationship they perceived between career success and success in their life as a whole.

The interviews were taped and transcribed in full as the first stage in the data analysis process. The aim of data analysis in this study was to build theory inductively from data gathered in the semi-structured interviews in a manner informed by Glaser and Strauss’s concept of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The data analysis process followed the five stages of data analysis identified by Ritchie and Spencer (1994): familiarization with the data; identifying a thematic framework or index; indexing (or coding); charting,
building up a picture of the data as a whole with reference to the coding system developed; and mapping and interpreting, defining concepts, and creating typologies and orientational categories.

The managers’ conceptions of career success

The managers’ criteria for success

The interviews with the managers generated dense and intricate descriptions of what career success meant to them on their own terms. Many of these descriptions were far removed from the conventional notion of what career success in organizations is – hierarchical rank and salary level. The following examples illustrate the range of ideas and definitions which were elicited in the interviews:

‘If I felt my job was important, and met my criteria for doing a good job, that it wasn’t a job that was just chasing bits of paper round and round . . . and I could do that job well, then to me, that would be my definition of what career success meant . . . it wouldn’t necessarily mean being promoted and getting to the top of the tree.’ (Woman in her forties)

‘It would be looking back and saying, yes, you achieved something in those roles, you were successful on the projects you were on, you were seen by the company you worked for as a good asset to have . . . and I enjoyed it . . . that’s the key thing, it has to be enjoyed.’ (Man in his twenties)

‘Career success . . . I think I’ve got to launch a successful product that changes the way (the company) thinks about what it is doing . . . I would feel very successful.’ (Man in his forties)

‘Achieving whatever or running whatever successfully . . . it’s back to being an expert . . . you know, I’m the best whatever in the country and everyone says let’s go and ask X . . . that would be success.’ (Woman in her thirties)

Despite the diversity of notions of career success expressed in the interviews, it was possible to identify the use of internal criteria for success (Gattiker and Larwood, 1986; Peluchette, 1993; Poole et al., 1993) in all the descriptions. The kind of internal criteria for success the managers used related in particular to feelings of accomplishment (‘I could do that job well’), feelings of achievement (‘You achieved something in those roles’) and enjoyment (‘That’s the key thing, it has to be enjoyed’). The use of such criteria will be discussed in detail below.

External criteria for success were also an important part of the managers’ descriptions of success, but a key conclusion drawn from analysis of the data was that the external dimension of career success is more complex than has previously been acknowledged. External material criteria for success, such as pay and position, were less central to many of the descriptions, than external, yet intangible, criteria related to concepts such as influence (‘I think I’ve got to launch a successful product that changes the way the company thinks about what it is doing’) and personal, rather than organizational, recognition (‘It’s back to being an expert’). Indeed, many of the managers whose definitions of career success were centred on intangible external criteria of this kind were unlikely to include material criteria in their descriptions as well; if they did include them, they emphasized them in a different kind of way from managers who saw success primarily in terms of hierarchical position and pay. (Such distinctions will be discussed in detail below.) It therefore seems conceptually important to distinguish between the two very different kinds of external criteria used; for this reason, they will henceforth be referred to as external and intangible success criteria.

It is important to note that, while the managers used a complex range of criteria to describe career success for themselves on their own terms, the key difference found between the managers’ definitions was one of emphasis, not one of actual kind. All criteria for career success are part of the same whole and, while distinct in nature, were found to be interrelated to each other in the context of three dimensions identified above, internal criteria, external criteria and intangible criteria.

Internal criteria for success

Criteria for success linked to accomplishment were used by almost all the managers in their descriptions of what success meant to them. These criteria related in some way to seeing career success in terms of feeling that one was extremely good at what one did at work. For some managers, this was inextricably linked with receiving personal recognition for this expertise:

‘I suppose I’d know I’d got to where I wanted to be and I loved what I was doing . . . I was good at
what I was doing, and recognised for being good at what I was doing... I suppose everyone else’s opinions of me count more than my own personal opinion.’ (Woman in her twenties)

For others, being good at their job was related to the idea of seeing career success in terms of obtaining a sense of personal achievement from what they did at work; their ideas of success were less dependent on the approval and affirmation of others:

‘I think I would need to feel that I also felt that I was doing a good job, because there is a difference... sometimes people think you are doing a good job, but you don’t actually think you’ve done it very well at all.’ (Woman in her forties)

The second group of success criteria identified was linked directly to the idea of getting a sense of personal achievement from work. This was particularly important for managers who had very internally focused ideas about success: for them, this achievement was often related to succeeding at challenging tasks, but sometimes was also described in terms of breaking new ground, that is doing things people had not done before, being creative and experiencing personal development through work-related tasks and experiences:

‘I think what would be successful is if I’d reached a point in whatever my career may turn out to be when I thought I had... fulfilled what I thought was probably my highest potential.’ (Woman in her thirties)

The most commonly used criterion for career success used by the managers related to enjoyment. This was described in terms of finding work interesting, as well as enjoyable, and was often linked to the idea of job satisfaction. While such enjoyment criteria underpinned most of the managers’ definitions of success, there were interesting differences between the ways in which they were used. For some managers, enjoyment was an important adjunct to hierarchical and financial success:

‘I believe that ultimately if it was apparent that earning more money meant you didn’t enjoy life, I wouldn’t do it... but I’ve not found that so far... I enjoy being in business.’ (Man in his twenties)

For others, enjoying work was an aspect of career success which transcended material achievement.

This was often expressed by the managers who saw success in this way as a conviction that they would not sacrifice a job they liked doing for hierarchical advancement:

‘I’m happy that I got so far, I would like to go a bit further, but I’d rather do something that I enjoyed and found satisfying.’ (Woman in her thirties)

Other groups of internal criteria identified related to integrity and to balance. Criteria related to the idea of integrity included feeling that what one did was worthwhile, acting with integrity as a manager and putting something back into the organization (perhaps through helping others). Balance criteria were used by managers who described having the ability to combine a successful work life with a successful home life as part of their definition of career success:

‘It would be am I balancing my private life with my work life and achieving at both of them?... I don’t want to be perfect at both of them but I’d like to be able to balance them both.’ (Woman in her thirties)

Intangible criteria for success

To those who valued personal recognition criteria highly, they were as important or more important in their definitions of career success than organizational recognition in terms of pay or hierarchical position. The recognition that these managers sought generally meant being acknowledged as someone who was a competent and valuable manager (and as such was often linked to also seeing success in terms of personal accomplishment):

‘I think that, staying on the theme of recognition, career success is where I go to a network meeting of senior players in the company and I am recognised for what I do and the value I bring to the company.’ (Man in his forties)

For other managers, personal recognition was described in terms of receiving specific feedback, such as winning awards, being selected to attend a prestigious conference, or even simply being thanked. It was particularly often expressed in terms of being regarded as an expert:

‘I feel reasonably successful now because a lot of people look to me as a kind of expert on quite a
few things . . . people ring you up and say so and so suggests I talk to you.’ (Man in his thirties)

Influence criteria for success were central to many of the managers’ descriptions of success, although again there were subtle differences between what this influence actually meant to different managers. For some, attaining influence was at the heart of their definition of career success, motivating them to aspire to positions in the organization where it would be possible to achieve this to a greater extent:

‘I think I’m driven by a desire to influence the world I’m in . . . I want to move further in the company, I am quite ambitious, and I get very frustrated when I feel there’s more I could be doing, but I’m not getting the chance to do it.’ (Woman in her forties)

Other ways in which influence was described included attaining responsibility, having an impact on the business and leaving a mark on the organization:

‘What you would like to say at the end of your career is that you have actually made a mark.’ (Woman in her forties)

External criteria for success

Despite the importance of criteria such as influence, personal recognition, enjoyment and accomplishment in the managers’ definitions of career success, many of their descriptions did include external material criteria, such as position in the hierarchy and level of pay. Two distinct groups of such external criteria were identified: grade criteria, which included hierarchical position, hierarchical advancement and status; and reward criteria, chiefly pay.

The degree of emphasis placed on grade criteria varied enormously from that of one group of managers who placed such criteria at the heart of their descriptions of what career success meant to them, to a group at the other extreme who did not describe their notions of career success in terms of grade criteria at all:

‘My next promotion will, I think, start to identify me more strongly as one of the people that might win the race.’ (Man in his thirties)

‘Some people might say that unless you’re continually pushing at developing and moving on and up, then you haven’t got a career, but I don’t actually see that, because I can move on and develop my career without necessarily getting further up the promotion ladder.’ (Woman in her forties)

As illustrated by the quote above, managers who emphasized grade criteria in their definitions of success viewed their progress through the organization almost as a highly competitive game, where each round which they won increased their personal status, as well as their power and influence. They viewed reward criteria for success as a necessary accompaniment to this advancement:

‘I suppose I’ve always had the ambition to succeed and get the money and all that.’ (Man in his twenties)

The managers’ conceptions of career success expressed in terms of orientational categories

While each manager’s description of what success meant to them was individual and based on a complex interrelationship of criteria, patterns were identified in the interview data which revealed the existence of groups of managers who defined what career success meant to them in a particular way. Baily (1989) acknowledges this as an important outcome of research which explores the internal career, and identifies a need for the development of orientational categories, based on ‘individual actors’ wants, plans and commitments’, which classify people ‘according to their individual predispositions’. What is required, she claims, is ‘an aggregation of individual data which reflects differences in subjective meanings’.

One way of expressing the findings of this study, therefore, is in terms of the orientational categories which emerged from the data analysis with regard to how the managers talked about what career success meant to them. This is likely to prove useful in two regards. First, it allows the links found between different criteria discussed in this section to be expressed succinctly and coherently. Second, it provides the basis of a framework which could be developed by future research exploring individuals’ notions of career success.

It is important to note that the orientational categories described here should not be construed as representing different types of managers, but
rather are a means of categorizing the different ways in which the managers who participated in this study talked about career success. The aim of this study was to elicit managers’ personal definitions of career success, and the typology is a categorization of these definitions. Nor is it proposed that this categorization is definitive; rather, it is intended to provide the basis for a conceptualization of personal definitions of career success on which future research might build. Indeed, further studies could well indicate the existence of other orientational categories relating to how managers conceive career success on their own terms: in this study two of the managers’ definitions of success did not fit in any one of the orientational categories identified.

Four orientational categories were identified in terms of how the managers who participated in this study described what career success meant to them.

The Climbers. The Climbers described career success very much in terms of external criteria, that is the grade criteria of hierarchical position and progression through promotion and reward criteria, especially level of pay. Their definition of success was thus closest to the ‘traditional’ concept of organizational career success, and often expressed as reaching the most senior levels of management. However, the Climbers did not just aspire to move up the hierarchy, but also talked about the status which they believed this would give them, expressing this in both organizational and social terms. They tended to be very goal oriented in terms of their attitude to their career progression: they talked about how they set themselves regular stretching goals and targets relating to their level of pay and their position in the hierarchy. Linked to this emphasis on career goals, the Climbers often expressed a strong competitive instinct.

Climbers were managers who described strong positive feelings about the organization they worked for, perhaps because their own ideas about career success were very close to success as the organization defines it. Nevertheless, Climbers did not rely on external criteria alone to define their career success. They said that they needed to enjoy their work to feel that they were successful, and internal enjoyment criteria therefore were an important part of their accounts of what success meant to them. They often described this as feeling that any material success they achieved was meaningless if they did not enjoy their work. Not surprisingly, their goal orientation, their competitive instinct and their positive feelings about the organization they worked for meant that the Climbers were highly likely to enjoy working in the corporate environment.

For the Climbers, other types of internal and intangible criteria were not important in terms of how they described career success. Accomplishment criteria were only valued by them in that they saw competence as a basic requirement to be able to perform their job; achievement was described in terms of external success, and not cherished in its own right. Personal recognition criteria were appreciated merely because being seen to be good at what they did at work was perceived as a route to further organizational recognition in the form of promotion or a pay rise. The group of Climbers consisted of seven men, three in their twenties, three in their thirties and one in their forties.

The Experts. For the managers who defined career success as experts, success was described in terms of achieving a high level of competency at their job and being recognized personally for being good at what they did, be it in terms of being seen to be an expert or winning the respect of the people they worked with. The Experts’ conception of success was therefore grounded in both internal accomplishment and intangible personal recognition criteria. Affirmation of their accomplishment was central to the Experts’ perception of career success: the way in which this accomplishment was described took many forms, such as given positive feedback, being thanked for their efforts or gaining their colleagues’ respect.

External criteria were far less important in terms of how the Experts described career success than internal and intangible criteria. For many of them, grade criteria for career success were not part of their definition of success at all. The others (especially younger Experts) did include external criteria in their definition of career success, but only because they saw them as another form of personal recognition, rather than because they valued them in absolute terms in the way that the climbers did.

To the Experts, the content of the job they did was more important than their position in the hierarchy or their status within the organization.
For this reason, they valued enjoyment criteria for success highly. Indeed, Experts often expressed the view that they were not prepared to sacrifice a job they enjoyed doing for advancement within the organization. While they did not necessarily desire high levels of influence at work, many of them, particularly older experts, saw the influence criteria of responsibility and autonomy as part of their idea of career success. For them, being given greater responsibility or autonomy at work was perceived as allowing them to gain an even greater sense of accomplishment from what they did. The group of Experts consisted of seven women, three in their twenties, two in their thirties and two in their forties, and two men, one in his twenties and one in his thirties.

The Influencers. For the Influencers, career success was defined as being able to do things at work which had a tangible and positive effect on the organization they worked for, regardless of the hierarchical position they occupied. The Influencers’ definition of career success was thus grounded in influence criteria for success, such as leaving a mark or having an impact on the business. The way in which the Influencers perceived they might achieve influence varied. For older Influencers in particular, the idea of leaving a mark on their organization was central to their definition of career success, and often linked to gaining autonomy at work, particularly for those managers who had not reached senior levels in the managerial hierarchy. For younger Influencers, or those who wished to progress up the hierarchy, influence was frequently described as attaining a level of responsibility within the organization, and, as such, something to aspire to as their career developed.

Influence was also often described in terms of having an impact on the business by Influencers of all ages. Some of the managers had tried to achieve this regardless of their grade by getting involved in activities outside the normal remit of their job, which allowed them to attain greater levels of influence than their position in the hierarchy would have permitted them. Others talked about being keen to progress up the hierarchy because they perceived that the higher they were, the greater the level of influence they would be able to exert.

This reference to status illustrates well how the Influencers’ conceptions of career success differed from the Climbers’ in the context of hierarchical position. The Influencers who believed that their grade in the hierarchy was important said that they did so for the influence it allowed them, rather than for the status which it endowed. Internal criteria for career success were important to Influencers’ definitions of success too, in particular achievement criteria for success. Influencers valued achievement criteria because to them career success related to what they could achieve within the organization, rather than the position which they reached. If personal recognition criteria were part of their view of success too, this was because having a good reputation was seen as potentially allowing the Influencers to gain more influence in the long run. The group of Influencers consisted of five women, one in her twenties, two in their thirties and two in their forties, and six men, one in his thirties and five in their forties.

The Self-Realizers. For the Self-Realizers, career success was described as an extremely internal concept, based on the idea of achievement at a very personal level, sometimes in a way which would mean little to other people. As a result, internal criteria for success, especially achievement criteria, were most important in the Self-Realizers’ definitions of success. They might cherish other criteria for success, such as personal recognition or influence, but the desire they expressed to achieve on their own terms overrode the value they placed on them in their conception of career success. The Self-Realizers’ definitions of success were thus as far removed from external managerial success as possible and closest to the notion of personal fulfillment.

Accomplishment criteria for success were also valued by some Self-Realizers, who talked about obtaining a sense of achievement from being good at what they did at work. However, while success for the Self-Realizers was sometimes defined in the context of specific job-related achievements, they often had difficulty in describing their very personal idea of career success in organizational terms at all. Self-Realizers found it essential that their work was challenging at a personal level in some way. Meeting a challenge not only added to their sense of achievement but was seen as helping them develop as managers, something which the Self-Realizers often mentioned as being important to them.

For the Self-Realizers, a vital part of their definition of career success was achieving a
balance between their work life and their home life; in general, they were managers to whom it mattered that they succeeded in both spheres of their life on their own personal terms. Enjoyment criteria for success were also a component of the Self-Realizers’ definition of career success, especially interest and job satisfaction. Finding their job interesting was usually seen as being far more important to them than their position in the hierarchy, perhaps because they did not believe that it was possible to gain any satisfaction or sense of achievement in a job which had no intrinsic interest. However, to most Self-Realizers, external criteria for success were unimportant with respect to how they described their own career success. In particular, Self-Realizers did not define success in terms of the grade they reached in the organizational hierarchy or the status which this might give them. If they set career goals, these were likely to relate to personal achievements rather than organizational landmarks. The group of Self-Realizers consisted of six women, one in her twenties, three in their thirties and two in their forties, and one man in his twenties.

Gender differences

Important differences were found between the male and female managers’ conceptions of career success, exemplified by the fact that three of the orientational categories identified were dominated by a single sex. The group of Climbers consisted of seven men and no women; the group of Experts comprised seven women and two men; the group of Self-Realizers consisted of six women and one man. (There were six male Influencers and five female Influencers.)

Thus the women managers who took part in this study were more likely than the men to describe what success meant to them with reference to internal criteria, especially accomplishment and achievement, and intangible criteria, in particular personal recognition. For all of the women, including the Influencers, success defined in terms of achievement, personal recognition or influence transcended material career success. It was common for them to describe the content of the job they did as being more important in determining how successful they felt they were than their grade, to the extent that six of the women said that they would not sacrifice a job they enjoyed for hierarchical advancement. For most of the men, on the other hand, the position in the hierarchy which they attained was used as a measure of their career success, be it for reasons of status or influence.

In fact, the differences between the men and the women in terms of how they described what career success meant to them were most marked when the ways in which they talked about external material criteria for success were examined. While external criteria were not irrelevant to all the women, they were never central to any of their descriptions of career success. For example, pay was valued by them for its utility, rather than the status which it might endow, and therefore was not a crucial part of their conceptions of success. Likewise, some of the women did express an interest in hierarchical advancement, but not for reasons of status. They said that they wanted it either to obtain more interesting work or gain greater influence, or viewed it as a form of personal recognition for the contribution which they believed they had made at work:

‘Pay is useful but I don’t need as much pay as I get, so I could take a pay cut, I could do something with less pay.’ (Woman in her thirties)

‘I suppose what you realise from being in a very hierarchical organisation is that sometimes if you want to do something that’s really right and help to get something through, it does help to have status . . . but I don’t want hierarchical status for the sake of it.’ (Woman in her thirties)

The men’s conceptions of career success were epitomized by the descriptions of success given by the seven Climbers. For them, position and pay were seen as indispensable markers of career success and closely related to a status which they craved:

‘Career success is financial to a degree . . . I keep going back to that one . . . and in a place like (this organisation), grade . . . then the importance of the area one works in, how important it is to the long-terms aims of (the organisation).’ (Man in his thirties)

‘So I have been reasonably grade conscious in the way I’ve progressed. I like people to acknowledge that I am a reasonably senior manager in (the organisation’s) terms.’ (Man in his thirties)
Other differences emerged as the men and women talked about their careers. The men who valued external criteria for success most strongly described hierarchical positions as targets to be aimed for, almost as if work was some kind of competitive game. This was reflected in the kind of language they used; they talked about their career development in terms of ‘goals’, ‘steps’ and ‘ladders’. The women, on the other hand, talked about career progression more in terms of meeting sets of challenges or as a means of ‘not being left behind’. If they viewed work as a competition at all, which many of them did not appear to, it was one based on equity and fairness, not a free-for-all in which only the fittest survived.

The women’s definitions of career success also tended to be ‘broader’ than the men’s: they were likely to describe career success as just one part of the success they wanted to achieve in their lives as a whole, and therefore were more inclined to talk about an interest in succeeding in other parts of their life as a whole. This was often expressed in terms of balance being part of their definition of career success. While some of the men alluded to a desire for balance, for them life success was essentially driven by career success.

**Age differences**

The research findings suggest that the differences between the men and the women in terms of how they describe what career success means to them become more complex once the consideration of age is taken into account. Three of the Climbers (an all-male group) were in their twenties, three were in their thirties and one was in his forties; the Experts comprised four managers in their twenties, three women and one man, three managers in their thirties, two women and one man, and two managers in their forties, both women; the Influencers consisted of one female manager in her twenties, three managers in their thirties, two women and one man, and seven managers in their forties, five men and two women; the Self-Realizers comprised two managers in their twenties, one man and one woman, three managers in their thirties, all women, and two managers in their forties, both women.

The findings suggest that material criteria for career success generally reduce in importance with age and are often replaced by an emphasis on influence and autonomy. This appears to be particularly true of the men: it is striking that, of the six men in their forties interviewed for the study, five described career success as Influencers. Furthermore, the Climbers were a predominantly younger group of managers with one exception: it is interesting to note that the one manager in his forties who defined career success as a Climber was still at the most junior managerial grade and therefore had not yet achieved any hierarchical success. While the women seemed less interested in material criteria for success overall, some did report that they felt that their grade was less important to them now than it had been when they were younger.

‘As a kid I always took my toys to pieces, so that I could understand how they worked, and I think that’s what I would like, that I could be involved in something where I understood the entirety of what’s going on and had some control over it, some influence.’ (Man in his forties)

‘I’ve noticed since being the wrong side of 40 a distinct drop in the ambition drive... I remember in the early nineties almost being eaten up with ambition, I still wanted to make that next move up... and what I feel now is, it didn’t happen and I think so what? ... I enjoy what I’m doing, and that’s more important now.’ (Woman in her forties)

For the managers in their forties, achieving influence was often described in terms of leaving a mark in some way on the organization for which they worked. Being able to do this was at the heart of the descriptions of career success given by all but one of the Influencers in their forties. Sometimes this idea was expressed rather differently by the managers, as creating something which was ‘theirs’, perhaps by leaving their current employer and setting up their own successful business.

Given that this was an exploratory qualitative study involving small numbers of managers, the emphasis on other criteria for success too appeared to be different for the older managers than it was for the younger ones. The importance women placed on accomplishment and personal recognition appeared to lessen with age: three out of the five women in their twenties interviewed described what career success meant to them as Experts; on the other hand the female Self-Realizers tended to be somewhat older, suggesting that the emphasis women give to success as personal achievement...
may increase with age. In contrast, whilst in general the men tended to be less inclined to base their definitions of career success on personal recognition, there was some evidence that this was more important for men in their forties. Likewise, both men and women in their forties appeared to place more emphasis on enjoying their work or finding it interesting than the younger managers did.

Discussion

The findings confirm earlier research (e.g. Korman et al., 1981) which suggested that many managers do not use the external criteria of hierarchical position and pay alone to delineate career success on their own terms. Expressing this in terms of the orientational categories identified in the study, of the 36 participants, only seven defined career success as Climbers, whose view of success was closest to conventional notions of what it means. Instead, individuals appear to use a range of internal and intangible criteria, such as achievement, accomplishment, personal recognition and influence, to define career success on their own terms. This seems to be especially true of women and older managers, a finding which also receives support from previous studies (e.g. Asplund, 1988; Marshall, 1984; Nicholson and West, 1988).

Indeed, while the study on which this paper is based was exploratory in nature, two of the four orientational categories which it identified applied particularly to women and one to older managers. The criteria which the Experts chiefly use to describe career success on their own terms, accomplishment and personal recognition, and the main criterion which the Self-Realizers use, personal achievement, reflect conclusions drawn by literature which has considered what women want from their careers (e.g. Hennig and Jardim, 1978). Likewise, the use of influence criteria by Influencers in their descriptions of success reflects the findings of research which has examined how managers’ ideas about their career change as they get older (e.g. O’Connor and Wolfe, 1987). This suggests that expressing the findings in terms of orientational categories provides a useful basis on which future research, be it qualitative or quantitative, can build.

A key question which the findings pose is why do many managers’ conceptions of career success differ from conventional notions? It may be, of course, that some managers simply talk about success in a different way from how they actually feel about it, perhaps from a reluctance to seem status conscious or mercenary. Given the support the findings receive from previous empirical work, this seems unlikely. The development of earlier career-related orientational categories, for example by Schein (1993), Derr (1986) and Driver (1982), indicates individuals do express a range of ideas about what the career means to them, and it seems likely that these differences will include different notions of career success.

One possible explanation for the differences found is that the delayering of organizations and the shift in the psychological contract between employer and employee has caused managers to rethink what career success means in the new organizational context. If the perception is that hierarchical success is no longer available to large numbers of managers, then individuals may resort to focusing on other, more attainable and potentially more valid models of success. For example, success may become increasingly equated with influence when managers operate in a flattened hierarchy with little opportunity for hierarchical progression; it is interesting to note that some of the younger managers in the study, especially the women, talked about progression in terms of increased responsibility or more difficult sets of challenges. Likewise, accomplishment, expertise and personal achievement may be the best means of measuring career success for managers who believe their career to be ‘boundaryless’. Schein’s latest research reinforces the notion that individual career orientations are changing, with managers moving away from emphasizing managerial and technical career anchors to favouring autonomy and balance (Schein, 1996).

The kind of managerial role that an individual occupies may affect their attitude to career success. For example, managers who work in specialist support roles such as personnel could be more inclined to define their own success around the idea of expertise, than managers who occupy general management positions. In this study, all the managers who worked as general managers did indeed see success either as Influencers or as Climbers. However, working in a specialist role did not necessarily mean that managers defined career success as Experts; there were four Climbers and seven Influencers who were specialists rather than generalists. Clearly the type of position a manager
occupies may influence their perception of career success, but this does not appear to be sufficient on its own to determine how success is defined.

It may also be the case that managers’ ideas about career success reflect the social context in which they develop as adults. For example, two of the managers who took part in the study talked about how they had struggled to work out what a career meant to them, because they grew up in working-class social backgrounds where people did not have ‘careers’. The effects of socialization on conceptions of career success seem likely to be most marked for women managers, and may explain to some extent the different ideas about success they appear to hold. It is accepted that women’s psychological development has traditionally been different from men’s, leading them to cherish values related to attachment and connection with others, rather than the values of separation and individuation which men are encouraged to favour (Chodorow, 1974; Gilligan, 1982). If this is the case, then it may be more difficult for them to see their own success in terms of the kind of competitive achievement, represented in the organizational context by hierarchical advancement, that men are traditionally believed to support.

The effects of socialization on women managers’ conceptions of career success are likely to be reinforced by their experiences as women in what is still a male-dominated profession. Women still only represent 15.2% of UK managers and 4.5% of UK directors (Institute of Management, 1997). They earn less than men (Cox and Harquail, 1991), enjoy fewer meaningful promotions (Stroh et al., 1992) and tend to occupy specialist support roles, rather than generalist line-management roles. It is clear that stereotypes about the masculinity of management as a profession persist, however covertly, and that as a result the structure of opportunity with which women must contend at work is poorer than that which their male colleagues enjoy. If women perceive that the traditional model of organizational success, based on hierarchical position and level of pay, is not readily available to them, then they might choose to refocus their ideas of what success is on other less tangible and more internal criteria, which they believe to be more easily attainable.

This kind of adaptation in order to ensure psychological fulfilment may also explain why older managers place less emphasis on external criteria for career success. For many managers in their forties, hierarchical success is undoubtedly perceived to be less easily available than it was earlier in their careers (Nicholson and West, 1988). The higher they have risen in the hierarchy, the fewer the opportunities that remain; if their career progression to date has been poor, the less chance there will be to move onwards and upwards once they are in their forties. They therefore choose to emphasize the kinds of success they believe are still available to them such as organizational influence, making a mark and enjoyment (Kalleberg and Losocco, 1983). Career stage is likely to influence conceptions of success too. Those managers who are ‘successful’ in hierarchical terms, may value external criteria for success less once they have achieved them. For those managers who have not achieved this kind of career success, however, it may be something to which they still aspire. For example, the one Climber in his forties identified in this study was still at the most junior management grade.

For women, there appears to be some kind of shift away from emphasizing the criteria of accomplishment and personal recognition with age. This may relate to women’s levels of confidence at work. It was common for the younger women who took part in the study to express a lack of confidence in their abilities at work, whereas some of the older women talked about how their self-confidence had grown as their careers had developed. It may be that young women are likely to define career success as Experts because they lack confidence as a result of their socialization as females, and because of their reaction to the male-dominated organizational culture which they encounter when they start work. Consequently, they need to believe that they are extremely competent at what they do in order to bolster their confidence, and therefore view career success in terms of accomplishment and personal recognition early on in their careers; it is acknowledged that experience of working helps boost women’s self-confidence as their careers develop, which may help explain the differences found between the older and younger women in terms of how they defined career success (Marshall, 1995).

Conclusion

In the past, careers have generally been viewed from the perspective of the organization (Herriot
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et al., 1994) and managerial career success judged accordingly in external, organizational terms. The research findings discussed in this paper, while the outcome of an exploratory study, suggest that no such narrow definition of career success exists from the point of view of the individual. Managers’ conceptions of career success differ, although there appear to be certain patterns of definitions which they use, expressed in this paper by four orientational categories.

Organizations therefore need to rethink their attitude to what career success means, if they wish to take the views of individual managers on this important subject into consideration. They should not assume that managers are a homogeneous group with a single set of wants and needs. Career development practices and career paths which do not reflect individuals’ values and beliefs are not likely to deliver the levels of commitment and motivation which organizations today require from their managers. In particular, strategies aimed at increasing the number of women in management positions and developing women’s careers are likely to be undermined unless organizations attempt to understand more clearly how women actually perceive their own career success. For older managers, a better understanding of what career success means to them could allow them to make a more valuable contribution at work in the later years of their career, as well as obtain the kind of career ‘rewards’ which they truly value.

The findings presented in this paper also pose an interesting agenda for future research into aspects of career success. The conclusions which have been drawn represent an early stage of knowledge about what career success means to individuals, the outcome of an exploratory study. There is a need for further studies, both qualitative and quantitative, to build on the results presented here, to help define the distinction and relationship between internal, intangible and external criteria, and in particular to substantiate and develop the orientational categories proposed, thereby extending knowledge about the complex but highly important subject of what career success means to individuals on their own terms.

Furthermore, while some suggestions have been made in this paper about possible explanations for the differences in definitions of success identified, future studies could also help provide useful insights into why individuals conceive of career success in different ways, and in particular why gender and age appear to have a strong effect on ideas about success. Longitudinal research is needed to illuminate the issue of age in particular. Further research could also examine in more detail the relationship between other variables, such as grade and area of work, and conceptions of career success.

If the notions of ‘career’ and ‘career success’ as they have traditionally been known are indeed under threat, then research which helps to demonstrate how and why many managers today do not see their own success primarily in terms of hierarchical advancement will be of great value to organizations as they struggle to devise alternative focuses for career development. It may even allow the diminution of the hierarchical career to be seen as a positive move, which reflects managers’ own ideas about career success, and not as the negative phenomenon it is currently perceived to be.

References


