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Is career what you make it? A critical review of research on social origin and career success

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ABSTRACT

In a business environment characterized by labor shortages, the under-utilization of existing potential is a problem for both companies and governments. Nevertheless, the development of people from disadvantaged social origin is limited. Research on the intergenerational transmission of social disadvantage consistently shows that access to higher education is still highly stratified. Less is known about whether origin-based inequalities persist or can be offset within the occupational context. Based on a systematic review of 59 studies, we identify the career success (CS) indicators that have been examined in this growing research literature, describe the various forms that the social origin–CS relationship can assume, and identify explanatory mechanisms for the discrepancies in the career trajectories of individuals from different social backgrounds. Based on a critical analysis of existing studies, we show that many areas of the above research themes remain underexplored, despite recent significant advancements, and provide directions for future research. This includes recommendations for the choice of indicators for measuring CS, including the determination of reference persons in future studies and for closing research gaps in previous research designs regarding the connection between social origin and CS. Moreover, we provide suggestions for taking into account further essential factors on an individual, organizational, and contextual level to explain the social origin–CS relationship.

1. Introduction

Researchers have been drawing attention for many years to the fact that a person's socioeconomic level at birth—their social origin—determines their access to valuable resources, which results in an unequal distribution of life opportunities across society (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Saunders, 1994). Nonetheless, individuals possess the capacity to outgrow their initial status and move between levels of the social hierarchy, a phenomenon known as social mobility (Pitesa & Pillutla, 2019; Saunders, 1994). Previous research has largely focused on chances to move up the hierarchy in the educational context (see e.g. Bukodi et al., 2017; Goldthorpe & Bukodi, 2018). While education is an essential prerequisite for social mobility, Pitesa and Pillutla (2019) argue that it is in the occupational context that socioeconomic progress occurs, allowing initial inequalities to be offset. This progress is reflected in employees' career advancement and resulting career success (CS) as an indicator of social mobility (Pitesa & Pillutla, 2019).

While societies strive for the ideal of meritocracy, in which rewards are distributed exclusively based on effort and ability, and “irrelevant

factors” such as social class, gender, and ethnicity are ignored (Son Hing et al., 2011, p. 433), studies have found a strong link between disadvantaged family origin and low educational attainment (e.g. Bukodi et al., 2017; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2013; Goldthorpe & Bukodi, 2018). The question arises of whether social origin also remains impactful once a person starts working and consequently predetermines CS throughout their working life. On the one hand, as family background is usually not disclosed to an employer, it may be possible for an individual to avoid stagnating at their parents' socioeconomic level, especially if they reach educational levels equivalent to those of their more privileged counterparts or receive organizational support. On the other hand, there might be factors, such as class-specific habitus (Fang, 2019; Hartmann, 2000), that cause organizations to disadvantage people of a lower origin and thus to perpetuate inequalities (cf. Friedman et al., 2015). In a business environment characterized by labor shortages, the under-utilization of existing potential is a problem for both companies and governments.

Although a vast body of academic work on social origin and CS exists, competing perspectives can be identified in the literature that have,

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to date, not been systematically examined (Stapf & Andresen, 2021). First, there are diverging views on what are the *most relevant CS indicators* to explain and predict social mobility. Social mobility is traditionally measured by status (Isakov, 2021). While occupational status is a typical form of CS, it remains anchored in the traditional career paradigm (Dries et al., 2008). As a result of this narrow focus, the research risks not fully reflecting reality, where there has been a shift from traditional to contemporary careers and an accompanying change in the understanding of CS, moving away from objective criteria and toward subjective ones (Dries et al., 2008). Traditional careers involve a linear progression in the organizational hierarchy, with success typically measured by “weighing a person’s career against societal norms” concerning status, salary, job level, or promotions (Spurk et al., 2019, p. 36). Organizational changes such as delayering, downsizing, or outsourcing combined with less job security have meant that in contemporary careers individuals are more guided by their own desires, are more mobile in terms of occupation and organization, and aim for personally meaningful career outcomes, such as job or career satisfaction (Spurk et al., 2019). To date, there has been no systematic review of the full range and prevalence of CS indicators used to study social mobility.

Second, although the literature distinguishes between CS indicators for traditional and contemporary careers, opinions diverge on whether the two categories also demand different *theoretical explanations* of social mobility. Different disciplines, such as sociology, management, and psychology, focus on different CS indicators. While sociologists argue for a focus on indicators such as status and income and concentrate on *social and organizational mechanisms* for achieving them (Isakov, 2021), management and psychology researchers argue that these indicators should be supplemented by personally significant CS indicators, which they claim are better able to explain the achievement of CS via *individual mechanisms* (Spurk et al., 2019). Due to different strands of research being separated by discipline, we lack a clear overall picture of whether social origin is equally correlated with different CS indicators and with objective CS (OCS) and subjective CS (SCS), how any differences in this regard can be explained, and what mechanisms have been explored in previous studies and how they work.

These two competing perspectives hinder a systematic, structured, and comprehensive approach to studying the social origin–CS relationship. To address this issue, we conducted a systematic review of empirical studies on social origin and CS published between the years 1964 and 2020 in order to address the following research questions. First, how can we develop a broad conceptual framework for analyzing the social origin–CS relationship in organizations that examines social origin (antecedent), CS indicators (outcomes), and mechanisms that explain this relationship in organizations (explanatory factors)? Second, what are the directions for future research and its implications?

Examining these questions is relevant for several reasons. One possible byproduct of social inequalities researchers primarily focusing on education (e.g. Bukodi et al., 2017; Goldthorpe & Bukodi, 2018) and the increasing proportion of highly educated people from a disadvantaged background (Blaskó & Róbert, 2007) is the impression that nowadays social inequalities are increasingly being mitigated and neutralized. However, for a sound argument, it is vital to consider the actual achievements over individuals’ professional careers *after* occupational entry. In order to build solid knowledge about careers as a function of social origin, research must proceed differently in the future as we will show. With this knowledge, human resource management (HRM) can work toward eliminating inequalities based on social origin, especially with regard to employees’ recruitment, selection, development, career management, and the management of diversity, in order to disrupt unrecognized mechanisms of power inequalities across generations and to leverage workers’ full potential.

A key purpose of this review is to bring attention to a topic that was not in the mainstream discussion and research until recently, despite being mentioned as new research agenda in management (Amis et al.,

2021). Pitesa and Pillutla (2019) have recently introduced an organizational view on social mobility into management literature by reviewing dynamics within organizations that restrict social mobility. However, their study relies merely on “suggestive evidence” (Pitesa & Pillutla, 2019, p. 756) that lower social origin is negatively correlated with CS, which they understand solely in terms of income. The present systematic review contributes to the literature by providing a comprehensive overview of current research, integrating the wide range of previously disconnected studies from different disciplines in order to reveal patterns with respect to three research themes: in the choice of CS indicators (outcomes), in the social origin–CS relationship, and in the investigation of explanatory factors. On this basis, research gaps are identified, and an agenda for future studies is suggested. This gives more structure and clarity to a heterogeneous field of research and reveals possible differences in the origin effect on OCS, which is typically associated with traditional careers, and SCS, which is typically associated with contemporary careers. Based on a synopsis of the substantive findings on the social origin–CS relationship and critical observations regarding the research designs used in previous studies, we suggest some avenues for future research. Finally, building on organizational practices that have been found to undermine career advancement for employees of disadvantaged origin, thereby preventing employees’ full potential from being harnessed and limiting companies’ effectiveness, we outline practical implications for future intervention opportunities that may contribute significantly to more effective organizational career management. We also aim to show how organizational perspectives on this topic can be better integrated into management approaches.

The remainder of this literature review is organized as follows: After explaining key terminology regarding social origin and careers and clarifying the methodological approach, we systematically set out findings on the CS indicators studied in relation to social origin, the relationship between social origin and CS, as well as the determinants of this relationship, in order to answer our research questions. In the subsequent discussion, we outline research gaps and avenues for future work.

2. Definition of key terms

2.1. Social origin and social mobility

Social origin describes the social circumstances of the families in which individuals grew up (Blickle et al., 2010), i.e., the layer of the social hierarchy in which they were raised, with the availability of resources and privilege decreasing from the top layer to the bottom layer (Saunders, 1994). The division of society is reflected in socioeconomic disparities in terms of occupation, income, and education. Individuals’ socioeconomic origin is assessed by widely differing measures (Crompton, 2012) that refer to parental occupation, mainly focusing on its prestige, its socioeconomic status (that is, the income and education typically attached to specific occupations), or the class associated with it (Ganzeboom & Treiman, 2003). In this study, we treat social origin as a relative construct, characterized by the amount of economic resources respondents had when they were still financially dependent on their parents.

Numerous studies have examined how social origin is related to educational and labor market outcomes (Breen & Jonsson, 2005). Blau and Duncan (1967) regard a person’s social origin as a crucial predictor of the type and duration of education that they complete. This educational attainment, in turn, determines CS (Blau & Duncan, 1967). However, previous research has mainly focused on the relationship between social origin and education, and found that individuals from disadvantaged families face substantial deficits in their educational attainment (e.g. Bukodi et al., 2017; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2013; Goldthorpe & Bukodi, 2018). An implicit assumption is that the attainment of higher levels of education by people from disadvantaged families is associated with a decrease in the total social origin effect on

CS (e.g. Passaretta et al., 2018).

So what a person can achieve in terms of education and CS also depends on social origin, according to studies. *Social mobility* is the movement of individuals in social position (Müller & Pollak, 2015). If parents simply pass on their conditions to their children (Sullivan et al., 2018), and thus the children’s social position is completely determined by social origin, there is no intergenerational social mobility (Pitesa & Pillutla, 2019; Saunders, 1994). In contrast, if the children’s social position is independent of their social origin and they can achieve positions regardless of their background characteristics, there is high intergenerational social mobility. These shifts are usually the consequence of personal effort and achievements, such as higher education and career advancement relative to their parents’ status (Saunders, 1994). The present literature review focuses on the intergenerational social mobility as indicated by the relationship between social origin and CS.

2.2. Career success

Arthur et al.’s (1989, p. 8) conceptualization of a *career* as the “evolving sequence of a person’s work experiences over time” emphasizes that careers are manifested in the relationship between individuals and organizations, which are the “providers of official position.” Thus, employers play a role in achieving CS, defined as the “positive psychological or work-related outcomes or achievements one has accumulated as a result of one’s work experiences” (Judge et al., 1995, p. 486).

The shift from the traditional to the contemporary career paradigm has seen researchers distinguish between *objective* and *subjective* CS (Dries et al., 2008). OCS refers to occupational attainment that is measurable by externally observable criteria, such as salary and number of promotions. By contrast, SCS refers to the personal perception of one’s occupational achievements. Typical measures are job and career satisfaction (Judge et al., 1995).

OCS and SCS can be evaluated either in terms of the progress someone has made toward their personal standards and aspirations (*self-referent*) or relative to the attainments of others or the internalization of others’ expectations (*other-referent*) (Heslin, 2005a). Intergenerational social mobility is consequently to be measured on the CS in comparison to the parents as “other-referents”.

3. Methods

We conducted a systematic literature review following the SPAR-4-SLR protocol that consists of the following three stages (Paul et al., 2021).

Assembling. We set the following inclusion criteria: Studies needed to: (1) either examine the direct relationship between social origin and one or more CS indicators or a career-relevant variable, or to use a relevant mediation variable; (2) have been published between 1967, the initial publication year of Blau and Duncan’s landmark study evaluating the stratification process, and 2020; (3) be peer-reviewed, in order to guarantee a high quality standard; (4) be written in English; and (5) come from a relevant scientific discipline, namely sociology, management, or psychology.

In the literature research, we proceeded according to the recommendations of the methodological literature for systematic literature research for the purpose of quality assurance (Bramer et al., 2017; Harari et al., 2020; Young et al., 2021): (1) More than one database was used. (2) First, subject-specific databases were searched that related to the disciplines of sociology, management, and psychology according to the research questions (see criterion 5 above). We chose the electronic databases EBSCO Business Source Ultimate, ERIC, SocINDEX, and APA PsycInfo. (3) Only in a second step were the interdisciplinary databases Google Scholar and Microsoft Academic additionally consulted in order to achieve more comprehensive data collection. As these have a broader coverage but less depth, they are therefore searched in addition to and not instead of the specialist databases.

The search string consisted of three thematic blocks—social origin, CS, and organizational context—each connected with the Boolean operator AND. The synonyms used within these three blocks were connected with OR operators (see Table 1). The initial search of titles and abstracts resulted in 8527 hits. After applying filters for timeframe (criterion 2 above), publication type (criterion 3 above), and language (criterion 4 above), 4833 articles were remained. Removal of duplicates reduced the sample to 3497 articles.

Arranging. We generated excerpts from all studies, distilled underlying concepts and relevant aspects, and grouped these into categories. The categories were then systematized using an AEO (Antecedents, Explanatory Factors, and Outcomes) format as an organizing framework, adapted from Paul and Benito (2018), to provide an overview of empirical findings on the CS of individuals (outcomes) as a function of their social background (antecedent), including individual and organizational factors that explain this relationship (explanatory factors).

Finally, to meet the criterion 1 above, our corpus was further refined by scanning the titles and abstracts, transferring them into Citavi (a program for reference management), and then reading them to screen them against the previously identified content criteria (AEO), resulting in 98 articles. Subsequently, the full texts of the remaining 98 studies were downloaded, and this screening for relevant content was repeated for the full texts of the remaining studies with an outcome of 49 suitable studies. Finally, forward and backward citation enhanced the corpus by another 10 relevant articles. This iteratively applied process resulted in a final sample of 59 relevant studies (see Appendix).

Assessing. The insights of this domain-specific, structured theme-based review (Paul & Criado, 2020) were presented in a structured form (see Figs. 1 and 2).

4. Relationship between social origin and career success

4.1. Career success indicators studied in relation to social origin

CS was examined in 50 out of the 59 papers. The coding process generated six CS indicators, four for OCS and two for SCS (see Fig. 1).

4.1.1. Objective career success

The category *monetary success* (54% of articles) encompasses variables such as income (e.g. Grätz & Pollak, 2016), earnings (e.g. Ford & Umbricht, 2018), and salary (e.g. Pfeffer, 1977a). The category *hierarchical rank* (12% of articles), i.e., an employee’s position within their organization, was measured by membership of specific high-ranked

Table 1
Search string.

Thematic blocks	Search term
Social origin	(“social origin” OR “socioeconomic origin” OR “social background” OR “socioeconomic background” OR “social status” OR “socioeconomic status” OR “social class” OR “socioeconomic class” OR “social inequality” OR “socioeconomic inequality” OR “social stratification” OR “socioeconomic stratification” OR “parental class” OR “parental background” OR “family background” OR “disadvantage#” OR “underprivileged”)
Career success - Objective - Subjective	AND (“career#” OR “career success” OR “occupational success” OR “social mobility” OR “mobility” OR “salary” OR “income” OR “wage” OR “earnings” OR “hierarch*” OR “job level” OR “rank” OR “promotion#” OR “prestige” OR “status” OR “class” OR “satisfaction” OR “financial success” OR “wealth” OR “work–life balance” OR “learning” OR “development” OR “impact” OR “relationship” OR “environment”)
Organi-zational reference	AND (“organilatio*” OR “career management” OR “human resource#” OR “worker#” OR “employee#” OR “personnel”)

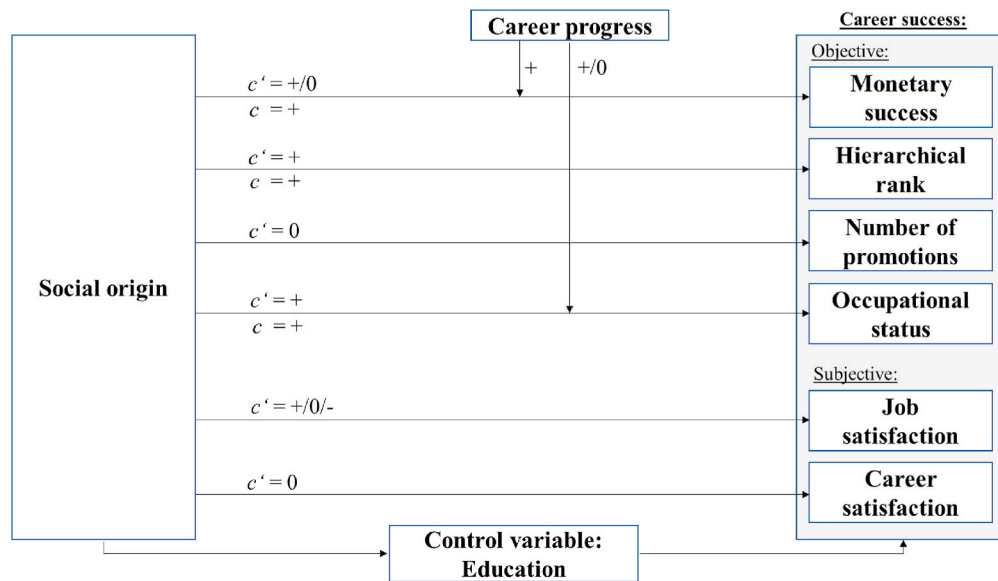


Fig. 1. Relationships between social origin and OCS and SCS in current research

(Note: c = total effect (OC); c' = direct effect (OCIE); + = significant positive relationship; 0 = no significant relationship; – = significant negative relationship).

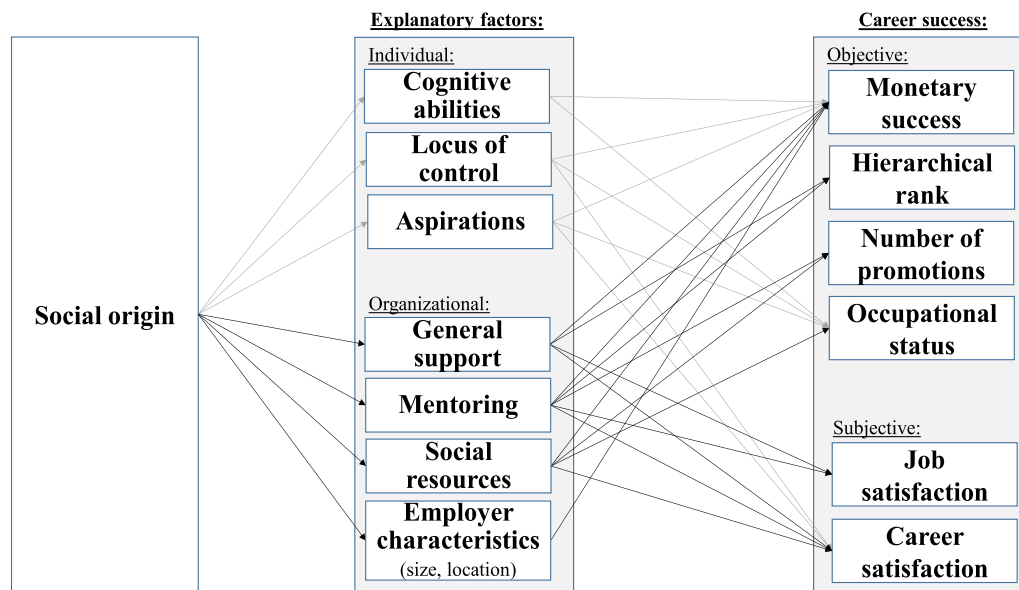


Fig. 2. Individual and organizational factors mediating the social origin–CS relationship in current research

(Note: All paths are positive. Gray arrows = individual-level explanatory factors; black arrows = organizational-level explanatory factors).

Table 2

CS criteria used in the corpus.

		OCS (i.e. based on factual data)	SCS (i.e. based on individuals' beliefs/judgments)
➡ Starting point of intergenerational social mobility research	Other-referent domain (i.e. relative to parents/father)	- Monetary success - Hierarchical rank - Number of promotions - Occupational status	NONE
	Self-referent domain (i.e. relative to personal standards/aspirations)	NONE	- Job satisfaction - Career satisfaction

groups (e.g. Hartmann, 2000), number of subordinates (e.g. Steyrer et al., 2005), or on a scale from bottom to top of the hierarchy (e.g. Blickle et al., 2009). Two studies (4% of articles) evaluated the *number of promotions* as a form of career achievement. *Occupational status* (54% of articles), i.e., a person's position in society derived from their occupation (Ganzeboom & Treiman, 2003), comprises variables of prestige, socioeconomic status, and class, all of which are used to assign individuals to a certain rank based on the desirability of their profession (Strenze, 2007). All OCS measurements are made in social comparison with the parents/father (other-referential criteria) based on statistical data (cf. Table 2).

4.1.2. Subjective career success

The category *job satisfaction* (12% of articles) was usually self-rated, either as a general category (e.g. Colarelli et al., 1987) or broken down into various subaspects of job satisfaction (e.g. Dinovitzer & Garth, 2007). The category *career satisfaction* (10% of studies) describes the satisfaction employees “derive from intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of their careers, including pay, advancement, and developmental opportunities” (Judge et al., 1995, p. 487). In contrast to job satisfaction, career satisfaction goes beyond a person's current job and considers their general occupational track (Blickle et al., 2009; Judge et al., 1995). SCS was measured solely by personal standards or aspirations (self-referent); other-referent criteria are omitted (cf. Table 2).

4.1.3. Observations on the career success indicators studied in relation to social origin (Research theme 1)

On the basis of this result, three observations can be made for the first research theme about what and how we know:

(1.1) *Dominance of studies on OCS over ones on SCS.* The narrow range of six indicators shows that researchers seem to assume that people define their CS in much the same way. Moreover, research on the social origin–CS relationship predominantly assesses OCS (92% of studies), with monetary aspects and occupational status being strongly prevalent at 27 studies (54%) each, and SCS only being considered in some studies (16% of studies). Changes over time are also noticeable. In the studies after 2009 (1) only OCS was measured, but no longer SCS (with one exception), and (2) the selected indicators for OCS have since been limited to only two, namely monetary success and occupational status. Thus, the differentiation of research with respect to CS has been significantly reduced over the years and runs counter to the trend in careers theory toward a greater focus on SCS.

The dominance of OCS has advantages and disadvantages. Heslin (2005a) argues that benefits of objective indicators can include being readily available from existing records (e.g., household panels), standardized, efficient to collect, and free from self-serving and common-method variance, if collected by means other than self-reporting. However, they can also be contaminated (i.e., influenced by factors beyond the individual's control, such as labor market conditions or discrimination) as well as be deficient since other OCS criteria can play a role (e.g., number of patent developments). Moreover, OCS is better at mapping success in traditional careers. Hence, as a result of the dominance of OCS, the career concerns of the increasing number of workers with contemporary careers are not well represented; these concerns are better reflected by SCS. Numerous career scholars have shown the incremental value of also considering SCS. Briscoe et al. (2021), for example, emphasize the need to determine whether people considered to have financial success are also *satisfied* with their career.

Furthermore, only 8% of articles assess *both* OCS and SCS, albeit empirically this approach would be supported by the relatively low correlation between them, as well as evidence that they have different antecedents (e.g. Spurk et al., 2019). It is therefore critical that OCS outcome variables remain prevalent in research on the association between social origin and CS.

(1.2) *Insufficient SCS indicators.* Current studies measure SCS exclusively in terms of job and career satisfaction. This runs the risk of failing

to adequately capture SCS. SCS involves reactions to actual and expected career-related achievements over a broader timeframe than immediate job satisfaction (Heslin, 2005a), and the career satisfaction scales used in our corpus are not necessarily sufficient to validly assess the SCS of each respondent. For example, a typical item to measure career satisfaction is satisfaction with career advancement, which is becoming less relevant in contemporary careers. Such items thus risk increasing the measurement error. Recent research shows that people conceptualize and evaluate their CS in a wider range of areas (e.g., work–life balance, impact, learning, and development) and suggests that a more refined measurement of SCS should be adopted (e.g. Briscoe et al., 2021).

(1.3) *Omission of other-referent SCS.* While all studies on OCS use other-referent criteria, there is a methodological inconsistency in that only self-referent criteria are used in the studies on SCS (cf. Table 2). This approach may be deficient because in this particular context of intergenerational social mobility, the measurement of SCS by means of a social comparison with a person's parents/father (i.e., other-referent criteria) is essential. Moreover, the assessment of whether career attainments lead to a sense of CS is likely to depend on the standards against which they are assessed and might vary substantially (Heslin, 2005a). For example, an individual might be subjectively dissatisfied with their CS evaluated relative to personal standards (for instance, they might be aiming for a higher financial success, or want more learning and development), but very satisfied when assessed against their father's attainments or the internalization of their parents' expectations (for instance, they may have a salary far beyond the level their father attained, or exceed parental expectations in terms of their education and qualifications). Research shows that the evaluation of other-referent success can explain additional variance in the evaluation of overall SCS beyond the self-referent criteria (Heslin, 2005a). The studies in our corpus do not provide a systematic theoretical rationale or empirical justification for the omission of other-referent criteria.

4.2. Relationship between social origin (antecedent) and career success (outcomes)

We included studies on the “total origin effect” (OC) between social origin and CS (measuring the total extent to which CS is affected by social origin as a predictor variable, including the indirect effect through education), as well as ones on the “direct origin effect” (OCIE) for individuals *with similar education* (quantifying the influence of social origin on CS that is not mediated by education). Education is assumed to be a central mechanism (mediator) to compensate for inequalities in CS based on social origin. In this respect, it is important to see what more influence social origin continues to have on CS despite equal education (see Fig. 1).

4.2.1. Monetary success

Almost all studies found a positive *total* association (OC) between social origin and monetary success, implying that individuals with a higher social origin derive substantially greater financial benefits (Canada: Corak & Heisz, 1999; UK: Laurison & Friedman, 2016; Schoon & Polek, 2011; USA: Corcoran et al., 1992; Damian et al., 2015; no relationship in Netherlands: Graaf & Flap, 1988; Spain: Requena, 1991). However, the disadvantages can be partially (Chile: Chiappa & Mejias, 2019; USA: Ford & Umbricht, 2018; Rumberger, 2010; Torche, 2011; Witteveen & Attewell, 2017; Sweden: Hällsten, 2013; Switzerland: Zimmermann & Seiler, 2019) or even completely (Austria: Steyrer et al., 2005; Belgium: Whitely & Coetsier, 1993; Germany: Becker et al., 2019; Blickle et al., 2009; Blickle et al., 2010; Grätz & Pollak, 2016 [raised in West-Germany]; USA: Porter, 1965) eliminated when having equal levels of education (*direct* effect, OCIE), though this is less true in countries with lower social mobility (e.g. Malaysia: Md Nor & Abu Samah, 2009). Moreover, the monetary impact of social origin seems to increase throughout a career and is usually not even directly observable at the outset of careers (Hungary: Blaskó & Róbert, 2007; Sweden:

Erikson & Jonsson, 1998; USA: Dreher et al., 1985; Pfeffer, 1977a). Black (USA: Corcoran et al., 1992; Rumberger, 2010; Witteveen & Attewell, 2017), ethnic minority (UK: Laurison & Friedman, 2016), and female employees (Germany: Becker et al., 2019; Hungary: Blaskó & Róbert, 2007; Sweden: Hällsten, 2013; Switzerland: Zimmermann & Seiler, 2019; UK: Laurison & Friedman, 2016; USA: Dreher et al., 1985) of lower social origin tend to be at additional disadvantage.

4.2.2. Hierarchical rank

All the studies on the *total* effect (OC) (France: Hartmann, 2000; Germany: Hartmann, 2000; UK: Mosson & Clark, 1968) and almost all of the studies on the *direct* effect (OC|E) (Austria: Steyrer et al., 2005; Germany: Blickle et al., 2009 [no relationship]; Hartmann, 2000; UK: Duta et al., 2020; USA: Porter, 1965; France: Hartmann, 2000) found that employees of privileged origin are more likely to experience favorable career trajectories and attain high hierarchical ranks within organizations. None of the studies investigated the change of this relationship over the course of career progression.

4.2.3. Number of promotions

Neither of the two studies that measured the *direct* association of social origin with number of promotions by using a similarly educated sample (OC|E) was able to prove a relationship (Belgium: Whitely & Coetsier, 1993; USA: Whitely et al., 1991). There are no previous studies on the *total* effect (OC) or of change across careers.

4.2.4. Occupational status

The studies on *total* effects (OC) demonstrate almost uniformly that members of the social elite enjoy substantially higher occupational status levels than their less privileged counterparts (Spain: Requena, 1991; UK: Schoon & Polek, 2011; USA: Damian et al., 2015; Lin et al., 1981; McClendon, 1976; no relationship Netherlands: Graaf & Flap, 1988). Not even the equalization of educational attainment levels (OC|E) seems able to compensate for such deficits (Germany: Becker et al., 2019; Grätz & Pollak, 2016; Malaysia: Md Nor & Abu Samah, 2009; Netherlands: Tolsma & Wolbers, 2014; Sweden: Behtoui & Neergaard, 2012; Erikson & Jonsson, 1998; Switzerland: Zimmermann & Seiler; UK: Gugushvili et al., 2017; Iannelli & Paterson, 2007; USA: Torche, 2011 [for individuals with attainment below a college degree and advanced degree holders]; no relationship UK: Sullivan et al., 2018). While this is already observable at the outset of careers, these initial inequalities seem to persist (Italy: Barone et al., 2011; Passaretta et al., 2018; Netherlands: Passaretta et al., 2018; Schulz & Maas, 2012; Sweden: Härkönen & Bihagen, 2011) or even increase (Germany: Manzoni et al., 2014; Müller, 1972; Hungary: Blaskó & Róbert, 2007; UK: Betthäuser et al., 2020) over the course of career progression. The differences in status as a function of social origin are far less pronounced among women than men (Germany: Becker et al., 2019; Switzerland: Zimmermann & Seiler, 2019; UK: Iannelli & Paterson, 2007; USA: Torche, 2011).

4.2.5. Job satisfaction

While the majority of studies on job satisfaction did not find any noteworthy *direct* origin effects (OC|E) (China: Fang, 2019; USA: Colarelli et al., 1987; Dinovitzer & Garth, 2007), there are some outliers that point in positive (USA: Porter, 1965) and negative directions (Turkey: Roos, 1978). Thus, this review supports the thesis of an inconclusive *direct* origin effect. As all studies used a sample of similarly educated individuals, no conclusions can be made about the *total* origin effect.

4.2.6. Career satisfaction

All studies used samples of similarly educated individuals, impeding the assessment of the *total* origin effect. While satisfaction with career choice was positively related to social origin (USA: Dinovitzer & Garth, 2007), all other studies found that career satisfaction overall seems to be

independent of the social conditions of a person's upbringing, at least given similar educational levels (Austria: Steyrer et al., 2005; Germany: Blickle et al., 2009; USA: Porter, 1965). None of the studies investigated the change of respondents' satisfaction with their job and career over the course of career progression.

4.2.7. Observations on the social origin–career success relationship (Research theme 2)

Six observations can be made about the what and how of our knowledge on the second research theme, i.e., the social origin–CS relationship.

(2.1) *Lack of knowledge about the relationship between social origin and other-referent SCS.* The findings on the social origin–CS relationship do not compare well because OCS was measured exclusively with other-referent criteria (in line with the intergenerational social mobility logic) but SCS with self-referent ones. Heslin (2005a) argues that judgments of success vary substantially depending on the self- or other-referent criteria.

(2.2) *Lack of assessment of the total origin effect for promotions and SCS.* Education has proved to be a key factor in improving OCS in many countries. Most studies on the relationship between social origin and promotions and (self-referential) SCS measure only the *direct* effect (OC|E; e.g. Blickle et al., 2009; Dinovitzer & Garth, 2007; Whitely & Coetsier, 1993). Consequently, we do not know the magnitude of the potential additional indirect effect of education that could buffer social inequality.

(2.3) *Lack of studies on relationships between OCS and SCS.* Only very few studies (8%) investigate both OCS and SCS indicators. In these studies, results are evaluated independently of each other, and any correlations or deviations between OCS and SCS indicators are not discussed. Looking at the indicators individually may create an incomplete picture and the risk of wrong conclusions, because two indicators can have a balancing effect (e.g., low other-referent monetary success is balanced with high satisfaction with other-referent work–life balance) that might be overlooked.

(2.4) *Failure to consider individual importance of OCS vs. SCS.* It seems to be implicitly assumed that people are similarly concerned about their objective and subjective success, even though people from different social origins, or pursuing traditional rather than contemporary careers, may have different perspectives. In order to identify the balancing effect, we would need to know more about the relative importance of the indicators, but there have so far not been any studies on this issue.

(2.5) *Failure to analyze OCS and SCS interdependence over time.* Although changes in the individual indicators over the course of a career were identified, a possible interdependence of OCS and SCS over time and their directionality in different career phases have not been investigated. Overall, previous studies that have been predominantly based on OCS and show disadvantages for people of lower social origin could therefore paint a picture that is either too negative, because it ignores the potential compensatory effect of positive other-referent SCS, or too positive, because it ignores how disadvantages with regard to other-referent OCS and SCS accumulate over time.

(2.6) *Failure to consider intersectionality.* We find research on the social origin–CS relationship, and on the relationship between identity characteristics such as race or gender and CS (e.g., the gender wage gap). Only a quarter of the studies included in this review considered intersectionality, i.e., the different intertwined inequalities that together form a social identity (Crenshaw, 1989), by analyzing the influence of gender (20%), race (6%), or ethnicity (2%) on the social origin–CS relationship. Seven studies even had all male samples (e.g. Corcoran et al., 1992; Passaretta et al., 2018). There is a lack of systematic, intersectional studies that examine a wider range of identity characteristics and combinations of more than two such characteristics and analyze their relevance for the social origin–CS relationship.

4.3. Explanatory factors for the social origin–career success relationship

The existence of total origin effects on OCS that tend to remain or even increase over the course of a career (e.g. Dreher et al., 1985; Pfeffer, 1977a) suggests that there are dynamics at work during the career trajectory that impede the upward social mobility of lower-origin individuals. Twenty-nine (49%) of the identified studies discussed such career-relevant factors, which we grouped into two main categories: (1) individual factors rooted in the employees themselves such as barriers due to their characteristics and behaviors—specifically: cognitive abilities, locus of control, and aspirations; (2) organizational factors representing institutional barriers that impede career advancement “in spite of [...] best efforts and intentions” (Belmi & Laurin, 2016, p. 505)—specifically: general support, mentoring, social resources, and employer characteristics (see Fig. 2).

4.3.1. Cognitive abilities

Seven studies have assessed the role of “verbal, mathematical, and spatial abilities” (Damian et al., 2015, p. 476), referred to as cognitive abilities, in explaining the inferior CS of socially disadvantaged employees. Despite the different results in terms of strength and mediation paths, nearly all studies (all from the UK and US) show a positive relationship between social origin and cognitive abilities, and agree that cognitive abilities mediate the positive relationship between social origin with monetary success and occupational status (UK: Betthäuser et al., 2020; Gugushvili et al., 2017; Schoon & Polek, 2011; Sullivan et al., 2018; USA: Damian et al., 2015; Ford & Umbricht, 2018; Ng et al., 2005; Rumberger, 2010).

4.3.2. Locus of control

Locus of control, defined as “the extent to which people believe that they can influence the events and outcomes of their own lives” (Betthäuser et al., 2020, p. 351), was found to mediate the positive association of social origin with monetary success (Ng et al., 2005; USA: Rumberger, 2010), occupational status (UK: Betthäuser et al., 2020; Gugushvili et al., 2017), and career satisfaction (Ng et al., 2005), albeit to a fairly small extent.

4.3.3. Aspirations

Five studies attribute less privileged employees’ lack of CS to their lower aspirations to be successful. People of lower social origin appear to be less eager to seek CS, both independently of individual educational attainment (UK: Schoon & Polek, 2011) and when education is excluded (Belmi & Laurin, 2016; UK: Friedman, 2016), at least when rewards are distributed through the exercise of political dominance. In one study, the level of aspiration proved to be significantly higher for women than for men (UK: Schoon & Polek, 2011). This lower self-initiative consequently was shown to impede the achievement of CS in terms of status (US: Crockett, 1964), monetary rewards, and career satisfaction (Austria: Steyrer et al., 2005).

4.3.4. General support

Studies consistently demonstrate how people from higher social origin experience disproportionate favoritism in the provision of general support. This higher general support leads to a better allocation of career rewards in terms of monetary success (Ng et al., 2005), hierarchical rank (Germany: Hartmann, 2000; Mexico/USA: Belmi et al., 2020), job satisfaction (Canada: Fang, 2019), and career satisfaction (Ng et al., 2005).

4.3.5. Mentoring

People from socially disadvantaged families seem to receive significantly less mentoring (Belgium: Whitely & Coetsier, 1993; China: Aryee et al., 1999; Germany: Blickle et al., 2010; USA: Whitely et al., 1991, 1992). This, in turn, adversely affects their monetary rewards (Blickle et al., 2010; Ng et al., 2005), hierarchical rank (Blickle et al., 2010),

promotion rate (Ng et al., 2005; Whitely & Coetsier, 1993; Whitely et al., 1991), job satisfaction (Whitely & Coetsier, 1993), and career satisfaction (Blickle et al., 2010; Ng et al., 2005; Whitely & Coetsier, 1993). Even with the same amount of mentoring, people of higher origin seem to benefit far more (Whitely et al., 1991). No gender differences were identified (Blickle et al., 2010; Whitely et al., 1992).

4.3.6. Social resources

Social resources comprise the whole network of beneficial contacts inside and outside an organization (Blickle et al., 2009). All previous studies have shown that people from privileged backgrounds have access to quantitatively and qualitatively more valuable social resources (Sweden: Behtoui & Neergaard, 2012; USA: Campbell et al., 1986; Lin et al., 1981). Behtoui and Neergaard (2012) highlighted that women and employees with a stigmatized migration background faced substantially more difficulties in obtaining social capital. While the subsequent outcomes may differ between countries, social resources generally seem to be beneficial for monetary success (Ng et al., 2005; Netherlands: Graaf & Flap, 1988 [weak, insignificant]; Spain: Requena, 1991), promotions (Ng et al., 2005), occupational status (Spain: Requena, 1991 [insignificant]; Sweden: Behtoui & Neergaard, 2012; USA: Lin et al., 1981), and career satisfaction (Ng et al., 2005).

4.3.7. Employer characteristics

As well as dynamics within a company, the type of organization in which people ultimately work can also be decisive for CS. People of lower origin tend to end up in companies that, because of their size and location, offer poorer prospects for rewarding careers, at least in terms of monetary variables (Sweden: Hällsten, 2013 [insignificant]; UK: Laurison & Friedman, 2016; USA: Pfeffer, 1977b).

4.3.8. Observations on explanatory factors of the social origin career success relationship (Research theme 3)

Based on these findings, we add the following observations about what and how we know about explanatory factors as the third research theme.

(3.1) *Narrow range of individual and organizational explanatory factors.* The explanatory factors that have been proposed are primarily organizational in nature, which is attributable to the dominance of sociological studies in the corpus; psychological studies are the exception. Organizational factors are well suited to shed light on OCS and SCS, as they relate to external resources that could explain the difference relative to parental success. Particularly after 2015, there has been increased analysis of individual-level explanatory factors, with little consideration of organizational-level factors. For SCS, a competitive perspective makes sense, e.g., a desire to be better than one’s parents and to achieve ambitious career goals. However, this perspective is reflected in only one of the individual explanatory factors (aspirations).

(3.2) *Failure to investigate contextual factors.* It is striking that more than 90% of the studies included in this review were conducted in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) countries (Henrich et al., 2010) and 86% in countries that rank among the top third in terms of social mobility (Jones, 2020), while 4 of the 10 GLOBE cultural clusters (House et al., 2004) accounted for 85% of the studies (Anglo: 32 studies; Germanic Europe: 15; Latin Europe: 4; Nordic Europe: 4) with studies based on samples from Chile, Hungary, Turkey, and Malaysia (one study each) being the exception. While a focus on successful countries in particular makes it possible to identify enabling factors, broadening the focus to include countries with different conditions would also allow for the broader identification of barriers, which is equally important. There is also a lack of studies comparing countries, regions, and continents, which would be fruitful for identifying best practices. Only four such studies were included in the present review, and each is limited to samples from only two countries, mainly ones in Europe; there are no global studies.

5. Discussion

This systematic review of the social origin–CS relationship will make a valuable contribution to future research and theory development, as several of the points we draw attention to have been underappreciated in the literature to date.

5.1. What do we know?

Prior research on social mobility has strongly focused on the educational context and has generally concluded that people of lower social origin experience academic disadvantage (e.g. Bukodi et al., 2017; Goldthorpe & Bukodi, 2018). However, the studies included in this review show that equalizing the educational attainment of individuals from different social backgrounds is not necessarily sufficient to produce equal career outcomes. This review summarizes several mechanisms that operate in the working life phase and compensate for disadvantages in organizational career advancement caused by social origin. In terms of these explanatory mechanisms, Pitesa and Pillutla (2019) reviewed antecedents undermining social mobility within organizations. But by focusing on monetary success only, their review treats CS as a one-dimensional and objective construct. Our systematic review goes beyond this by, first, examining whether origin-based differences persist for different dimensions of both OCS and SCS, and, second, by acknowledging the differential influences of explanatory mechanisms on the various career variables.

Our review has revealed a strong dominance in previous research of OCS indicators (monetary success, hierarchical rank, number of promotions, and occupational status), which are typically associated with traditional careers, as opposed to subjective ones (job satisfaction and career satisfaction), which are typically associated with contemporary careers (cf. Dries et al., 2008). This shows that sociological research is still predominant in this area, and that there is a dearth of management and psychological research supporting a broader focus that also includes personally significant CS indicators.

While socially disadvantaged individuals achieve lower OCS, they do not necessarily feel less satisfied in their careers compared with their objectively more successful counterparts of privileged origin. Therefore, social origin seems to relate in fundamentally different ways to OCS and SCS indicators. Whereas disadvantages in OCS can be strongly mitigated (particularly in terms of monetary success) by achieving similar levels of education, direct disadvantage usually still remains. The comprehensive research on monetary success and occupational status in particular further illustrates that such disadvantages seem to persist or even increase within a person's career trajectory. Consequently, social origin is likely to affect employees' OCS throughout their careers.

This lack of social mobility appears to be a result of individual barriers, such as lower cognitive abilities, locus of control, and career aspirations, and of organizational practices that tend to favor people from privileged social origin. This discrimination may occur in the allocation of supervisory support or mentorships, through the use of social resources for career-relevant decisions, or as a result of organizations' hiring tendencies in the first place. Especially in times of labor shortage in many countries, there needs to be an awareness of the need to create a more equitable organizational environment in which people from all social strata have equal opportunities to realize their potential.

Although the findings demonstrate how the socioeconomic conditions of employees' families of origin affect their OCS, thus perpetuating social inequalities in organizations, it seems too early to draw a final conclusion. At the same time, our review has revealed various deficits in the content and methodology of previous studies, which need to be addressed in future management research on the social origin–CS relationship.

5.2. How do we know and where should we be heading?

By considering both OCS and SCS indicators as well as organizational and individual explanatory mechanisms, the present review acknowledges the transition from traditional to contemporary careers, which has not yet been adequately reflected in research on social inequality, and encourages greater recognition of social inequality in the management literature.

Based on the underappreciated aspects highlighted by this review, we have drawn up the following agenda for future study. Table 3 integrates the three research themes (CS indicators; social origin–CS relationship; explanatory mechanisms) with the observations on the three research themes as well as the derived points for an agenda of future research.

5.2.1. Identify understudied CS indicators and refocus on SCS

The dominance of OCS in career-related research (Gu & Su, 2016; Heslin, 2005b) has also become obvious in this literature review, with monetary aspects and occupational status being especially prevalent. By contrast, SCS indicators, hierarchical rank, and number of promotions remain understudied in relation to social origin. Friedman et al. (2015) coined the term “class ceiling” to describe the barrier that prevents individuals of lower social origin from being promoted to the very highest hierarchical levels in business organizations. This in turn means that organizations may not be realizing the full potential and talent of their workforce. However, given the increasing importance of contemporary careers (in organizations with flat hierarchies), it might turn out that the previously little-researched indicators of promotion and hierarchical status are comparatively less relevant, while SCS is gaining in importance.

Future research should qualitatively survey those criteria people of different social origins themselves place the most weight on when evaluating their CS. This approach would make it possible to model and assess the success factors that matter most to people and minimize the noisy data that results from inadvertently giving equal weighting to criteria that they consider irrelevant or relatively unimportant (Heslin, 2005a; cf. observation 1.1).

5.2.2. Integrate further SCS indicators and consider other-referent criteria

It is crucial to address SCS in the context of social mobility research, among other reasons in order to account for the reality of contemporary careers. As the indicators used so far for SCS are deficient (cf. observation 1.2), alternative SCS indicators should be included to achieve greater precision. More specifically, we lack a multidimensional perspective on SCS in social mobility research, such as satisfaction with work–life balance, learning and development, positive impact, or relationships at work (see Briscoe et al., 2021). Multidimensional SCS indicators have the advantage that they fluctuate less rapidly than, for instance, job satisfaction and are thus more comparable to the more stable OCS indicators. Moreover, they are likely to yield more precise conclusions. For instance, the objective criterion of income is subject to changes in prices, which makes it challenging to compare income levels between parents and their descendants at comparable career stages (and thus different points in time) in order to determine differences in CS. As income development is determined to a very high extent by a factor that is independent of people's career, using it creates a risk of misinterpreting variation between measurement points (Inklaar & Rao, 2017). In contrast, Boswell et al. (2009) refer to the existence of a stable predisposed element of satisfaction, suggesting that there is some stability in an individual's satisfaction over time. Thus, the factors explaining variations in satisfaction levels beyond predisposition are largely due to situational factors related to a person's career and job.

Furthermore, social mobility research must pay attention to SCS based on social comparison, either by assessing how people believe their CS compares to their parents' success or by comparing the parents' and the focal person's respective self-assessments (cf. observation 1.3 and

Table 3

Agenda for future research on the influence of social origin on CS.

AEO framework (research themes)	Observations on previous research	Agenda for future research	Indicative research interests for HRM/career studies
1 CS indicators studied in relation to social origin (Outcome)	1.1 Dominance of studies on OCS over ones on SCS	#1 Identify understudied CS indicators but declared relevant by individuals in the context of social mobility, and refocus on SCS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Research understudied CS indicators, i.e. hierarchical rank, promotions, SCS - Qualitatively identify (a) additional CS indicators that people from different social backgrounds themselves emphasize most strongly, e.g. power, and (b) determine their weighting between groups of individuals of different social origins as well as in contemporary careers - Include multidimensional SCS measures, e.g. satisfaction with work–life balance, learning and development, positive impact, positive relationships at work, financial success - Use other-referent criteria to measure SCS, i.e. how people believe their CS compares with their parents' success; or comparison of the parents' and the focal person's respective self-assessments
	1.2 Insufficient SCS indicators 1.3 Omission of other-referent SCS-	#2 Integrate further SCS indicators and consider other-referent criteria	
2 Social origin–CS relationship (Antecedent – Outcome)	2.1 Lack of knowledge about the relationship between social origin and other-referent SCS	#3 Conduct studies on hitherto understudied social origin–other-referent SCS relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Explore the relationship between social origin and other-referent and multidimensional SCS - Identify differences between the social origin–OCS and social origin–SCS relationships in individuals from different social backgrounds, including further influencing variables - Measure the total origin effect in the relationship between social origin with other-referent CS in terms of promotions and SCS - Identify mechanisms in the education system that could empower individuals to achieve higher CS - Analyze divergences between orientation/values and CS within groups of different social status (e.g. are OCS aspects such as promotions, and occupational status more prominent in the definitions of CS given by people of privileged rather than lower social origin, but less likely to be achieved in social comparison with their parents/father?) - Explore whether SCS and OCS are dependent, as well as the conditions underlying this dependence - Investigate interrelationships between CS indicators in order to reveal cause–effect relationships and related net effects of social origin - Analyze bundles of other-referent OCS and SCS indicators to create comparability - Research individual weighting of CS indicators and their balancing effect - Analyze the directionality and balance of the OCS–SCS interdependence in different career phases - Explore influence by age at career entry, inactivity, unemployment, type of occupation - Investigate intersectionality between social origin and other identity characteristics, such as gender, race/ethnicity, religion, migration, function, generation - Combine more than two characteristics (e.g. gender, race, and migration background) - Study intersectionality effects related to explanatory factors
	2.2 Lack of assessment of the total origin effect for promotions and (other-referent) SCS	#4 Assess the total origin effect for number of promotions, job satisfaction, and career satisfaction	
	2.3 Lack of studies on interrelationships between OCS and SCS	#5 Investigate interrelationships between CS indicators	
	2.4 Failure to consider individual importance of OCS vs. SCS		
	2.5 Failure to analyze OCS and SCS interdependence over time	#6 Explore the social origin–CS relationship across the working lifespan	
	2.6 Failure to consider intersectionality	#7 Systematically study intersectionality based on a broader range of identity characteristics	
3 Individual and organizational factors explaining the social origin–CS relationship (Explanatory Factors)	3.1 Narrow range of individual and organizational explanatory factors	#8 Gain insights into the missing paths between explanatory factors and CS indicators and explore additional explanatory factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Research influence of aspirations on the social origin–other-referent CS relationship and identify individual (e.g. upward vs. downward comparison) and organizational (e.g. resource distribution, discriminatory practices) explanations - Explore how individual and organizational explanatory factors relate to occupational status, SCS - Investigate role of macroeconomic (e.g. cross-country income/wage inequality, economic growth), societal (e.g. social class), and cultural (e.g. performance orientation, power distance) conditions – including related changes in the post-pandemic era – for CS attainment - Study interrelationships between individual, organizational, and contextual explanatory factors
	3.2 Failure to investigate contextual factors	#9 Investigate interrelationships between explanatory factors, taking the macroeconomic context into account	

Table 2). Individuals from higher and lower social backgrounds might differ in the extent to which social comparison with their parents plays a role in evaluating their attainments and determining SCS. Consequently, the question of weighting plays a role here as well.

5.2.3. Conduct studies on the social origin–other referent SCS relationship

Findings show that social origin plays a different role depending on the CS indicator. In line with the landmark study by [Blau and Duncan \(1967\)](#), this literature review supports the thesis of a predominantly positive link between social origin and OCS. By contrast, self-referent SCS seems to be less dependent on origin-related influences, at least given similar educational attainment. These findings indicate that OCS and SCS might be explained by different variables (cf. [Judge et al., 1995](#)). A broader investigation of the social origin–SCS association would allow developing empirically more substantiated and comprehensive models (cf. observation 2.1).

5.2.4. Assess the total origin effect of promotions and subjective career success

We find that the CS gap shrinks significantly when individuals from lower social origin obtain a similar level of education to their more privileged counterparts. It is particularly striking that *monetary rewards* can be substantially mitigated or even offset, particularly at the outset of a career (e.g. [Becker et al., 2019](#); [Grätz & Pollak, 2016](#)). However, for the factors *occupational status* and *hierarchical rank*, education appears to be far from sufficient to ensure equal labor market outcomes (e.g. [Barone et al., 2011](#); [Becker et al., 2019](#)). Thus, to explain the remaining variance, we need more research on the total origin effect (OC) in terms of *number of promotions* and SCS, all based on other-referent criteria. The dominant consideration of the direct effect (OCIE) and focus on self-referent criteria may create overconfidence in advanced education's demonstrated equalizing effect (e.g. [Becker et al., 2019](#); [Blickle et al., 2009](#)). Thus, despite the finding that no origin-based differences exist for people with similar education, there might be total effects for more exclusive samples. For instance, in the case of *job satisfaction*, it may be possible that an advanced education system can prepare a person of lower origin for a highly regarded future job similarly to how a privileged (parental) environment does for socially advantaged individuals (cf. [Dinovitzer & Garth, 2007](#)), which could positively influence levels of job satisfaction through the mechanisms of value orientations, aspiration, adaptation, and agency ([Pichler & Wallace, 2009](#)). To confirm or rebut such assumptions, we strongly recommend an assessment of the total origin effect (cf. observation 2.2).

5.2.5. Investigate interrelationships between career success indicators

The literature usually assumes a positive relationship between OCS and SCS, considering extrinsic rewards to be predictors of the intrinsic feeling of success (e.g. [Judge et al., 1994](#)). Although 13 studies examined multiple indicators of CS, including four studies with both OCS and SCS indicators, they generally tested identical hypotheses for OCS and SCS, and the results were not systematically compared even though these constructs are widely acknowledged to be conceptually distinct and moderately correlated ([Ng et al., 2005](#)). Contradicting the widespread notion indicated above, our literature review provides an initial indication that monetary success and career satisfaction may be more strongly correlated among individuals of low social origin than those of high social origin and that even objectively less successful individuals of lower social origin may experience high career satisfaction (see also [Judge et al., 2010](#)). This, again, shows the importance of considering both types of CS while also distinguishing between them. Some aspects of SCS may be more strongly correlated with measures of OCS than others ([Spurk et al., 2019](#)).

[Erikson and Jonsson \(1998\)](#) noted a possible relationship between the CS indicators when they observed that *occupational status* can be understood as a predictor of *income progression*. Other-referent *career satisfaction* was shown to have a strong influence on *income* and

hierarchical status ([Abele & Spurk, 2009](#)). [Johnson and Mortimer \(2011\)](#) found that people from more privileged backgrounds are more focused on jobs that offer intrinsic rewards, as reflected in SCS, and less focused on extrinsic rewards, as reflected in OCS. Nevertheless, their more socially disadvantaged counterparts' stronger extrinsic orientation does not predict more prestigious or better-paid jobs; on the contrary, the socially privileged have an advantage in terms of OCS. These divergences between orientation and CS within groups of different social origin, as well as the question of whether SCS and OCS are dependent and what conditions underpin these interrelationships between CS indicators, should be further explored to reveal cause–effect relationships and associated net effects of social origin. We recommend that future researchers analyze bundles of OCS and SCS indicators, both measured based on other-referent criteria, to create comparability, with each indicator weighted according to respondents' preferences (cf. observations 2.3, 2.4).

5.2.6. Explore the social origin–career success relationship across the working lifespan

As regards a long-term perspective, the literature often assumes a decrease in the influence of social origin as employees advance in their careers and become increasingly detached from their parental context (e.g. [Jacob & Klein, 2019](#)). The present literature review does not support this assumption. Rather, people of lower origin are not able to achieve sufficient career mobility to catch up to their more privileged peers. Consequently, inequalities cannot be offset by education and tend to persist throughout a working lifespan.

To be able to conceptualize the effect on CS over the course of career progression, we recommend examining differences in the sequences (e.g., education, career entry age, inactivity, unemployment, and occupation at different hierarchical levels) that individuals of different social origins follow during their careers. Longitudinal studies are also advantageous with regard to the assessment of intergenerational mobility as the data on the family of origin can be collected directly and at several points in their development rather than being reconstructed retrospectively. Longitudinal designs should be adopted for all CS indicators (cf. observation 2.5).

5.2.7. Systematically study intersectionality based on a broader range of identity characteristics

A focus on intersectionality would make it possible to overcome the previously dominant classification based on social origin alone and to systematically extend it to other identity characteristics, such as gender, race/ethnicity, religion, generation, and function in line with the double disadvantage theory ([Boyd, 1984](#)), which holds that characteristics other than social origin contribute to the stratification of individuals. While gender has been studied much more frequently in connection with social origin, there is a lack of studies on other key characteristics and on the combination of more than two characteristics (e.g., gender, race, and migration background). There is also a need to expand the study of intersectionality to include explanatory factors as structural inequalities and organizational support mechanisms may not apply equally to all groups (cf. observation 2.6).

5.2.8. Further investigate explanatory factors leading to career success

The social origin–CS relationship is mediated by several individual and organizational factors (explanatory factors). The review found that mediation by the individual factors was relatively small. Only lower aspirations among people from lower social origin proved to be a significant barrier to CS. Organizations showed to place more direct social mobility constraints on less privileged employees, despite “their best efforts and intentions” ([Belmi & Laurin, 2016, p. 505](#)), by consciously or unconsciously distributing different amounts of career resources.

A better understanding is needed of how and when explanatory factors create inequality as different mediators might relate to different CS indicators. Not all connections have yet been researched in the

literature. Particularly, striking is the lack of research on how organizational factors might relate to *occupational status*. This CS indicator is one of the most widely used measures for the origin effect, but its association with explanatory factors has been neglected. Friedman et al. (2015), who found a class ceiling effect regarding mobility into elite occupations for the socially disadvantaged, emphasize that more knowledge is needed about the relative extent to which this effect on occupational status is attributable to individuals' ability and motivation (i.e., individual factors) or a lack of opportunities offered by their employer (i.e., organizational factors). These deficiencies need to be investigated more thoroughly in future research in order to identify recommended courses of action. Insofar as we see SCS not only as a byproduct but a key determinant of OCS (Abele & Spurk, 2009) and can also prove this effect in the context of social mobility, there is a need for increased inclusion of explanatory factors that can explain the SCS of individuals from different social backgrounds. Future research could, for example, incorporate more motivational and volitional processes, such as task efficiency or achievement motivation (cf. observation 3.1).

5.2.9. Study interrelationships between explanatory factors, taking context into account

This review identified several individual and organizational explanatory factors. The phenomenon of “social” (i.e., origin-related) CS inequality in a given society is complemented at a macro level by *contextual explanatory factors*: the (pre-existing) structure of social inequality that differs across countries and cultures, including the structure of occupations and social classes, and relates to the labor market (cf. observation 3.2). These contextual factors need to be addressed in future research, including through *comparative social and cultural studies*. More specifically, future research should expand samples to include “non-WEIRD” countries with poorer macroeconomic conditions and countries from the other six GLOBE cultural clusters (i.e., Eastern Europe, Latin America, Sub-Sahara Africa, Arab Cultures, Southern Asia, and Confucian Asia). Outcomes in these countries could conflict with the findings of this review, show unknown barriers, and reveal limits to the effect of enabling mechanisms in organizations that have been identified so far. Examples of contextual factors worthy of further investigation include cross-country income/wage inequality and social class (e.g., caste systems), which in addition to—and directly linked to—social origin may create social barriers in the pursuit of CS (e.g., expensive education investments; caste-related limitations to hierarchical advancement). Moreover, there is evidence that in countries with economic growth (which have typically been the focal point of previous research), (male) individuals tend to rate their SCS higher relative to their parents (Kelley & Kelley, 2009). The same is to be expected for low power distance, which allows power and resource sharing and thus increases career opportunities. A disadvantaged group of lower origin is a loss for society, and this is true at the global level in the wake of an increasingly internationalized labor market. Solving this problem, and not just in the already privileged countries, will make it possible to better exploit the value of human capital and make the world more equitable, which in turn will have a positive impact on the collective good, in line with the UN's first Sustainable Development Goal: “No Poverty.”

Future research should also explore the *interrelationships between different explanatory factors* of the social origin–CS relationship at the individual, organizational, and contextual level in order to determine their relative importance and thus identify the core reason for any disadvantages. Gentry et al. (2008) show that cultures with a high performance orientation value (House et al., 2004) place a strong emphasis on developing people to improve their performance and, thus, are more likely to see career-related mentoring as beneficial. The importance and influence of the explanatory factors could therefore differ between cultures. This knowledge would enable companies to concentrate their resources on mitigating only the fundamental cause rather than a number of secondary factors (Pitesa & Pillutla, 2019).

Finally, the relationship between social origin and CS should be monitored in the future. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in major structural changes in the management of human resources in many sectors and countries, such as the increased use of remote work and new temporal work arrangements (Collings et al., 2021), as well as individual-level changes, such as workers' reorientations in their career goals and aspirations (Akkermans et al., 2020). These structural and individual-level changes, which were not investigated by the studies included in this review, might impact individuals' career development (Guan et al., 2020) and CS (Cao & Hamori, 2022) in the postpandemic era. These changes, as well as the concurrent economic challenges (layoffs) coupled with labor shortages, could alter the relationship between social origin and CS.

How successfully workers can manage to deal with postpandemic challenges, is determined by their ability to realign their career habitus and capital. For those of higher social origin, the new conditions could offer opportunities for career development and improvement of their qualifications. For example, individuals of low social origin might have a smaller increase in OCS than their counterparts of high social origin, who can afford to prolong their search for employment commensurate with their qualifications or expected rank, status, and salary and can rely on their influential social capital to get notified about high-prestige job openings (Moawad, 2022). In contrast, financial pressures coupled with few job offers during an economic downturn may compel workers of lower social origin to take any job. Educational inequalities among young adults may also widen as those of lower social origin are less able to afford the costs associated with education (e.g., tuition, housing, and books), which ultimately manifest themselves in unequal career trajectories leading to lower OCS. However, changes in personal values could, in turn, increase the importance of SCS (Daniel et al., 2022), such as work–life balance or personal relationships at work, as well as improve opportunities to achieve SCS through wider adoption of favorable practices, such as remote work. This could particularly benefit individuals of lower social origin.

5.3. Limitations

Like every study, this one has some limitations. We treated social origin as a relative construct and used all types of parental socioeconomic measurements interchangeably. Research shows that while the magnitude of the social origin–CS association varies, findings on the direction of the relationship are largely constant regardless of the independent variable used (e.g. Gugushvili et al., 2017; Rumberger, 2010). While the present study concentrates exclusively on relationships, with a focus on mediators that appear to be relevant for CS within the organizational trajectory, future studies that address the social causes (social origin and phase of education) should also test differences in the strength of effects of the independent variable in the relationships identified here in order to be able to determine the best starting points for measures to address the relevant problems.

Due to the scope of this review, we excluded mediators prior to labor market entry (e.g., university reputation, and career choice), as well as moderators that caused variations within the general patterns, such as the points in workers' careers at which data was collected or country-specific differences in mobility chances (e.g. Grätz & Pollak, 2016; Hartmann, 2000). A meta-analysis of these factors and the strength of their effect could provide further insights and identify opportunities for intervention.

5.4. Implications for human resource management

There are various areas where efforts to minimize effects of social origin on CS, and thus to realize the full potential of workers, could be undertaken: recruitment, selection, career, or diversity management. In the context of *recruitment*, data on social origin could be collected first for later use in other HR processes. In the *selection* phase, any negative

bias against applicants of a lower social origin should be identified and flagged up. Moreover, an awareness of the career orientations of people from lower and higher social backgrounds can help organizations to attract individuals who share their values (Schneider et al., 2000, attraction–selection–attrition framework). In the implementation of organizational *career management* practices, the social origin of employees could be consistently taken into account, for example, by deliberately including people of lower social origin in mentoring programs and at a comparatively early stage of their careers and at lower career levels. Special programs for individuals of lower social origin, such as “habitus training” or networking to create awareness of their own behavior and teach alternative skills, could also prove valuable. Moreover, since educational attainment has been shown to simultaneously enable equality and reproduce inequality, employers could implement rules or incentives so that internal promotions are based less on educational attainment and more on proven abilities and performance. People from socially disadvantaged backgrounds play barely any role in companies’ *diversity strategies*. To combat social disadvantage, companies can implement various measures, such as recognizing social origin as a diversity factor in its own right, not requiring unnecessary educational qualifications, understanding the interrelationship between race and social origin, creating a culture of cohesion, and developing employees as role models.

6. Conclusion

The removal of barriers to social mobility has become a central concern for modern societies, with the goal of reducing unjustified inequalities (Pitesa & Pillutla, 2019). Employees from less privileged

families experience significant disadvantages in achieving OCS that are persisting or worsening over their career trajectory. Conversely, SCS proves to be less affected by social origin, though the few studies available are limited to self-referent criteria. Persisting disadvantages result from the individuals themselves and discriminatory practices in organizations. Our review shows that *what we know* provides an initial foundation of knowledge, but there are gaps because of *how we know it*. We highlight methodological deficits in research on the social origin–CS relationship that call into question the soundness of the above summary, and identify extensive avenues for future research, i.e., *where we should be heading*. Regarding the CS indicators studied in relation to social origin (research theme 1), there is a need for the inclusion of previously less studied and of additional CS indicators using other-referent criteria. As for the social origin–CS relationship (research theme 2), there is a particular need for analyses of the social origin–other-referent CS relationship, especially with respect to SCS, including the total origin effect (i.e., the indirect effect through education), and over time. Also needed is a better understanding of the interrelationships between CS indicators, as well as of the intersectionality between social origin and other identity characteristics such as gender, race/ethnicity, migration background, etc. In the area of the third research theme, explanatory factors, we recommend that the interrelationships with all explanatory factors, including additional individual, organizational, and contextual explanatory factors, be systematically examined and their interrelationships analyzed. Expanding the research to include the aforementioned points is a prerequisite for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the importance of social origin for CS and for determining appropriate interventions.

Appendix

Overview of studies.

Study	SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS				Type of analysis (technique)	Measure of SO (parental)	CAREER SUCCESS (RQ1 + RQ2)**						Explanatory factors*** (RQ3)
							OBJECTIVE				SUBJECTIVE		
	Size	Coun-try	Subjects	Year of data collection (CS)*			Mone-tary success	Hierar-chical rank	Number of promo-tions	Occu-pational status	Job satis-faction	Career satis-faction	
Belmi et al. (2020)	152,661	MX, US	Various experiments (different samples)	NA	Regressions	Class							GS
Bethhäuser et al. (2020)	9.391	GB	Residents (born: 1970)	2008 (age: 38)	Path analysis	Class			X	Class			CA, LC
Duta et al. (2020)	2236	GB	Graduates	2012 (age: 42)	Sequence analysis, cluster analysis	Class							
Becker et al. (2019)	5246	DE	Residents (born: 1979)	2009 to 2010	Correlation, regression, SEM	Prestige	X		X	Prestige			
Chiappa and Mejias (2019)	943	CL	Doctorate holders	2011	Path analysis model	Class	X						
Fang (2019)	124	CN	Graduates	2018 to 2019	Correlation, regression, path analysis	Income					X		GS
Jacob and Klein (2019)	951	GB	Graduates (born: 1970)	2000 to 2008	Growth curve modeling	Class			X	Prestige			
Zimmermann and Seiler (2019)	2260	CH	Residents	2016 (age: ~30)	Sequence analysis, regression	SES	X		X	SES			
	1035	US	Graduates	2012 (age 25 to 54)	Regression	Education	X		X	Prestige			CA

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Study	SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS				Type of analysis (technique)	Measure of SO (parental)	CAREER SUCCESS (RQ1 + RQ2)**						Explanatory factors*** (RQ3)
							OBJECTIVE				SUBJECTIVE		
	Size	Country	Subjects	Year of data collection (CS)*			Monetary success	Hierarchical rank	Number of promotions	Occupational status	Job satisfaction	Career satisfaction	
Ford and Umbricht (2018)													
Passaretta et al. (2018)	5769	IT, NL	Residents (career start: 1946 to 95)	1997 to 2005	Growth curve modeling	Class			X SES				
Sullivan et al. (2018)	7102	GB	Residents (born: 1970)	2012 (age: 42)	Correlation, regression, SEM	Class, Income			X Class			CA	
Gugushvili et al. (2017)	NA	GB	Residents (born: 1970)	2008 (age: 38)	Regression	Class			X Class			CA, LC	
Witteveen and Attewell (2017)	7640	US	Graduates (graduated: 1992 to 93)	2003	Regression	Income	X						
Belmi and Laurin (2016)	NA	NA	Various experiments (different samples)	NA	Regressions	Class						A	
Friedman (2016)	39	GB	Residents (upwardly mobile)	2012	Qualitative study (interviews)	Class						A	
Grätz and Pollak (2016)	9000+	DE	Residents (born: 1947 to 84)	2012 (age: 28 to 65)	Regression	SES	X		X SES				
Laurison and Friedman (2016)	3377	GB	Higher professionals/managers	2014	Regression	Class	X					EC	
Damian et al. (2015)	81,000	US	Residents	1971	Regression	various variables	X		X Prestige			CA	
Jacob et al. (2015)	2703	GB DE	Graduates (graduated: 1999 to 2000)	2005 to 2006	Regression	Education			X Class, SES				
Manzoni et al. (2014)	7910	West DE	Residents (born: 1919 to 71)	1981 to 2005	Multilevel growth curve modelling	Class			X Prestige				
Tolsma and Wolbers (2014)	6416	NL	Residents (born: 1931 to 80)	1998 to 2009 (age: 25 to 70)	Regression	SES			X SES				
Hällsten (2013)	NA	SE	Residents (born: 1945 to 70)	2001, 2004, 2007	Regression	Class	X					EC	
Behtoui and Neergaard (2012)	465	SE	Employees of a mid-sized firm	2007 to 2008 (age: Ø 44)	SEM	Prestige, education			X Prestige, income			SR	
Schulz and Maas (2012)	2231	NL	Residents (born: 1850 to 1922)	1865 to 1940	Multilevel growth model	Class			X Prestige				
Barone et al. (2011)	59,311	IT	Residents (born: 1908 to 67)	1997 to 2005	Growth curves modeling	Class, prestige			X Class, Prestige				
Härkönen and Bihagen (2011)	4937	SE	Residents (born: 1925 to 74)	1991, 2000	Growth curves modeling	Class			X Prestige				
Schoon and Polek (2011)	11,555	GB	Residents (born: 1958, 70)	1991, 2004 (age: 33/34)	Correlation	Class, Prestige	X		X Class, prestige			CA, A	
Torche (2011)	NA	US	Residents	1996 to 2006 (age: 25 to 64)	Regression, log-multipli-cative layer effect model	Class, SES	X		X Class, SES				
Blickle et al. (2010)	292	DE	Graduates	NA (age: 24 to 39)	Regression	Class	X					M	
Rumberger (2010)	8901	US	Residents	2000 (age: ~26)	Regression	SES	X					CA, LC	
Blickle et al. (2009)	112	DE	Graduates	NA (age: Ø 33.2)	Regression	Class	X	X			X	M, SR	
Md Nor and Abu Samah (2009)	2048	MY	Graduates (graduated: 2006)	2008 to 2009	Correlation, regression	Income	X						
Blaskó and Róbert (2007)	2242	HU	Graduates (graduated: 1999)	2000, 2004	Regression	Prestige, education	X		X Prestige				
	3950	US		2002	Regression					X	X		

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Study	SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS				Type of analysis (technique)	Measure of SO (parental)	CAREER SUCCESS (RQ1 + RQ2)**						Explanatory factors*** (RQ3)
							OBJECTIVE				SUBJECTIVE		
	Size	Country	Subjects	Year of data collection (CS)*			Monetary success	Hierarchical rank	Number of promotions	Occupational status	Job satisfaction	Career satisfaction	
Dinovitzer and Garth (2007)			Lawyers (admitted to bar: 2000)			Prestige/SES							
Iannelli and Paterson (2007)	9455	GB (SCT)	Residents (born: 1937 to 75)	2001 (age: 26 to 64)	Log-linear model testing	Class			X Class				
Ng et al. (2005)	NA	NA	Diverse (meta-analysis)	NA	Meta-analysis (average correlation)	–						LC, GS, M, SR	
Steyrer et al. (2005)	290	AT	Graduates (graduated: 1970, 90)	2008 (age: ~40/~60)	Correlation, regression	Education, occupation	X	X			X	A	
Hartmann (2000)	NA	DE FR	Senior executives	1970, 1972, 1995	Descriptive statistics	Class		X				GS	
Aryee et al. (1999)	184	CN	Graduates	NA	Regression	Class						M	
Corak & Heisz (1998)	400,000	CA	Residents (born: 1963 to 66)	1995	Regression	Earnings	X						
Erikson and Jonsson (1998)	357,776	SE	Residents (born: 1945 to 65)	1990 (age: 25 to 45)	Regression	Class	X		X Class				
Whitely and Coetsier (1993)	148	BE	Graduates (graduated: 1980 to 82)	1986 to 1987 (age: Ø 30)	Regression	Class	X		X		X	X	M
Corcoran et al. (1992)	841	US	Residents	1983 (age: 25 to 32)	Regression	Income	X						
Whitely et al. (1992)	416	US	Managers and professionals	1985 to 1986 (age: Ø 30)	Regression	Class							M
Requena (1991)	609	ES	Residents	1989 (age: 16 to 65)	Correlation, regression	Prestige	X			X Prestige			SR
Whitely et al. (1991)	404	US	Graduates (graduated: 1980 to 82)	1985 to 1986 (age: Ø 30)	Correlation, regression	Class	X		X				M
Graaf and Flap (1988)	466	NL	Residents	1982 (age: 20 to 64)	Correlation, regression	Prestige	X			X Prestige			SR
Colarelli et al. (1987)	280	US	Graduates	NA (age: Ø23)	Regression	SES					X		
Campbell et al. (1986)	2063	US	Residents	NA	Correlation	Income, education							SR
Dreher et al. (1985)	314	US	Graduates (graduated: 1978 to 79)	1983 (age: ~29)	Regression	Class	X						
Lin et al. (1981)	399	US	Residents	1975 (age: 20 to 64)	Regression	SES				X SES			SR
Roos (1978)	146	TR	Graduates (graduated: 1946 to 55)	1956	Path analysis	Occupation					X		
Pfeffer (1977a)	371	US	Graduates (graduated: 1960 to 74)	NA	Correlation, regression	Class	X						
Pfeffer (1977b)	371	US	Graduates (graduated: 1960 to 74)	NA	Regression	Class							EC
McClendon (1976)	2159	US	Residents	1972 to 1974 (age: 18+)	Regression	SES				X SES			
Müller (1972)	398	DE	Residents (born: 1936 to 37)	1969 (age: 33)	Correlation, path analysis	Prestige				X Prestige			
Mosson and Clark (1968)	554	GB	Managers	NA	Inference statistics	Class		X					
Porter (1965)	337	US	Graduates (graduated: prior 1944)	1962	Correlation	Occupation	X	X			X	X	
Crockett (1964, 2005)	367	US	Residents	1957	Inference statistics	Class, prestige							A
Total of studies: 59													
Studies used for research themes 1 + 2: 50 (86% of total studies)													
							6 (12%)	2 (4%)	27 (54%)	5 (10%)			

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Study	SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS				Type of analysis (technique)	Measure of SO (parental)	CAREER SUCCESS (RQ1 + RQ2)**						Explanatory factors*** (RQ3)
							OBJECTIVE				SUBJECTIVE		
	Size	Coun- try	Subjects	Year of data collection (CS)*			Mone- tary success	Hierar- chical rank	Number of promo- tions	Occu- pational status	Job satis- faction	Career satis- faction	
							27 (54%)				6 (12%)		
Studies used for research theme 3: 30 (51% of total studies)						46 (92%)				8 (16%)			

Studies used for research theme 3: 30 (51% of total studies)

Note. * Year of data collection about career success outcome; ** no consideration of studies that were ONLY used in RQ3 (career-relevant variables); ***CA = cognitive abilities; LC = locus of control; A = aspirations; GS = general support; M = mentoring; SR = social resources; EC = employer characteristics; SEM = structural equation modeling.

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Note: Studies marked with an asterisk (*) are the subject of the SLR.