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Complementary person–culture values fit and hierarchical career status

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ABSTRACT

Although career success is an issue of global concern, few studies have examined the antecedents of career success across cultures. In this study we test whether the relationship between individuals' self-enhancement values (achievement and power) and hierarchical status differs across 29 countries and whether this variation depends on countries' cultural value orientations. The results of the multilevel regressions indicate that the relationship between self-enhancement values and hierarchical status varies across the 29 countries and that the cultural value orientations of egalitarianism and hierarchy moderate this relationship. In line with trait-activation theory, individuals with high self-enhancement values were most likely to obtain hierarchical status if their values differentiated them from the other members of the culture.

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1. Introduction

Are ambitious and achievement-seeking individuals generally more likely to make it to the top — or does their career advancement depend on the national culture in which they live? Until now, most career research has implicitly assumed that there are universally applicable predictors of career success (Briscoe, Hall, & Mayrhofer, 2012). In this respect, the fact that ambitious career goals and aspirations were shown to predict career advancement in the US (Howard & Bray, 1988), Australia (Tharenou, 2001) and Germany (Abele & Spurk, 2009b; Spurk & Abele, 2011) would indicate that ambition is also a predictor of objective career success in other cultures. This implicit assumption, however, not only lacks theoretical and empirical evidence (Briscoe et al., 2012), but also contrasts with a substantial amount of research that has emphasized the contextual nature of careers (e.g., Mayrhofer & Schneidhofer, 2009). Further, despite the fact that culture is singled out as uniquely important to career research (Thomas & Inkson, 2007), no study so far has looked into whether the relationship between individual differences and objective career success may be contingent on national culture.

The joint analysis of individual and contextual variables is, however, particularly important for advancing our knowledge of career success because careers are shaped not only by individuals' characteristics and actions, but also by the organizational and societal contexts in which they are embedded (Grandjean, 1981). For advancing career theory, it is therefore necessary to build more culturally sensitive theoretical models that can better explain when and where individual differences affect objective career success across diverse cultural contexts.

The present study addresses the call for multilevel career research that analyzes careers across cultural contexts (Khapova, Vinkenburg, & Arnold, 2009). Using data from individuals in 29 countries, we examine how the match between individual (Schwartz, 1992) and cultural values (Schwartz, 1999) affects objective career success. Specifically, in line with the abovementioned research

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about aspirations and career success, we examine in which cultures individuals with pronounced achievement and power values are most likely to attain hierarchical status. Based on trait-activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000), we argue that if the national culture does not encourage and reward ambition-related behavior, these values are more important for understanding hierarchical status. Adopting a cross-cultural approach to objective career success makes a number of contributions to the career literature. Theoretically, it allows us to examine culture as a national boundary condition that influences the value-career success relationship. Practically, it draws attention to the cultural differences that influence career outcomes across countries, providing implications for individuals' career management and organizations' global HR practices.

1.1. Career success across cultures

Career success is widely conceived as a multi-faceted concept that comprises both subjective (e.g., career satisfaction) and objective components (e.g., pay, hierarchical status and promotions) (Gunz & Heslin, 2005). In cross-cultural research, measures of career success need to fulfill additional methodological criteria that do not arise in non-comparative research. The main challenge in cross-cultural research is that the indicators of career success need to assure measurement equivalence, which requires that the concept under investigation is equally understood across cultures (Thomas & Inkson, 2007). In this respect, previous research has outlined that people of different countries ascribe varying meanings to the notion of careers and also differ in their conceptualizations of career success (Briscoe et al., 2012). This, in turn, suggests that indicators of subjective career success, which are commonly derived from individuals' level of satisfaction with the success in their careers, are likely to lack the conceptual equivalence that is an essential assumption in cross-cultural research. Thus, although we acknowledge that career success is a multi-faceted concept, we focus in this study on objective career success, particularly hierarchical status.

Hierarchical status, which is a commonly used indicator of objective career success (Abele & Spurk, 2009a; Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999), refers to individuals' career achievements with respect to their managerial level and managerial responsibilities (Abele & Spurk, 2009b; Abele & Wiese, 2008). The use of hierarchical status has the advantage that its dimensions are objectively defined, facilitating the measurement equivalence across countries that is required for conducting cross-cultural research. Additionally, hierarchical status is an adequate cross-cultural indicator of career success because status is considered to be one of the most universal features of career success across national contexts (Nicholson & De Waal-Andrews, 2005).

1.2. Individual values

In the last few decades, a wide range of variables has been discussed as antecedents of objective career success. These predictors can be classified into four categories: namely, human capital, organizational sponsorship, socio-demographics, and individual differences (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). Individual values belong to the last category; they are overarching goals that act as guiding principles across contexts, reflecting what individuals want in their lives (Schwartz, 1992). According to Schwartz's value theory (1992), human values can be categorized into a circular system organized into two poles. The first pole consists of *self-enhancement values* (power, achievement), which support the pursuit of individual interests, as opposed to *self-transcendence values* (universalism, benevolence) that encourage the well-being of others. The second pole consists of *openness values* (e.g., self-direction, stimulation, hedonism), which encourage change and the pursuit of new experiences and ideas, as opposed to *conservation values* (security, conformity, tradition), which emphasize the maintenance of the status quo (Schwartz, 2011).

In the current study we focus on self-enhancement values, which comprise achievement and power values, because previous studies have shown that these values are particularly conclusive for understanding objective career success (e.g., Frieze, Olson, Murrell, & Selvan, 2006). People with high self-enhancement values greatly appreciate the attainment of social status, prestige, and domination over people and resources; they generally aim for social power, authority, and wealth, and find it important to demonstrate competences according to social standards. Individuals who value self-enhancement are also described as ambitious, capable, successful, and influential. Schwartz (1992) has shown that individuals generally seek out work environments that support their individual values. Thus, based on Schwartz's values theory, we expect self-enhancement values to predict hierarchical status because individuals with high self-enhancement values are likely to seek managerial jobs that allow them to exercise power and to demonstrate their competencies. In fact, several empirical studies have shown that power and achievement values are positively related with indicators of career advancement. In a longitudinal study of MBA graduates, Frieze et al. (2006) showed that individuals with high power values were more likely to be promoted to higher-level positions. Further, several studies have shown that ambitious people tend to be more successful in their careers in terms of salary, job position, and occupational prestige (Howard & Bray, 1988; Jansen & Vinkenburg, 2006; Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). These findings are also consistent with research showing that graduates who found it important to advance in their careers were more likely to attain an elevated hierarchical status in their early and mid careers (Abele & Spurk, 2009b; Spurk & Abele, 2011).

Hypothesis 1. Self-enhancement values are positively associated with individuals' hierarchical status.

1.3. Cross-moderated effects of cultural values

Despite the increasing number of studies on individual differences as antecedents of career success, current research falls short of testing the generalizability of these relationships across cultures, neglecting the idea that country-level variables such as

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national culture may explain variation in the individual differences–objective career success relationship. Although cross-cultural differences have been examined across a wide range of fields in organizational behavior, they still need to be systematically examined within the career literature (Thomas & Inkson, 2007).

The values a society emphasizes are the most central characteristic of culture (Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz, 1999). Cultural values express what is considered to be good and desired in a culture. Cultural values influence not only societies' policies, norms, and social beliefs, but also individuals' beliefs, actions, and goals. This effect happens because cultures act like a press to which people are exposed by living in a certain society (Schwartz, 2011). The "cultural press" refers to stimuli that draw attention to the underlying cultural values through either language patterns (Kashima & Kashima, 1998), social expectations, or taken-for-granted practices. Cultural values thus encourage those behaviors and attitudes that are most legitimate in the societal context. In fact, culture can also influence individuals' career management through its impact on personal attitudes and societal norms (Thomas & Inkson, 2007). Most individuals internalize the beliefs, behaviors, and value priorities that are congruent with the society's cultural values because doing so allows them to feel comfortable and to function effectively in their societal environment (Schwartz, 2011). The "cultural press," therefore, provides external rewards for behavior that is congruent with the cultural values.

Personality researchers describe situations in which informal or formal norms provide high external rewards for certain behaviors as "strong" situations. Situational strength can best be understood as a "multifaceted force that homogenizes behavior by providing information about the most appropriate course(s) of action" (Meyer, Dalal, & Bonaccio, 2009, p. 1078). The trait-activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000) posits that strong situations are likely to restrict or even override the effects of individual differences because they clearly define appropriate behavior and provide great external rewards for enacting these behaviors. As a consequence, strong situations tend to evoke homogenous responses from most individuals in the situation, irrespective of individuals' value priorities.

1.4. Matching individual and cultural values

Although there are various useful measures for conceptualizing culture (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004), Schwartz's (1999) cultural values have particular validity for the purpose of this study. The main advantage of using Schwartz's conceptualization of cultural values is that it allows us to examine directly which cultural values encourage and reward self-enhancement related behavior. In fact, Schwartz (2011) has already discussed the conceptual and empirical correspondence of individual and cultural values, which permits us to systematically test the tenet of trait-activation theory that the relationship between self-enhancement values and hierarchical status is more pronounced in "weak situations" — that is, in cultures that do not provide high external rewards for value-related behavior.

Schwartz's (1999) theory of cultural values identifies three bipolar cultural orientations: autonomy vs. embeddedness, egalitarianism vs. hierarchy, and harmony vs. mastery. These cultural orientations provide normative responses that prescribe how institutions should function and how individuals should behave. A cultural emphasis on one pole usually goes hand in hand with a de-emphasis of the opposing pole. For instance, countries with a high emphasis on hierarchy commonly deemphasize egalitarianism (Schwartz, 2011). For the present study, we focus on those four cultural values that conceptually match with self-enhancement values. In the following we demonstrate how these cultural values match with self-enhancement values.

1.4.1. Hierarchy and egalitarianism

Exercising social power, demonstrating competencies, and seeking authority is characteristic of cultures that highly value hierarchy. In hierarchy cultures, the unequal distribution of power and resources is considered to be legitimate and even desirable. Hierarchy cultures therefore allow and support, to a certain extent, actions that seek the fulfillment of power, authority, and wealth. On the contrary, egalitarian cultures encourage individuals to internalize cooperation and concern for the community's welfare. The exploitation of people and resources, which can go along with the pursuit of self-enhancement (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001), is in contrast to the idea of cooperation. Because exercising power and authority is not congruent with the social norms of these cultures, egalitarian cultures are less likely to support self-enhancement values.

1.4.2. Mastery and harmony

Like hierarchy values, the cultural value orientation of mastery encourages the pursuit of self-enhancement. In mastery cultures, individuals are rewarded for being self-assertive and for managing the social environment in order to attain individual or group goals. Likewise, active problem solving and achieving progress are highly valued (Schwartz, 2011). This value emphasis encourages individuals to be ambitious and successful, and to pursue their own goals independently. In contrast, harmony cultures place a low importance on individuals' self-enhancement. In fact, in these countries it is considered important to accept and preserve the status quo; change and conflict are contrary with their harmony value orientation.

According to the tenet of the trait-activation theory, weak or moderate situations are required in order to observe variance in individual differences (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Therefore, a condition for the association between self-enhancement values and hierarchical status is that societies do not strongly induce behavior related to power and achievement values. We consequently expect self-enhancement values to be more strongly associated with hierarchical status in countries that value hierarchy and mastery less and egalitarian and harmony values more. Thus, based on trait-activation theory, we argue that it is beneficial for people's self-enhancement values to be dissimilar to their countries' cultural values. In contrast to the common emphasis on value congruence that prevails in career and general organizational behavior research (e.g., Edwards & Cable, 2009), we thus expect individuals' chances for attaining hierarchical status to be higher in countries with non-matching cultural values. Considering that

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the person-environment paradigm comprises both a similarity (supplementary fit) and a dissimilarity (complementary fit) perspective, our research draws on the latter category, arguing in favor of the benefits associated with a complementary person-culture fit for individuals' objective career success. A complementary fit indicates that individuals fit, not because they are similar to everyone else, but rather "because they bring something unique to the collective" (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987, p. 271).

Hypothesis 2. Hierarchy (mastery) values moderate the relationship between self-enhancement values and hierarchical status, so that the association between individuals' self-enhancement values and hierarchical status is stronger when countries' hierarchy (mastery) values are lower.

Hypothesis 3. Egalitarian (harmony) values moderate the relationship between self-enhancement values and hierarchical status, so that the association between individuals' self-enhancement values and hierarchical status is stronger when countries' egalitarian (harmony) values are higher.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

We used data from the European Social Survey (ESS), Round 4, collected in 2008. Because of the cultural diversity within Europe, the European landscape is particularly useful for conducting cross-cultural research (Mayrhofer & Schneidhofer, 2009). In this respect, the ESS is especially suited to addressing our cross-level hypotheses because it provides data of representative national samples in 29 countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Finland, France, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Latvia, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Rumania, Russian Federation, Spain, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, and Ukraine). The European Social Survey involves strict random probability sampling with a minimum target response rate of 70% (European Social Survey, 2011). For the purpose of this study, we selected participants who were employed and who were aged 18 to 67. In total, the sample included 35,463 participants coming from a wide range of occupations and industries.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Individual values

Respondents completed a version of the Portrait Values Questionnaire (Schwartz et al., 2001) which was revised for the ESS (Schwartz & Rubel, 2005). The questionnaire includes portraits of peoples' goals and aspirations, which were gender matched with the respondent. On a response scale from 1 (*very much like me*) to 6 (*not like me at all*), participants indicated how much like them the person in each of the portraits was. We reverse coded the variables so that a higher score suggests a stronger similarity. Self-enhancement values were represented by four items (sample item: "Being very successful is important to her/him. She/he likes to impress other people," $\alpha = .75$). We ipsatized the value scores by centering participants' responses on their means and thereby eliminated individual differences in response scales (Schwartz & Rubel-Lifschitz, 2009). The value scores thus indicate the relative importance a person places on a specific value (Schwartz, 1992).

2.2.2. Hierarchical status

In line with Abele and Wiese (2008) and Abele and Spurk (2009b), we measure hierarchical status by combining information about individuals' managerial level and responsibilities: supervision responsibility, which is defined in terms of monitoring and being responsible for the work of other employees (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*); number of subordinates (0 = *no subordinates*; 1 = *1–3 subordinates*; 2 = *4–6 subordinates*; 3 = *7–14 subordinates*; 4 = *over 15 subordinates*); and official management position (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*) based on the International Standard Classification of Occupations (International Labor Organization, 2012). The composite index could thus range from 0 to 6 with higher scores representing a higher level of hierarchical status.

2.2.3. Cultural values

The assessment of the cultural values was obtained from a dataset released in 2007, which consists of teacher and student samples who responded to the 57-item Schwartz value survey. In total, the survey was filled out by 55,022 respondents in 72 countries (Schwartz, 2011). Several advantages make Schwartz's cultural values survey a promising approach for studying country-differences in culture (Khapova, Briscoe, & Dickmann, 2012). One of these advantages is that all items were tested for cross-cultural equivalence of meaning. Additionally, there is empirical evidence showing that the order of countries on each of the cultural values is robust across different samples from many countries around the globe (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2007). The students' and teachers' scores were equally weighted in order to obtain the cultural value scores. The mean rating of the cultural value orientations was calculated for each of the 29 countries included in this study. In this way, the country constituted the unit of analysis. The culture value scores of each country thus represent the mean importance rating for the value items. For further details about the data collection, see previous work by Schwartz (2006, 2008, 2009).

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2.2.4. Controls

We included age, gender (0 = *male*; 1 = *female*), years of education, and number of contract work hours per week as covariates because these variables have previously been shown to predict objective career success (Ng et al., 2005). Given that previous research has shown that certain study disciplines are associated with objective career success (Abele & Spurk, 2009b), we also controlled for participants' field or subject of highest qualification. The variable differentiates between the following disciplines: Safety, arts, humanities, engineering, agriculture, education, science, medical, economics, social studies, law, personal care, public order, transport, and general/no specific field. We dummy-coded the variable such that "general/no specific field" was the comparison category. Rather than include every dummy-coded variable in the hypothesized model, we ran ANOVAs using hierarchical status as the dependent variable and study majors as the independent variables. We then included only those disciplines that were statistically significant in the ANOVA and regression analyses. Considering that careers are embedded in economic contexts (Mayrhofer, Meyer, & Steyrer, 2007), we controlled for the standardized values of countries' GDP per capita for the year 2008, which we obtained from the dataset of the World Bank survey (2012).

2.3. Analyses

Because of the nested structure of our data with individuals nested within countries, we first examined which proportion of variance in hierarchical status is attributable to the grouping structure. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) for hierarchical status was $\rho = .04$, which indicates that only a small proportion (4%) of the variance in hierarchical status resides at the country level. We tested our hypotheses with a series of multilevel linear regressions using Mplus 6.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 1988–2010). In line with Ganninger's recommendation (2011), we weighted the data, controlling for the design effect. The design weight corrects for unequal selection probabilities and thus makes the sample more representative. The hypotheses were tested with maximum likelihood with robust standard errors (MLR) because this estimator is recommended when sampling weights are applied. In order to improve the interpretability of the intercepts, we mean-centered all continuous variables. In the first model, we tested the fixed and random effect of self-enhancement values on hierarchical status across the 29 countries. In the following models, we subsequently tested whether the random slopes can be explained by cultural values. Using Preacher, Curran, and Bauer's (2006) online application, we calculated the region of significance and graphed the cross-level interactions for the lower- and upper-observed values of the moderators.

3. Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations of the study variables are presented in Table 1. Table 2 shows the results of the multilevel regressions. In support of Hypothesis 1, self-enhancement values are positively associated with hierarchical status, holding the control variables constant (self-enhancement: $B = .13$, $p < .001$). The model can account for 8% of variance in hierarchical status at the individual level. Furthermore, the results indicate that the relationship between self-enhancement values and hierarchical status varies across the 29 countries. The variance of the regression coefficients for self-enhancement is estimated as .01, which is significant at $p < .05$.

As hypothesized, the cross-level interactions of hierarchy and mastery values are negative. Whereas the interaction with hierarchy values is statistically significant, the interaction including mastery does not significantly predict hierarchical status beyond the main effects (hierarchy: $B = -.13$, $p = .05$, mastery: $B = -.22$, $p = .16$). As an insignificant interaction coefficient cannot always be taken as evidence for the absence of a substantively meaningful moderation effect (e.g., Brambor, Clark, & Golder, 2006), we additionally estimated over what range of the moderator the effect of self-enhancement is significantly different from zero. The region of significance for the self-enhancement slope indicates that self-enhancement was positively associated with hierarchical status in most countries, except in those cultures that greatly value hierarchy (i.e., Bulgaria, Russian Federation, Turkey, and Ukraine) and mastery (Greece). The model including hierarchy accounts for 27% of the variance in the self-enhancement slope. Thus, we find partial support for H2 (see Fig. 1).

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and correlations of study variables.

	Means	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 Self-enhancement	−.53	.72	1.00										
2 Hierarchical status	.89	1.66	.02**	1.00									
3 Hierarchy values	2.11	.35	.14**	−.04**	1.00								
4 Egalitarianism values	4.76	.31	−.21**	.09**	−.54**	1.00							
5 Mastery values	3.90	.14	.18**	−.01*	.35**	−.03**	1.00						
6 Harmony values	4.18	.27	−.12**	−.04**	−.67**	.25**	−.48**	1.00					
7 Age	43.34	13.56	−.20**	.09**	−.01	−.05**	−.01*	.03**	1.00				
8 Gender	.54	.50	−.11**	−.13**	.01*	−.04**	.02**	−.03**	.03**	1.00			
9 Education	12.88	3.69	.03**	.22**	−.10**	.04**	−.07**	−.04**	−.16**	.03**	1.00		
10 Working hours	37.35	9.82	.09**	.07**	.14**	−.21**	.02**	.01	.06**	−.18**	−.08**	1.00	
11 GDP per capita	33,186. 55	21,012. 08	−.22**	.13**	−.55**	.76**	−.17**	.17**	−.02**	−.02**	.15**	−.25**	1.00

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .001$.

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Table 2
Results of multilevel regressions.

	Model 1 (random slope)		Model 2 (hierarchy)		Model 3 (egalitarianism)		Model 4 (mastery)		Model 5 (harmony)	
	Coeff.	(s.e.)	Coeff.	(s.e.)	Coeff.	(s.e.)	Coeff.	(s.e.)	Coeff.	(s.e)
Intercept	1.05**	(.07)	1.06**	(.05)	1.06**	(.05)	1.06**	(.05)	1.06**	(.05)
Gender[a]	−.37**	(.04)	−.37**	(.04)	−.37**	(.04)	−.37**	(.04)	−.37**	(.04)
Age	.02**	(.00)	.02**	(.00)	.02**	(.00)	.02**	(.00)	.02**	(.00)
Years of education	.10**	(.01)	.10**	(.01)	.10**	(.01)	.10**	(.01)	.10**	(.01)
Agriculture	−.16*	(.07)	−.15*	(.07)	−.15*	(.07)	−.15*	(.07)	−.15*	(.07)
Economy	.25**	(.04)	.25**	(.04)	.25**	(.04)	.25**	(.04)	.25**	(.04)
Education	−.18**	(.05)	−.18**	(.05)	−.18**	(.05)	−.18**	(.05)	−.18**	(.05)
Engineering	.14**	(.03)	.15**	(.03)	.15**	(.03)	.14**	(.03)	.14**	(.03)
Media	.21**	(.05)	.21**	(.05)	.21**	(.05)	.21**	(.05)	.21**	(.05)
Safety	.70**	(.12)	.70**	(.12)	.70**	(.12)	.70**	(.12)	.70**	(.12)
Working hours	.02**	(.00)	.02**	(.00)	.02**	(.00)	.02**	(.00)	.02**	(.00)
Self-enhancement	.13**	(.02)	.13**	(.02)	.13**	(.02)	.13**	(.02)	.13**	(.02)
GDP per capita			.23**	(.05)	.16*	(.06)	.20**	(.05)	.21**	(.04)
Hierarchy			.18	(.14)						
Egalitarianism					.18	(.17)				
Mastery							.17	(.34)		
Harmony									−.37*	(.15)
Self-enhancement*Hierarchy			−.13*	(.06)						
Self-enhancement*Egalitarianism					.15*	(.07)				
Self-enhancement*Mastery							−.22	(.16)		
Self-enhancement*Harmony									.03	(.10)
Random intercept	.09**	(.02)	.05**	(.01)	.05**	(.01)	.05**	(.01)	.05**	(.01)
Random slope SE	.01*	(.00)	.01*	(.00)	.01*	(.00)	.01*	(.00)	.01*	(.00)

[a] Reference category was male.
* $p<.05$.
** $p<.001$; regression coefficients are all unstandardized.

The cross-level interaction of egalitarianism values was estimated as .15 and is significant at $p=.02$. The region of significance for the self-enhancement slope indicates that self-enhancement does not significantly predict hierarchical status in countries with very low egalitarianism values (Bulgaria, Latvia, Ukraine; see also Fig. 2). This model accounts for 18% of the variance in the self-enhancement slope. In contrast to our hypothesis, harmony does not significantly moderate the relationship between self-enhancement and hierarchical status ($B=.03$, $p=.76$). Thus, H3 is partially supported.

4. Discussion

The results of this study advance our knowledge about the role of individual differences in shaping objective career success across countries. In line with previous research on values and objective career success (e.g., Frieze et al., 2006), self-enhancement values were positively associated with hierarchical status. Confirming our hypotheses derived from trait-activation theory, our results showed that if the culture did not provide strong cues for self-enhancement related behavior, self-enhancement values mattered most for understanding variations in hierarchical status. In this respect, the relationship between self-enhancement values and hierarchical status was strongest in countries that are low in hierarchy (e.g., Finland) and high in egalitarianism (e.g., Belgium).

Although the positive relationship held for most of the 29 countries included in this article, it was non-significant in countries whose cultural values provided very high external rewards for self-enhancement related behavior — namely, in countries with a very high emphasis on hierarchy and mastery, and a low emphasis on egalitarianism. Within Europe, Greece places the highest importance on mastery, and according to our results, it is in this country where self-enhancement values do not predict who makes it to the top (for an overview of cultural values within Europe, consult Sagiv & Schwartz, 2007). In countries such as the UK – with a lower but nevertheless high emphasis on mastery – self-enhancement values were still significantly related to hierarchical status. Consequently, our results are in line with previous research showing that ambitious career aspirations predict objective career success in Anglo-Saxon countries (Howard & Bray, 1988; Tharenou, 2001). In addition, self-enhancement values did not explain variation in hierarchical status in countries with a very high emphasis on hierarchy — like Turkey or some Eastern European countries. Given that both hierarchy and mastery cultures induce self-enhancement, the advantage of individuals who personally value self-enhancement vanishes because most other members of the culture display such a behavior owing to the cultural cues present in the society. Thus in these countries, self-enhancement values explained no variation in hierarchical status.

In contrast to the negative cross-level interaction of hierarchy values, egalitarianism synergistically interacted with self-enhancement values to predict hierarchical status. Thus, the advantage of having high self-enhancement values increases the more countries value egalitarianism. Countries that greatly emphasize egalitarianism do not induce people to pursue self-enhancement related behavior because the exercising of power and authority is not congruent with its norms. Consequently, people with high self-enhancement values – that is, whose overarching goal is to achieve authority and power in their lives – have more opportunities to climb up the corporate ladder if the remaining members of the culture have lower aspirations for power

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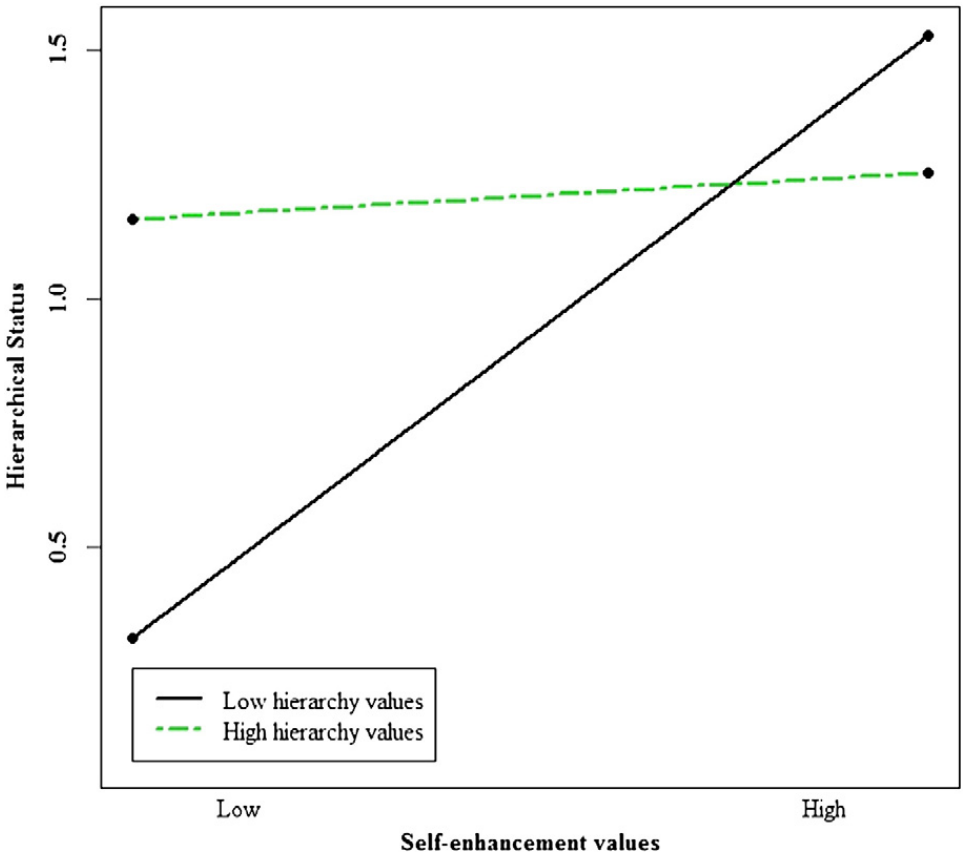

Fig. 1. Regression lines for hierarchical status by self-enhancement for two levels of hierarchy values.

and authority. In egalitarian cultures, they are more likely to stand out from the remaining members of the culture, and their self-enhancement values are more likely to present a comparative advantage, which helps them to achieve hierarchical status.

In contrast to our hypothesis, harmony values did not moderate the relationship between self-enhancement and hierarchical status. A potential explanation is that harmony values present only a small negative relationship with self-enhancement values. This suggests that cultures that highly value harmony do not substantially differ from low harmony cultures to the extent that they dissuade citizens to demonstrate self-enhancement behavior. In this respect, low harmony cultures are unlikely to provide a sufficiently "strong situation" to reduce the impact of individual values.

Although the results obtained from the region of significance analysis suggest that self-enhancement is only positively associated with hierarchical status as long as countries' mastery values are not very high, the omnibus test of the interaction term was non-significant. It is possible that high mastery values do not create a sufficiently strong situation to restrict the effect of self-enhancement on hierarchical status. In mastery cultures, achievement is more highly valued than power and authority. It is hence conceivable that citizens of mastery cultures are less encouraged to attain hierarchical status in their careers than citizens of hierarchy cultures. In mastery cultures, individuals might express their desire for achievement, not necessarily by climbing up the corporate ladder, but by pursuing less hierarchical career paths — for instance, by becoming scientists or professors. For this reason, future research is necessary to examine the moderating role of mastery values on the relationship between personality and other indicators of career success, such as occupational status. Additionally, it is also conceivable that there are further macro variables that explain career success across cultures. In this respect, the impact of self-enhancement values might also depend on the career opportunities available in a country and on the extent to which a culture allows for social mobility. Besides analyzing cultural values, future research might want to look at the moderating role of national institutions (e.g., economic, legal, and political) to improve our understanding of when individual values matter for explaining variations in hierarchical status.

4.1. Theoretical contributions

Our findings extend the related theory in several ways. First, our results showed that the cultural context matters for understanding where individual values are associated with hierarchical status. In line with trait-activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000), self-enhancement values predicted hierarchical status only in countries that did not provide very high external rewards for self-enhancement. In this respect, our study showed that the national culture is a boundary condition that affects the relationship between individual values and hierarchical status.

Second, our results suggest that it was the complementary person-culture fit that explained wherein self-enhancement values were most important for predicting individual differences in hierarchical status. This finding is in contrast to the common tenet in

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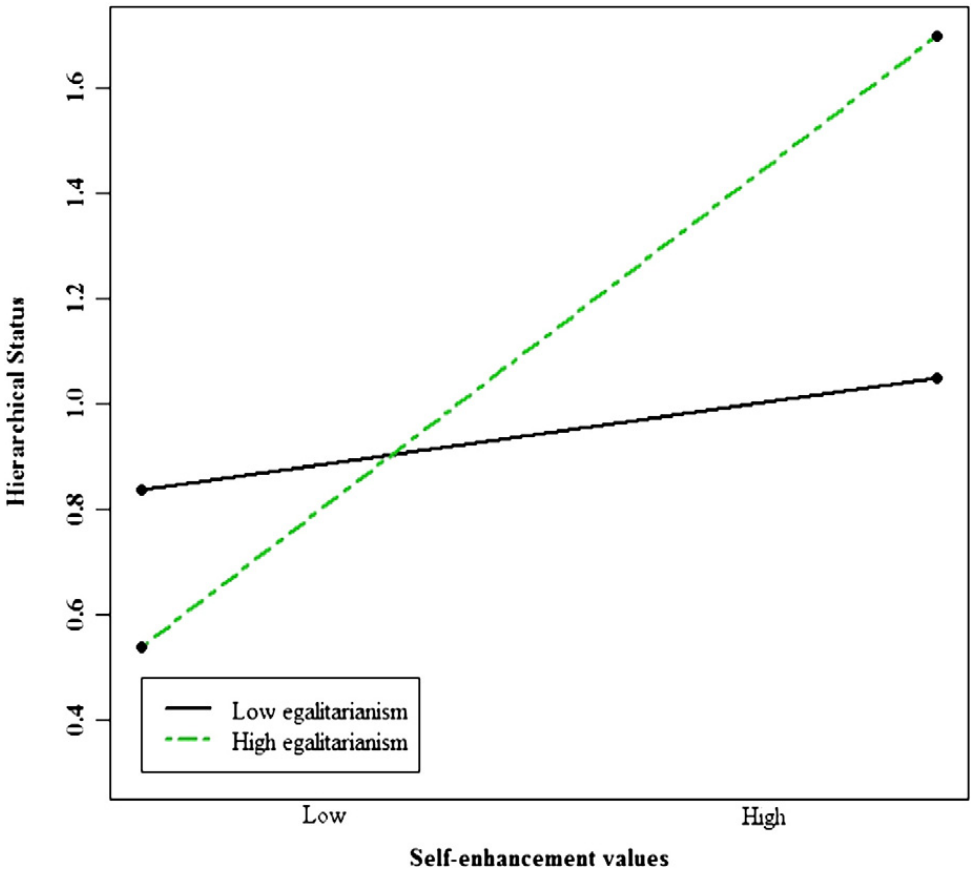

Fig. 2. Regression lines for hierarchical status by self-enhancement for two levels of egalitarianism.

the career literature that stresses the advantages of a supplementary person-environment fit. Although we are not aware of any research that analyzes a complementary person-culture fit at the country level, research has started to examine the relative advantages of individuals who have opposite personality characteristics in teams and in supervisor-subordinate dyads (Glomb & Welsh, 2005; Pierro, Presaghi, Higgins, Klein, & Kruglanski, 2012). Future research will be required to further elucidate when dissimilarity provides advantages to individuals' careers. The complementary person-culture fit also points to the frog-pond effect (Davis, 1966), which refers to the relative advantage that individuals have if they stand out from the remaining people in their environment. Specifically, the frog pond model posits that a large frog is perceived to be larger if it lives in a pond with small frogs than if it lives in a pond with large frogs. Although the frog-pond model initially referred to academic performance in educational settings, the model has recently also been applied to cross-cultural research (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000). The cultural frog pond effect describes the "difference between an individual's values, attitudes, and beliefs and the dominant [cultural] group" (Gelfand, Leslie, & Fehr, 2008, p. 502). A more thorough focus on the cultural frog pond model might provide intriguing insights into the literature of career success in that it can improve our understanding of the absolute and relative advantages that people with certain individual differences experience in their careers.

Third, this study makes a theoretical contribution to cross-cultural career research by discussing and empirically testing the trait-activation theory as a framework that can link individual and country-level variables to career success. This study therefore goes beyond previous career studies that have only described rather than predicted intercultural differences in career phenomena (Thomas & Inkson, 2007).

4.2. Practical implications

This study offers practical implications both for individuals' career management and for the recruitment and development policies of global companies. The results suggest that individuals should be aware that the decision to remain or leave their home countries is likely to have an impact on their objective career success. In this respect, individuals living in countries with elevated hierarchy values might not experience career advantages resulting from high self-enhancement values. In countries with a low emphasis on hierarchy values, their self-enhancement values would provide a comparative advantage, resulting in higher probabilities of obtaining hierarchical status. The findings of this study also have practical implications for organizations' global HR practices. Expatriates or employees in global subsidiaries could be selected depending on whether their values tend to be highly rewarded in the specific cultural context. Furthermore, global companies that design development programs for their employees could take into account that individuals are more likely to be successful in certain cultures than in others.

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4.3. Limitations

As with most studies, the limitations must be acknowledged. Despite the strengths of the ESS for conducting cross-cultural research in terms of its multi-national sample and strict probability sampling, the study also suffers from a number of limitations. First, our study is limited to the extent that it analyzes only one indicator of objective career success. We therefore recommend that future studies extend this research by examining the joint effects of individual and cultural values on other indicators of objective career success, such as occupational status and salary. As with all cross-sectional surveys, we cannot infer causality. Specifically, we cannot infer that values caused career advancement. However, it is important to note that value research assumes that values cause behavior and work outcomes (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003; Schwartz, 1992) and that values are relatively stable and do not change much over time (Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz, 2011). Although we used multisource data, this study may suffer from common method bias because the individual values and the composite measure of hierarchical status were extracted from the same data source. Furthermore, we could not control for other personality variables that have previously been related to objective career success, such as the Big Five traits. Although personality traits and values are conceived as distinct concepts (Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, & Knafo, 2002) that explain a unique part of variation in work outcomes (Arthaud-Day, Rode, & Turnley, 2012), it remains to be examined how much variance values can explain beyond personality traits. In this respect, research has shown that ambition – a concept closely related to self-enhancement values – is a more proximal predictor of career success than personality traits and that it partially mediates the effect of the Big Five on career success (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012).

5. Conclusions

This study points out that both individual and cultural values are important for understanding individual differences in hierarchical status. Whereas individuals with high self-enhancement values in most of the 29 countries were more likely to attain hierarchical status, this effect varied across countries and could partially be explained by cultural value orientations. Individuals valuing self-enhancement values were more likely to report hierarchical status in egalitarian countries and in countries with a low emphasis on hierarchy values.

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