

## DOES POPULARITY AT WORK MATTER? EXAMINING THE EFFECTS ON CAREER SATISFACTION THROUGH SELF-EVALUATION AND ABILITIES

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Much research has been conducted on the effect of popularity among children and adolescents, but the popularity of adults at work has received little attention. I investigated the effects of employees' popularity on their career satisfaction, and, in regard to this relationship, the roles of employees' knowledge, skill, and abilities (KSA) as moderators, and of their core self-evaluations as a mediator. Participants were 219 supervisor–subordinate dyads employed by 32 enterprises in China. Multiple regression analysis of the data showed that the employees' popularity was positively related to their career satisfaction. Their KSA level moderated this relationship, so that, among employees with less KSA, popularity had a stronger effect on their career satisfaction than among those with more KSA. Employees' core self-evaluations fully mediated the moderating effect of KSA on the relationship between popularity and career satisfaction. The findings suggest that if employees can increase their popularity, this is an effective way to improve their career satisfaction, especially for those who are low in KSA. Improvement of employees' core self-evaluations may also directly enhance their career satisfaction.

*Keywords:* popularity, career satisfaction, knowledge, skill, ability, core self-evaluation, employee.

Researchers have reported finding that *popularity*, which is defined as “being generally accepted by one’s peers” (Scott & Judge, 2009, p. 21), is of significance during childhood and adolescence. Popular students have positive

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social interactions with others and experience high levels of self-confidence, whereas unpopular students are viewed and treated negatively by others and, hence, experience high levels of psychological withdrawal, depression, and even delinquency (Henneberger, Durkee, Truong, Atkins, & Tolan, 2013; Kornienko & Santos, 2014; Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993).

Does it matter whether or not an adult is popular in the context of his or her workplace? Researchers have confirmed that both children and adults have strong needs for social acceptance, and strive to prevent social failure (Scott & Judge, 2009). Being popular is important not only during one's school-age years, but also throughout adulthood (Cullen, Fan, & Liu, 2014). This is especially true in organizations where teamwork and cooperation are required in work routines, for, without the acceptance and support among colleagues, working together in teams and carrying out tasks cooperatively could be difficult.

However, only a small number of researchers have examined popularity in the context of the workplace, and in most of these studies the focus has been on the outcomes of being popular, such as one's perceived organizational justice and the beneficial behavior of peers (Koopman, Matta, Scott, & Conlon, 2015; Scott & Judge, 2009), but the mechanisms of how popularity influences these outcomes, and the situational conditions of these effects, have not been explored. This presents an obstacle to understanding not only of popularity, but also of how theory applies to organizational management practices.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of popularity on career satisfaction and the mechanism and conditions of this effect. First, I chose career satisfaction as the dependent, because this variable is an indicator of an individual's perception of his or her career success (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001), and is of great importance in predicting employees' work attitudes and behavior (Ng, Eby, Sorensen & Feldman, 2005). Second, I investigated the boundary condition under which popularity affects career satisfaction. From a social-cognition perspective (Bandura, 2001), personal and environmental factors interact and influence people's perception. Knowledge, skill, and ability (KSA) describe the level of personal aptitudes an employee has to fulfill his or her job demands and achieve his or her work objectives. I presumed that this personal factor may interact with popularity, which describes the relational environment, and influence the employee's perception of his or her career success. Third, I further explored the mechanism of how popularity affects career satisfaction by introducing core self-evaluations, that is, one's own evaluations of one's ability and values of worthiness and self-efficacy. Based on social cognition theory (Bandura, 2001), I argued that the interaction between KSA and environmental factors would influence the individual's self-cognition and then, in turn, his/her perception of career success.

## Hypotheses and Model Development

### Popularity and Career Satisfaction

*Career satisfaction* describes an individual's perception of his or her career success (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999). According to social cognition theory, people's behaviors are based more on their perceptions than on the true reality (Bandura, 2001). Hence, compared with objective measures of career success, career satisfaction is more important in predicting employees' work attitudes and behavior, and even organizational outcomes.

Findings in research have suggested that popularity leads to both extrinsic and intrinsic outcomes (Scott, 2013). In terms of extrinsic benefits, popular employees who have beneficial interactions with their colleagues experience more kindness and less interpersonal mistreatment from others (Cullen, Fan, & Liu, 2014), which, in turn, leads to more positive career outcomes, such as better work performance and more career development opportunities. In studies of popularity at school the findings have indicated that popular students may have more beneficial interactions with others, which led to lower levels of truancy and delinquency (Henneberger et al., 2013).

In terms of intrinsic benefits, according to Maslow's human motivation theory (1943), humans have needs for love, belonging, acceptance, and esteem from their social groups. If employees are popular in their workplace, this can satisfy these needs by making them feel accepted and respected by their work colleagues, leading them to have a positive perception of their career. Findings reported in a substantial amount of research in which the focus was on children and adolescents have also shown that, compared to their peers, popular students experience more positive emotions, less depression, and less psychological withdrawal (Kornienko & Santos, 2014; Newcomb et al., 1993). In sum, both the extrinsic and intrinsic benefits enjoyed by popular employees influence them to form a more positive perception of their career than do unpopular employees.

***Hypothesis 1:*** Employees' popularity will be positively related to their career satisfaction.

### The Moderating Role of Knowledge, Skill, and Abilities

Studies have found that employees' level of KSA is a significant predictor of their work performance (e.g., Andrews, Kacmar, & Harris, 2009; Bosco, Allen, & Singh, 2015). Employees with more KSA, compared to those with less, can achieve work objectives more successfully and attain better work performance, which, in turn, leads to greater career satisfaction (Hennekam, 2016).

From a social-cognition perspective (Bandura, 2001), employees' KSA level, as a personal factor, will interact with their popularity, as a relational environmental factor. Compared to employees with more KSA, it is harder for

employees with less KSA to obtain both subjective and objective success because of their limitations. Hence, popularity becomes a determining factor in expected outcomes for the latter group of employees. Peer acceptance can not only bring them special advantages, such as, help, favor, and priority (Scott & Judge, 2009), but can also give them a sense of belonging through positive social interactions, and this leads to career satisfaction. However, when employees have more KSA than others have they can rely on these abilities to develop and obtain positive cognitions about their career, that is, the effect of popularity on their career satisfaction is partially substituted by KSA. In other words, employees with less KSA are more sensitive to the effect of popularity on their career satisfaction than are those with more KSA.

**Hypothesis 2:** Knowledge, skill, and abilities of employees will moderate the relationship between their popularity and career satisfaction. The influence of popularity on career satisfaction will be stronger for employees who have less knowledge, and fewer skills and abilities than for those with greater knowledge and more skills and abilities.

### **The Mediating Role of Core Self-Evaluations**

*Core self-evaluations* are an individual's fundamental evaluations of his or her own abilities and values, indicated by self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, neuroticism, and locus of control (Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997). Core self-evaluations are significant predictors of job satisfaction, work performance, and career success (Judge, Hurst, & Simon, 2009). Employees with positive core self-evaluations are confident and optimistic. They have strong self-efficacy and a positive cognition/explanatory style and focus on their positive qualities (Watson, 2000). They also believe that the events in their lives can be changed through their own efforts.

Employees with positive core self-evaluations always have high levels of career satisfaction (Zhang, Wu, Miao, Yan, & Peng, 2014). Because of their positive attitude, stable and optimistic mood, and the positive cognition/explanation style they adopt in their work, they perform well, which can create extrinsic benefits (Cheung, Herndon, & Dougherty, 2016) and give them a positive perception of their career (Judge et al., 2009). Hence, core self-evaluations have a positive effect on career satisfaction.

Employees' core self-evaluations can be influenced by the popularity they experience. Based on social cognition theory, people's cognition can be changed through interpersonal interactions (Bandura, 2001). Peers' acceptance can be interpreted as a symbol of social status and success, which increases employees' self-evaluations of their own abilities and self-efficacy. Findings in research related to individuals' popularity at school have indicated that, compared to popular students, unpopular students experience more negative emotions, more

depression and are more likely to display psychological withdrawal because of their negative social interactions with others (Kornienko & Santos, 2014), which, in turn, decreases their own evaluations of their worth, values, and abilities.

In addition, I argued that the relationship between popularity and core self-evaluations would be moderated by the employee's KSA level. Employees with less KSA than others have mainly base their evaluations of their worth and values on the recognition they receive from their work groups. However, employees with more KSA can derive their self-cognition from two sources: their own traits and their social environment (Bandura, 2001). As such, their KSA substitutes for part of the effect of popularity on their core self-evaluations. In other words, people with less KSA than others have are more sensitive to their social interactions with others when evaluating themselves.

In sum, peer acceptance is an important way for employees with less KSA to obtain self-confidence and, in turn, to achieve career satisfaction, but employees with more KSA can rely on this to form positive self-evaluations and achieve career satisfaction. In other words, the effect of KSA weakens/substitutes for the effect of popularity on career satisfaction through core self-evaluations.

**Hypothesis 3:** Core self-evaluations will mediate the moderating effect of KSA on the relationship between popularity and career satisfaction.

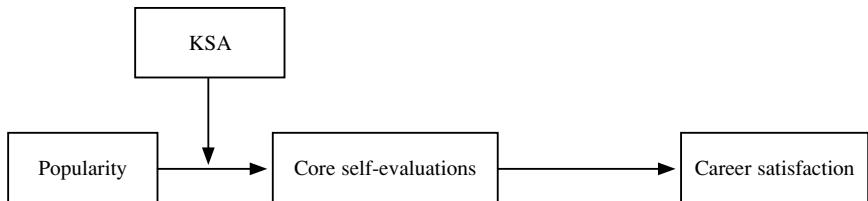


Figure 1. *Hypothesized model of effects of popularity on career satisfaction.*

Note. KSA = knowledge, skill, and abilities.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

The sample consisted of 219 supervisor–subordinate dyads employed in 32 enterprises located in Shanghai, Xi'an, and Chengdu City, People's Republic of China. The industries included manufacturing, electronic, finance, and service enterprises. The organizational types were state-owned, private, and foreign-owned enterprises. Participants completed a survey, with one survey being distributed to the employees and another different survey being distributed to their supervisors. With each survey form, I attached a cover letter to explain the purpose of this research to the respondents and assured them of the confidentiality of their responses. Each survey form was assigned an identification

number, which facilitated matching the employees' responses with those of their supervisors. Out of 300 survey forms distributed, 219 matched pairs of completed subordinate-supervisor forms were returned, for a response rate of 73.0%. In the group of employees 51.6% were men, 48.4% were women, and, in terms of education level, 81.3% had a bachelor's degree or higher academic qualification. The mean age and dyad tenure were 31.1 and 2.09 years, respectively.

### Measure

**Popularity.** I used Scott and Judge's (2009) eight-item scale to measure the employees' popularity. Supervisors were required to evaluate their subordinates' popularity among their colleagues on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*. The following is a sample item: "This subordinate is generally admired" ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

**Knowledge, skill, and abilities.** The four items measuring the employees' KSA were based on the discussions of Subramaniam and Youndt (2005) and described the level of employees' KSA. The supervisors were required to rate their subordinates' KSA on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. The items were: "Has a comprehensive grasp of the knowledge used in the work," "Masters the essential skills of the position," "Has strong business ability," and "Has strong learning ability and can quickly accept and master new knowledge and new technology" ( $\alpha = .87$ ). We conducted confirmatory factor analysis to evaluate the validity of this measure through calculation of chi square, degrees of freedom, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), normed fit index (NFI), and incremental fit index (IFI). The results suggested that the KSA model provided a moderate fit for the data ( $\chi^2 = 8.13$ ,  $df = 2$ , RMSEA = 0.07, GFI = 0.94, NFI = 0.95, IFI = 0.96).

**Core self-evaluations.** We used the 12-item Core Self-Evaluations Scale (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003) to measure the employees' core self-evaluations. The employees were required to rate their self-evaluations on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*. The following is a sample item: "When I try, I generally succeed" ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

**Career satisfaction.** We used Greenhaus, Parasuraman, and Wormley's (1990) five-item scale to measure career satisfaction. The employees were required to rate their career satisfaction on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*. The following is a sample item: "I am satisfied with the success that I have achieved in my career" ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

### Data Analysis

First, correlation analysis was performed to examine the correlations among popularity, career satisfaction, core self-evaluations, and KSA. Second, following

the procedure recommended by Aiken and West (1991), I performed multiple regression analysis to test the moderating effect of KSA. Finally, I followed the procedure recommended by Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt (2005) and Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007) to test the mediated moderation effect of core self-evaluations.

## Results

In Table 1 the means, standard deviations, reliability, and correlations of the study variables are presented. The results show that employees' popularity was positively correlated to both their core self-evaluations and career satisfaction, and their core self-evaluations were positively correlated to their career satisfaction.

I tested the hypotheses using multiple regressions. In Model 1, I controlled variables including education, gender, age, and tenure with supervisor. In Model 2, I entered popularity as the predictor. In Model 3, I entered KSA as the moderator. In Model 4, I entered the interaction between popularity and KSA. The results are shown in Table 2.

As shown in Model 2, popularity was significantly positively related to career satisfaction. Hypothesis 1 was supported. In Model 4 the results show that interaction between KSA and popularity was significantly related to career satisfaction. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was also supported. Figure 2 graphically depicts the results of the moderating effect. The effect of popularity on career satisfaction was stronger for employees who had less KSA, than for those with more KSA.

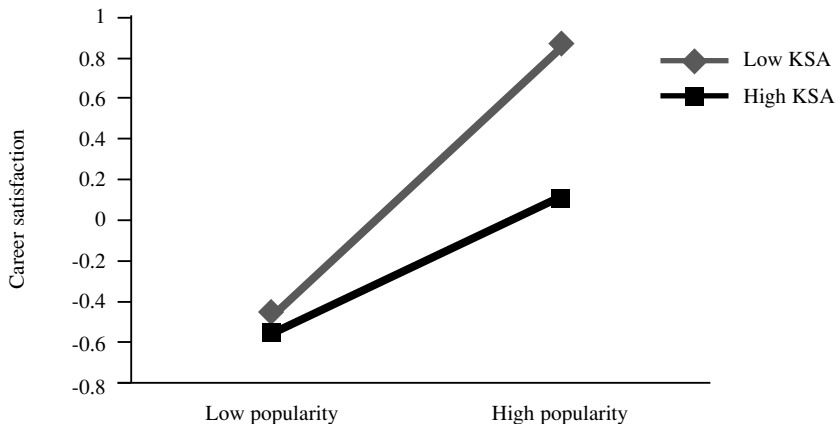


Figure 2. Effects of popularity and knowledge, skill, and abilities on career satisfaction.  
Note. KSA = knowledge, skill, and abilities.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Education <sup>a</sup>	4.99	.78	—							
2. Gender (1 = male; 2 = female)	1.49	.52	-.177**	—						
3. Age (years)	31.11	7.83	.232**	-.111	—					
4. Tenure with supervisor	2.09	1.70	.230**	-.002	.319**	—				
5. Popularity	2.07	1.70	-.078	.023	-.163*	-.079	(0.83)			
6. Knowledge, skill, and abilities (KSA)	4.69	0.50	.131	-.109	.072	.118	.550**	(0.87)		
7. Core self-evaluations	5.37	0.80	.024	-.053	-.046	-.115	.450**	.225**	(0.83)	
8. Career satisfaction	4.02	.91	-.076	.009	-.142*	-.071	.391**	.075	.487**	(0.92)

Note. N = 219. Alpha internal consistency reliability coefficients appear on the main diagonal in parentheses. <sup>a</sup> Education (1 = primary school, 2 = junior high school, 3 = senior high school, 4 = college, 5 = bachelor's degree, 6 = master's degree, 7 = doctorate). \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01.

Table 2. Results of Regression Analyses for Career Satisfaction

Predictors	Career satisfaction								Core self-evaluations		
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9		
<b>1. Control variable</b>											
Education	-.044	-.030	-.007	-.003	-.031	.049	.067	.072	.076		
Gender	-.012	-.013	-.030	-.046	-.023	-.044	-.045	-.049	-.062		
Age	-.127	-.071	-.053	-.057	-.072	-.027	.040	.044	.042		
Tenure with supervisor	-.020	-.011	.009	.005	.045	-.117	-.107	-.102	-.105		
<b>2. Main effect</b>											
Popularity		.377***	.490***	.497***	.313***		.454***	.483***	.488***		
Knowledge, skill, and abilities (KSA)			-.194*	-.207**	-.184*			-.050	-.060		
<b>3. Moderating effect</b>											
Popularity × KSA				-.164**	-.114			-.133*	.88		
<b>4. Mediated moderation</b>											
Core self-evaluations					.376***						
R <sup>2</sup>	.023	.161	.184	.211	.319	.018	.218	.220	.237		
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.023	.138***	.024*	.027**	.108***	.018	.200***	.002	.017*		
F	1.240	8.108***	7.953***	8.022***	12.230***	.984	11.823***	9.896***	9.317***		

Note. N = 219. Tabled values are standardized regression weights. \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001.

Finally, I tested the mediated moderating effect of core self-evaluations following the procedures suggested by Muller et al. (2005). First, the results had to show that KSA moderated the effect of popularity on career satisfaction, as indicated in Hypothesis 2. The significant and negative moderating effect shown in Model 4 suggested that popularity had a stronger effect on career satisfaction for employees who had less KSA than for those with more KSA.

Second, the results had to demonstrate that KSA moderated the effect of popularity on core self-evaluations. I entered the control variables, popularity, KSA, and the interaction between popularity and KSA step by step to predict the core self-evaluations in Models 6 to 9, and found that the interaction was significantly and negatively related to core self-evaluations. Finally, I had to enter the predictor, moderator, interaction, and mediator to predict the employees' career satisfaction and the results had to show that their core self-evaluations significantly predicted their career satisfaction while controlling for the direct moderating effect of KSA on career satisfaction. When I accounted for the effect of core self-evaluations on career satisfaction, the moderating effect of KSA on career satisfaction decreased. As shown in Table 2, core self-evaluations had a significant effect on career satisfaction (see Model 5). When I entered core self-evaluations into Model 5, the interaction between popularity and KSA decreased to nonsignificance. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

I applied the approach used by Preacher et al. (2007) to test further this moderated indirect effect. In Table 3, the bootstrap result showed that the indirect effect of popularity on career satisfaction was significant at the mean level and at the 10th percentile of KSA, as a 95% confidence interval (CI) does not include zero, and the indirect effect is not significant at the 90th percentile, as a 95% CI includes zero. Hence, when the KSA level was high, core self-evaluations did not mediate the effects of popularity on career satisfaction. At lower KSA levels, core self-evaluations mediated the effects of popularity on career satisfaction. Hypothesis 3 was, therefore, supported.

Table 3. *Indirect Effect Analysis Results*

Moderator: KSA	Indirect effect	SE	95% CI LL	95% CI UL
10th percentile (-1.36)	.31	.06	.19	.45
<i>M</i> (0.17)	.16	.04	.10	.25
90th percentile (1.09)	.08	.04	-.01	.17

*Note.* Bootstrap sample size = 5,000. KSA = knowledge, skill, and abilities. LL = lower limit, UL = upper limit.

## Discussion

In this study the results revealed the effects of popularity on career satisfaction. The results were consistent with those reported in previous research examining the effects of popularity on job satisfaction and work performance (Koopman et al., 2015), illuminating the importance of popularity in the work context.

In this study I also extended the prior research on the effects of popularity in the work context by investigating the moderating effect of employees' KSA on the relationship between popularity and outcomes from a social cognition perspective. Employees with less KSA, compared to those with more KSA, were more sensitive to the effect of peers' acceptance on their career satisfaction, as they rely more on the help and recognition of other people to build up a positive perception of their career. As employees with more KSA can count more on their own abilities, they are less sensitive to the effect of popularity on their career satisfaction.

I further explored the mechanism of how popularity influenced career satisfaction by investigating the mediating effect of core self-evaluations on the moderation of KSA. For employees with more KSA, the effect of KSA on their self-evaluations of their own worth and values substitutes for the effect of peer acceptance on core self-evaluations, which are associated with career satisfaction. As employees with less KSA are more sensitive to peer acceptance than others are, the way they are viewed and treated by colleagues has a much stronger influence on their core self-evaluations and, in turn, on their career satisfaction.

Taken together, my results make the following theoretical contributions. First, following the work and initial effort of Scott and Judge (2009), in this study I extended previous research related to the popularity of children and adolescents from the perspective of developmental and educational psychology, by investigating the significance of popularity in the workplace. Second, the findings demonstrated that the effect of KSA substituted for the effect of popularity on career satisfaction. KSA may weaken the influence of popularity on career satisfaction, which adds to understanding of the complex relationship between employees' own talents and their social interactions with others. Third, in my study I explored the mechanism of how popularity affected career satisfaction and, specifically, the mediating effect of core self-evaluations on the moderation of KSA. Fourth, although Scott and Judge (2009) tested the predicting effect of core self-evaluations on popularity, I argued, and proved, the effect of popularity on core self-evaluations based on social cognition theory, which has broadened understanding of the interactions between personal traits and social acceptance.

The findings also have management implications for organizations and individuals. First, to gain career satisfaction, which is beneficial for both organizational and individual development, managers and employees should find

effective ways to improve their popularity, such as offering more help to others, undergoing training in interpersonal skills, and enhancing the harmony of the workplace culture. Second, managers of organizations can improve employees' KSA through providing training and development aimed at weakening the negative effect of popularity. Unpopular individuals can increase their career satisfaction by increasing their KSA through learning and practice. Finally, as employees' core self-evaluations form a direct path to their career satisfaction, managers of organizations and individual employees can apply motivational strategies to influence the perception and evaluations of their own worth, values, and abilities, such as recognition programs acknowledging professional stature and accomplishments, objective appraisal assessing performance and contributions, and interactional justice, to increase their career satisfaction.

Although the findings in this study contribute to the literature and management practice, there were limitations. First, although I explored the effects of popularity, KSA, and core self-evaluations on career satisfaction, other important variables that may influence the effect of popularity were not taken into account, such as power distance, organizational culture, and leadership style. These variables should be included for examination and assessment in future studies. Second, I examined only the consequences of popularity. As popularity can significantly affect work outcomes, research on its predictors will be very important for identifying practical implications. Finally, given the context in which the data were collected, I was unable to gather employee career satisfaction data longitudinally. It would have been informative to see how these relationships changed over time. All of these are areas that should be the focus in future studies.

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