

# Evaluation tools to behavioral norms: the social construction of standardized success and its impacts

*Jingyi Pan*

College of Social Sciences, Department of Sociology, Hanyang University, Seongdong-gu, Republic of Korea

18678522876@163.com

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**Abstract.** While quantifiable indicators for success have become more common in contemporary society, there has been relatively little research focused on how these indicators become norms of behaviour. This study will adopt social constructionist perspective and analysis survey data of 200 young people in China to explore the process of the construction of standardized success criteria and its impact on cognition, psychology and behavior. Results show that income, education and occupational status were the top three factors respondents felt were essential measures of success. This uniformity of perception creates a lot of psychological stress such as anxiety, comparison, doubts, and more, especially for the young people between the ages of 24–26, who are leaving high school and getting ready for work. Conversely, people engage in active decisions to adapt their education and employment options in order to fit into the usual ways of achieving success, thus reinforcing the "rules" by strategic choices. The study concludes that success standards are created through a cyclical process of institutional evaluation, quantification, individual adaptation, and social reinforcement and become internalized behavioral norms. This is especially exacerbated in highly competitive and centralized, as is the case in modern China.

**Keywords:** social comparison, indicator reactivity, social construction, behavioral norms, success standardization

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## 1. Introduction

Success, in today's culture, is more often coupled with anxiety, comparison and self-denial. Success has evolved from an open-ended and multi-faceted pursuit of personal achievement to a measurable and measurable set of external "rules" [1]: from the "other people's child" in a family context, to the demonstration of a high income, an elite education, and financial autonomy on social media, to performance ratings and promotion rankings at work.

The transition is based on solid empirical facts. As per the statistical data, it is witnessed that in 2026, there were 3.43 million candidates that appeared for the National Postgraduate Entrance Examination, and the competition is very high even in 2026 [2]. In November 2025, the unemployment rate of China's urban youth (16-24) was 16.9% and high employment pressures increased people's concerns about success criteria [3]. Success on social media platforms is presented in a very template form and through algorithmic recommendations, people feel compelled to compare themselves and imitate. A sociological point of view

would view success as an evaluative system which is gradually built through social processes and institutions. Bourdieu and Passeron noted that the education system has a set of evaluation methods to transform the social differences into ability differences [4]. Lareau's research also indicated that middle-class families' concerted cultivation helps their children to adjust to the institutionalized form of evaluation [5]. Espeland and Sauder suggested the term indicator performativity at the organisational level: after the use of indicators for ranking and resource allocation, the indicators lose their meaning as a measuring device and become instruments that guide behaviour [6].

However, little research has been done that fully integrates the educational and workplace stages, and even less that examines the ongoing functioning and internalization of success standards in an integrated fashion across the various institutional fields. Hence, in this article, empirical data are presented based on theoretical analysis which aims to carry out an integrated examination of the standardization process of success criteria. The article addresses two concrete questions: First, how success standards are created by the intertwining of education, family, organization, and media, becoming social common sense; and second, what the standardized success standards do to the individual's psychological states and choice of behaviors.

## **2. The theory presented is that of standardization and social construction**

### **2.1. Success criteria and indicator reactivity: the social construction**

This article addresses three dimensions of success criteria becoming standardized (institutional evaluation, social comparison, and individual action), views indicator reactivity as an important explanatory factor, and provides analytic insights into this process. Success is really an evaluative measure that is slowly built up by social interaction and institutional arrangements. This construction process is especially crucial for the educational system. Bourdieu and Passeron noted that the educational system operates on a particular evaluation system which creates ability gaps from social gaps, and lends legitimacy to certain success pathways [4]. It is a theory of cultural reproduction that shows how success standards can exist in harmony with the existing social structure and this is how they can continue to be reproduced from one generation to the next [5]. In the particular case of China, an examination and promotion-based assessment system has made scores and rankings the best measure of success and the ultimate criteria for allocating resources [7]. In this context family comparisons and public opinion continually enable this standard to be reproduced and to contract success from pluralistic values to a few well-known pathways.

In the whole construction process of success standards, quantification is an important connecting link. Society makes complex abilities and values measurable by transforming them into measurable factors like income, educational degrees and occupation rank and thus not only makes individual comparison and screening possible, but also concretises the content of success. More importantly, these indicators have reactivity in them. Espeland and Sauder pointed out that when indicators are used for ranking and resource allocation, the actors will make decisions based on the indicators, and the indicators will cease to describe reality and instead, shape reality [6]. In the classroom and workplace, scores and rank are tied to progress in school, or gaining resources, and performance measures are tied to the promotion and income. This suggests that indicators are not just technical tools, but stand for the whole process in which success criteria are institutionalised and internalised as behavioural orientations.

The above processes are internalized, as well as compared socially, with cyclical reinforcement mechanisms.

After being institutionalized, success standards become internalized by individuals over time, via social comparison and through effects of daily interactions. Families and peer groups are important. Lareau

explained that the families from various social classes use different approaches to raise their children, which results in children learning to fit into and rely on the evaluation system to varying degrees [5]. In achievement oriented families, people often assume that they must conform to institutionalized measures of success. Social comparison theory suggests that people tend to compare themselves with others when making self-evaluations [8]. When competing, this kind of comparison is more likely to be made on measurable aspects, thus sustaining the idea of one success standard. In the Chinese environment, such involution competition and peer pressure exacerbates this tendency [9, 10] and makes people more likely to conform to mainstream evaluations. So success standards takes the place of institutional norms, and become psychological constraints.

The process of standardization of success standards can also be seen as a circular system: the institutionalization of the assessment system supplies the success standards, the quantification mechanism makes the success standards comparable, people act in a strategic way on the basis of the indicators of success, and through social comparison, they internalize the existing success criteria, which in turn are put into practice again. In the Chinese context, this mechanism is more intense, and is closely connected with the centralized nature of the educational competition, the increase in the participation of the family, and the pressure of social mobility.

## 2.2. Internalization, social comparison, and cyclical reinforcement mechanisms

Once success standards are institutionalized, they are gradually internalized by individuals through social comparison and daily interaction. Families and peer groups play significant roles. Lareau noted that families from different social classes employ distinct child-rearing practices, causing individuals to adapt to and depend on the evaluation system to varying degrees. In achievement-oriented families, individuals are more likely to take institutionalized success standards for granted. Meanwhile, social comparison theory indicates that individuals often rely on comparisons with others when evaluating themselves. In competitive environments, such comparisons are more likely to focus on quantifiable indicators, reinforcing the trend toward singular success standards. In the Chinese context, involution-style competition and peer pressure intensify this tendency, making individuals more inclined to follow mainstream evaluative standards. Thus, success standards complete the transformation from institutional norms to psychological constraints.

The standardization process of success standards can be understood as a cyclical system: the institutional evaluation system provides the standards; the quantification mechanism renders the standards comparable; individuals engage in strategic action around the indicators; and through social comparison, they gradually internalize these standards, ultimately reproducing the existing success standards in practice. This mechanism exhibits higher intensity in the Chinese context, closely related to the centralized nature of educational competition, the intensified involvement of families, and the pressures of social mobility.

## 3. Data and methods

### 3.1. Data sources and sample composition

The sources of the data and the composition of the sample are presented.

The data in this article are based on a questionnaire-based investigation around the question of what 'success' looks like through indicators and 200 valid responses. In the context of China (Mainland), the respondents are mainly young people, both currently in school and in the workforce.

The respondents are quite diversified in terms of their sample structure, as in terms of gender, age and identity. The gender distribution is fairly even; the age distribution is mainly in the 18-26 group, with a proportion of age 27 and above; and the identity distribution is a mix of undergraduate students, graduate

students and working professionals. This structure enables to compare the success perceptions at various stages. In the study it is noteworthy that the sample was collected by convenience sampling. The goal is not to make inferences from the statistics, but to uncover the typical expressions of the standardized success standards within a given population.

### 3.2. Variable settings and measurement

This study focuses on the main problem of the indicators of success standards and builds an analytical variable in three aspects, namely, cognition, emotion, and behavior.

At the level of cognition, the study assesses how individuals think about indicators of success (e.g., do they see high income, high education and social standing as indicators of success; do they see a relatively stable evaluative system in society about success).

Second, on the emotional level, the study pays attention to the psychological effect that standardized success criteria have on individuals, which includes worrying about not meeting society's expectations of success, feeling pressured to conform to others, and a self-doubt about not conforming to mainstream expectations of success.

Third, at the behavioral level, the study explores people's behavioral tendencies when they actually have to make a decision, such as how much they are willing to gain competitive experiences or how much they are willing to take socially validated development paths.

Based on the three dimensions, this article tries to make a comprehensive analysis of the social influence of success standards from continuous mechanism of cognition—psychology—behavior.

### 3.3. Analytical methods

The use of analytical methods in this article is mainly descriptive statistics and group comparison to organize and interpret the data obtained from the questionnaire.

The study first analyzes overall cognitive tendencies towards the standards of success in terms of the distribution of the mean results of the respondents, then compares the groups (e.g., gender, age, identity) and examines the different forms in which the perception of success manifests itself in the groups, and finally, it examines the cognitive, emotional and behavioral variables together and examines what pathways are available for the influence of the standardization of the concept of success.

It should be emphasized that, due to the small sample size, this article does not pursue the use of complex statistical models but rather is aimed at explanatory analysis, with a focus on revealing the structural relationships between the variables, and their social relevance.

## 4. Empirical analysis: the standardization of success standards and their mechanisms of influence

Contemporary youth groups have certain indicatorizing characteristics in their understanding of success. The survey reveals that around 84% of the respondents indicated that high income is an important measure of success, with 64% stating strongly agree. At the same time, most of the respondents also include high academic qualifications, social position and recognition by others as important dimensions of success. These findings suggest that success in the modern day has been distilled into a small number of measurable and comparable key measures, as a fairly coherent assessment framework (Figure 1).

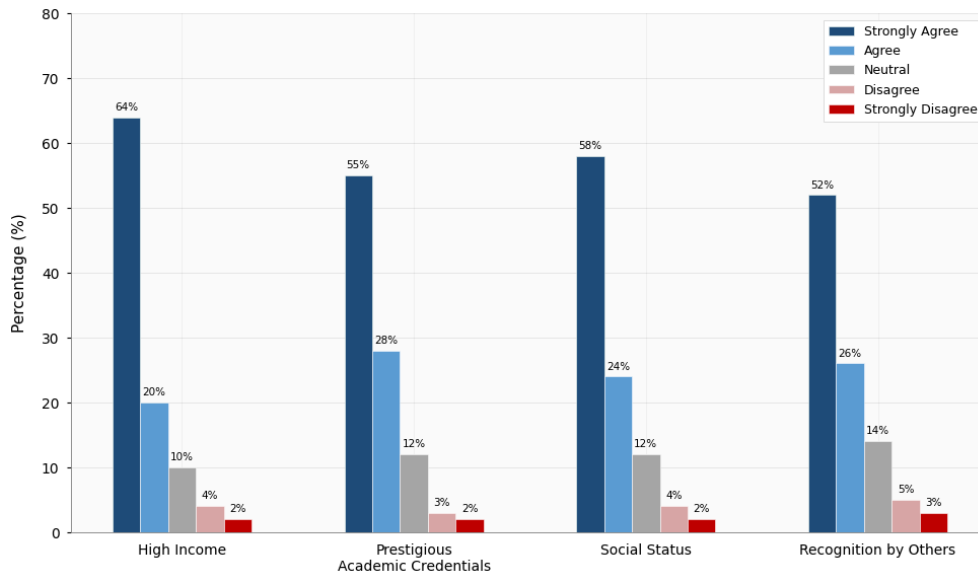


Figure. 1. This is the distribution for respondents' recognition of success standards

When looking at group differences, there are important variations between the different identity groups on the extent of agreement. High income equals success" is a statement for which the proportions of undergraduate and graduate students (71.74% and 69.84%, respectively) are both very high, while that of the working group is only 40%. This indicates that in contexts with high institutionalization of evaluation systems (as in the educational system) people are more likely to say they know what they want to do when they are successful – and to stick to one indicator – but as they join the workforce and evaluative systems become more plural, they become less reliant on a single indicator. So the recognition of success standards does not come just out of the preference of the individual but is more closely related to their structural positions (see Figure 2).

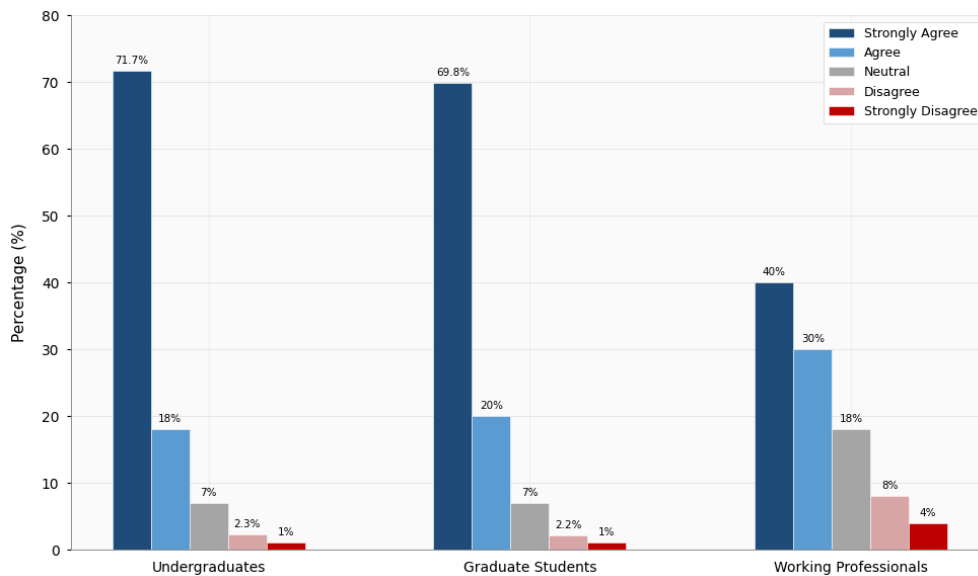


Figure. 2. The differences between individual groups in recognising standards of success

Success criteria do not just stop at the cognitive level, it also becomes psychological pressure to the individual (see Figure 3).

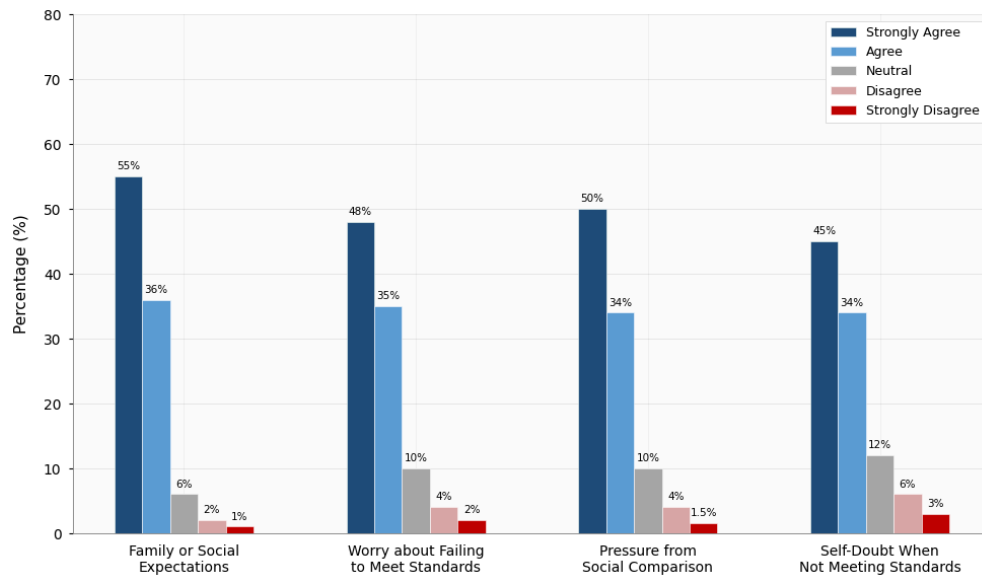


Figure. 3. Psychological pressure based on normalized success standard

According to the survey, 91 % of the respondents feel expectations of success from family/society; 83.5% feel that they are concerned about the inability to successfully meet expectations of success at the hands of others; 84.5% feel that they are pressured when they feel others are more successful and 79% of respondents feel self-worth doubts when they do not meet the expectations of socially recognized success. The results showed that the success criterion has been changed from external evaluative instruments to internal psychological restriction, constituting a continuous pressure mechanism in the person [11].

But on the age difference side, the comparison tendency and pressure experience of younger respondents has relatively high scores, especially those aged 18-20 and 24-26, and the sensitivity to standardized success criteria of the respondents aged 27 and above is relatively low. This implies that the individuals who are in the process of leaving school and entering the job market or are still in an educational context of high competition, have more chances to internalize the standards of success as self-demand and, therefore, create a greater psychological burden. For example, the "strongly agree" level of self-doubt about not meeting standards is 72.73% for this group compared to some other age groups. The transition from school to work is an important one and the young are subject to a variety of assessment regimes, such as academic, employment and social. They will more readily internalise success expectations as self-expectations under the overlay of the structural pressures and so create greater psychological burden.

The success standards' ability to exercise influence is tightly coupled to the mechanism of social comparison. 82.5% of the respondents strongly agree (63.5%) that they often compare themselves to others. This kind of comparative behavior is not a one-time event, but rather it is reinforced time and time again through group interactions. If people have long been in situations where evaluation is based on the same indicators they are more likely to take them for granted and so are less likely to reflect on their rationality. Interpersonal comparison in relation to success standards represents the "real-life" expression of indicator reactivity in interpersonal interaction, namely, evaluative indicators mutually influence people's cognition and behavioral models [6].

In the case of cognitive identification and psychological internalization, success standards are also manifested in people's real behavior choices. The results of the survey reveal that 90% of the respondents say they will take steps to improve their competitive ability through the acquisition of certificates, internships or experiences; more than 85% are more inclined to follow the development paths that are more known to society; and 83.5% will modify their development goals according to society's success criteria. This phenomenon refers to the shift of the success criteria from conceptual level to action orientations. While making educational and career decisions individuals do not only account for their interests and capacities, but mainly see which options better align with mainstream evaluative norms and hence their chances of access to resources and social recognition (see Figure 4) [12].

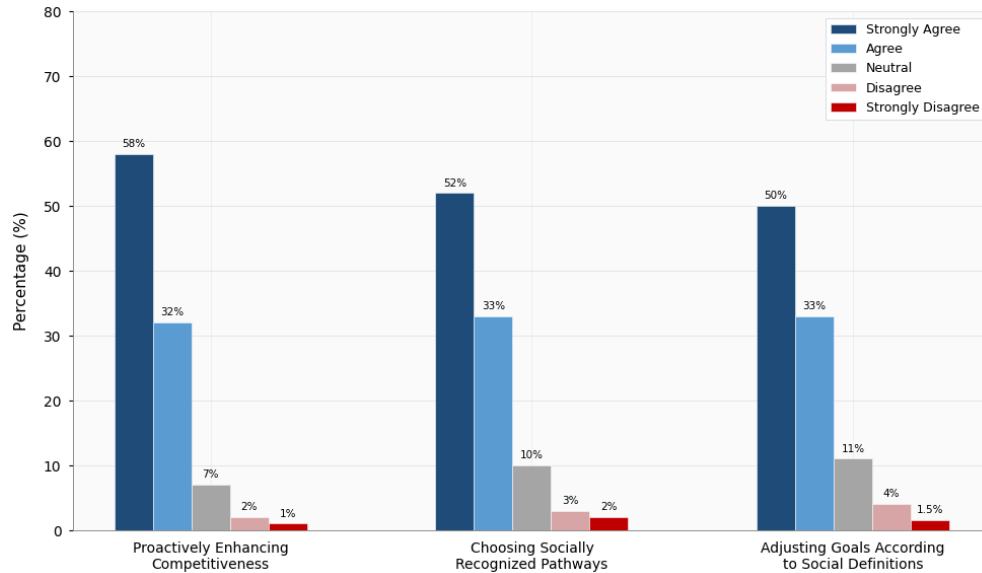


Figure. 4. Achievement of Standardised Success Straits

This behavioral conformity can be interpreted as an interactive result of structure and rational choice: In the first place, institutionalized evaluative systems delineate possible courses of action through the use of indicators; secondly, it is possible for individuals to adapt and optimize their own interests through strategic action within the limits set by the institution [5]. In this process, the persons do not just bear the evaluation system, they are also the players who reproduce it.

Combining the above analysis, it can be found that the indicatorization of success standards develops gradually at three levels: cognitive identification, psychological internalization and behavioral conformity, and that it is reinforced and consolidated constantly in the process of social comparison. Success standards have gone beyond being evaluative, external instruments to becoming a norm with a constraining force in social structure, in a cyclical way. It is during the ongoing interactive process that such success standards are continually reproduced, and eventually that become social common sense.

## 5. Discussion: further development of "mechanism of success" standardization and situational interpretation

If researchers put together the analysis and the results of the above-mentioned empirical studies, researchers can notice that the indicatorization of the standards of success is an effect of the confluence of the institutional

evaluation, of the mechanism of quantification and of the individual action. In contexts like education and the workplace, explicit evaluative standards like scores, academic qualifications and performance are used for resource allocation and for screening opportunities. The standardization of success criteria reduces complex abilities and values into measurable and comparable numeric values, allowing people to be ranked and compete in a common metric. Within such uncertainty and competitive pressure, people slowly adapt their behavior in connection with these indicators, developing action patterns that are directed towards standards. In this way, success standards transform from evaluative instruments into behavioural norms and thus become a structuring force that pre-shapes the pathways of individual action.

If researchers look at the research result as a typical action-structure relationship cyclical mechanism, educational institutions and organizational evaluations as structural factors are the indicators that give individuals clear success standards and orientations of action; when they are seeking for success they are constantly adjusting to the standards through strategic action, such as increasing their learning investment, selecting the pathway with high returns, or obtaining the quantifiable advantage. A clear cyclical aspect to this process is that institutions set standards, indicators allow ranking, individuals respond to these standards and actions reinforce standards. Individuals do not only embody the evaluation system, but they also produce it. Within this cycle, success standards become stable, legitimate and common sense in society. This result is consistent with the indicator reactivity theory, which states that indicators are not only used to measure reality, but they continuously influence reality.

So, this article combines the above analysis and proposes a continuous route on three levels which integrates the mechanism of success standardization. Cognitively, people see factors like income, qualifications and jobs as fundamental measures of success. On the psychological level, a person creates anxiety, pressure and self-worth evaluation when they are engaged in continuous social comparison in which they convert external standards into internal evaluative standards [13]. At the behavioral level, people take proactive behavior, in line with mainstream ideas of success, in educational and career decisions, which increases the chances of access to resources and recognition. The empirical analysis supports this continuous mechanism of cognition, psychology and behavior.

## 6. Conclusion

This article is based on the standardization of success criteria as the analytical object of the article. Through social construction and the analysis of questionnaires, it systematically looks at the success perceptions of modern youth groups in China and how they influence. The study revealed that 'success' standards are not the outcome of individual autonomous choices but are built-up through a combination of the education system, the family, the organisation and the media and are stabilised and reinforced by quantified indicators.

This article shows at the level of the empirical analysis that there is a three-layer pathway that operates to ensure success. First, on the cognitive level, the respondents tend to think in terms of quantifiable parameters – income, education, and occupation – the three generally accepted standards of success. Second, from the psychological level, by ongoing comparing with others, external assessment norms are incorporated into self-assessment norms, leading to anxiety, pressure and self-worth questions. Third, at the behavioral level, individuals' action pathways are oriented more toward mainstream evaluative systems in making educational and career choices, which further makes the success standards shift from conceptual to behavioral.

Based on this, this article further theoretically proposes that the process of the standardization of success standards is a mechanism of structure–action cycle: The standards are set through institutional evaluation, the standards are quantified and ranked through quantification and ranking mechanisms, individuals act

strategically based on the standards, their action further supports the existing evaluative system, and thus the success standards are continuously reproduced. This mechanism illustrates how success criteria can not only be assessment instruments for individuals, but can also be a norm that produces a constraining force for behavior.

In the Chinese context, this standardization mechanism has a higher intensity, as this article reveals. This is mostly due to the centralisation of the educational evaluation system, the high engagement of families in the choice of pathways and the social mobility and job insecurity pressures. In this structural context, success can be more easily codified as a handful of measurable metrics, and success is constantly reinforced through social comparison, group interaction.

Theoretically, this article combines the social construction of success with standardization mechanisms, and suggests an analytical framework consisting of institutions, interaction and individual action that helps to grasp the generative logic of success anxiety and competitive pressure in contemporary society. From a practical point of view, the research results indicate that the psychological pressure on individuals and dependence on the path may be intensified in the case of singularization and high standardization of evaluative systems, even if they increase the efficiency of the evaluation. Hence, researchers need to investigate the possibility of other more pluralistic forms of success assessments both at the institutional and cultural level so that researchers may prevent the social effects of over-competition.

There are still some drawbacks with this article. First, the study is based on a small convenience sample that is the situation of one particular group and cannot easily be generalized to other groups. Second, this article is now mainly descriptive in nature and a formal econometric testing of the link between variables has not yet been done. Future research can be more in-depth by increasing the number of subjects, adding quantitative analysis, and cross-context comparison to the mechanisms of success standardization.

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