

African Journal for the Psychological Studies of Social Issues

Volume 29 Number 2, June, 2026 Edition

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Journal of the African Society for THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF
SOCIAL ISSUES % DEPT OF Psychology, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

PERCEIVED CAREER SUCCESS AMONG FEMALE ACADEMICS IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF MENTORING, RESILIENCE AND ORGANISATIONAL JUSTICE

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ABSTRACT

This study reviewed the roles of mentoring, resilience and organisational justice on perceived career success among female academics in Nigeria. Using a narrative review design, existing conceptual and empirical literature were selected from major academic databases and thematically analysed into four major themes with the aim to identify patterns and relationships. The review revealed that mentoring increases career awareness, confidence and professionalism, networking, research opportunities, and leadership development, which improves objective and subjective measures of success. Resilience emerged to be an important resource for female academics to handle institutional barriers, heavy workloads, rejection and work–life conflict, though highly effective when there are supportive conditions. Organisational justice was found to be an important institutional determinant in the perception of fairness in promotion processes, workload distribution, opportunities and recognition. The review’s integrative contribution shows that these factors are interrelated: mentoring can contribute to strengthening resilience and organisational justice can influence the environment of mentoring and resilience. The study findings suggest that Nigerian higher education institutions need structured mentoring, environments that support resilience and transparent, fair organisational practices to improve the career success of female academics.

Keywords: Perceived career success; Female academics; Nigeria; Mentorship; Resilience; Organisational justice

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are integral to the national development process, as they generate research and professional capacities to drive economic and social transformation, serve as producers of knowledge, human resource developers, and a source of public debate. (Altbach et al., 2010; Chankseliani et al., 2020). The productivity, retention and career development of academic staff are key determinants of the effectiveness of these institutions. However, not all of the advantages of academic work and leadership are the same. Although access to higher education has improved in many countries, women continue to be under-represented in senior academic positions and in university governance (UNESCO, 2022). This paradox has led to scholarly exploration of the structural, relational and psychological environment that affects the career of women academics. This is especially important in Nigeria. Despite the growing enrolment of women in higher education institution, few women occupy senior academic positions and leadership in the academic institutions, which is attributed to institutional, cultural and domestic pressures on women (Igiebor, 2021; Okeke et al., 2017).

Previous studies have consistently identified access to mentorship, inequitable workload distribution, unclear promotion policies, under-representation in decision-making positions and work-life balance tensions as important challenges for women (Aina & Adebayo, 2021; Ejike et

al., 2025; Edewor & Aluko, 2020). Such conditions influence objective progress (promotion or appointment to leadership roles) as well as the subjective assessment of the value, recognition and satisfaction of an academic career. This makes career success as a construct a good lens to look at the lived meaning of academic progress for female academics (Ng et al., 2005; Eketu & Edeh, 2021).

The purpose of this article is to provide a narrative review of four related constructs: mentorship, resilience, organisational justice and perceived career success. Although these have been investigated individually in education and other contexts, there has not been a cohesive review to explain the careers of female academics, specifically in the Nigerian context (Shen et al., 2022; Ogbogu, 2020). There is no prior integrative review on the role of mentorship, resilience and organisational justice on perceived career success among female academics in Nigeria. Hence this review aims are to first, to synthesise conceptual and empirical research on these four constructs, second, to provide an explanation of how these four constructs interact to influence the career trajectory of female academics, and third, to suggest lines of institutional action and future research. The article is presented in a thematic structure, starting with the overall status of women in higher education and then leads to an integrative synthesis of the effect of support, adaptability and equity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is underpinned by Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SCCT, proposed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994), emphasizes the interplay between personal factors (e.g., self-efficacy and resilience), contextual influences (e.g., mentoring and institutional support), and career-related behaviours (e.g., persistence and goal-setting). In the context of academia, SCCT provides a theoretical lens to explain how female academics navigate structural barriers and leverage support systems like mentoring to foster professional growth and success.

Complementing SCCT is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (1985), focuses on intrinsic motivation and the psychological needs that support optimal functioning, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness. SDT is particularly relevant in understanding how mentoring and organisational justice shape the internal motivation and psychological well-being of female academics. For example, when institutions provide fair treatment and empower women through mentoring, they satisfy these basic psychological needs, enhancing their intrinsic motivation and resilience. Together, SCCT and SDT provide a comprehensive framework that captures both the agency of female academics (through self-efficacy, resilience, and motivation) and the influence of the academic environment (through mentoring and organisational justice).

METHODS

The study employed a narrative review design to synthesize conceptual and empirical literature on perceived career success of female academics in Nigeria. Unlike systematic reviews, this approach provides a broad interpretive overview of the Literature related to mentorship, resilience, organisation justice and women's academic careers in Nigeria. Highlighting key themes, historical developments, controversies and future direction and not appraising every available study. The primary data bases searched included Scopus, Google Scholar and Web of Science. The review emphasised conceptualization of these constructs, the patterns which were found across studies, and the integrated meaning of these constructs in the context of career outcomes of women academics in higher education.

FINDINGS

Female Academics in Higher Education: Context and Career Realities

The career situation of female academics is frequently likened to that of the “leak in the pipeline”, where the number of women in academic positions decreases the higher one goes up the ladder (Greska, 2023; Ollrogge et al., 2022). It consistently has been found in the literature that although women do enter the academic profession in visible numbers, they are not as likely as men to hold high status professorial, executive, and leadership positions. This pattern is associated with a build-up of disadvantage rather than one barrier. Institutional structures are gendered, and the opportunities for academic publication, research funding, administrative profile, networking and sponsorship are unevenly distributed, which hinders career progression (Kaymakcioglu & Thomas, 2024; Muleya & Maqubela, 2025).

Historical and contemporary institutional exclusion of women in Nigeria affects their academic career. Historically, girls' access to formal education has been limited, and existing education systems reflect conservative notions of power, caregiving, and value in work, and therefore, are associated with lower likelihoods of women entering academic careers (UNESCO, 2022). The presence of leadership roles that are traditionally viewed as masculine, informal networks that are gendered, and work-life tensions that are more damaging to women's careers are prevalent in the workplaces of female academics (Igiebor, 2021; Okeke-Ihejirika & Salami, 2021). Marriage and motherhood expectations, and domestic duties, are not unique to Nigeria, but they do worsen these patterns.

However, there are also instances recorded in the literature of perseverance, innovativeness and leadership displayed by women in difficult institutional settings (Ibrahim & Bature, 2023). But one important takeaway from this review is that it is important not to lose sight of structural inequality in individual success stories. The career success of female academics can only be understood as the product of a dynamic relationship between the personal resources and institutional arrangements. This interaction is the foundation for the study of mentorship, resilience, and organisational justice as interrelated factors of perceived career success.

Mentorship as a Career Development Resource

Mentorship is one of the most typically mentioned relational pathways to academic success. In general, mentoring can be described as a process where a more experienced academic, often a fellow lecturer, offers advice, guidance, coaching, psychosocial support and acts as a role model for a less experienced academic, and to provide the less experienced academic with career opportunities (Dashper, 2018; Hughes & Sheerin, 2016). Mentoring in higher education may be formal, informal, peer to peer, and/or networked across multiple mentoring relationships. Throughout the literature, mentoring emerges as a factor that can lead to career clarity, research productivity, confidence, sponsorship and institutional socialization (Shen et al., 2022; Cross et al., 2019). Mentoring is especially relevant to women in academic institutions, as it may be used to make up for the disadvantages that result from non-participation in informal power networks and offer valuable advice on promotion, publication, grant writing, and leadership opportunities (Afolabi et al., 2022; Udegbe et al., 2017).

The literature explored in Nigeria and elsewhere reveals that there is often a lack of mentorship among female academics. This imbalance can be due to having too few senior women to turn to as role models, women not wanting to take part in cross-mentoring with men, poor institutional infrastructure for faculty development, or cultures that allow early-career academics to “find their way” informally (Ogba & Igu, 2022; Chitsamatanga et al., 2018). Women are less likely to gain access to the implicit rules, less likely to have strategic encouragement, and more likely to experience professional isolation without mentorship. Women feel more confident in their professional identity, are more confident in navigating academic systems, and are clearer about their promotion and leadership when they have a mentor and when the mentor is effective (Aina & Adebayo, 2021; McIlongo & Strydom, 2021).

An important contribution of mentorship in this review is its twofold purpose. It is objective and subjective career outcome focused. Subjectively, mentors can provide colleagues with a sense of belonging and help them feel a deeper bond with the university. Objectively, mentors can introduce their colleagues to new opportunities for collaboration, grants, conference visibility and improved preparation for promotion. Subjectively, they confirm skills, defuse uncertainty and enhance belonging to the academic profession. From this point of view, mentorship isn't just a technical resource but a meaning-making one as well. It aids female academics to see failure as controllable, opportunity as achievable, and advancement as a possibility. Mentoring therefore plays a pivotal role in attainment of perceived professional success (Ndung'u, 2016; Ng et al., 2005; Oyesoji & Olusola, 2019).

Resilience and the Ability to Persevere

Resilience is the ability to positively adapt, bounce back from adversity, and continue functioning despite challenges (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2014; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). It is especially significant in the realm of academic pursuits, where the path to success involves a series of assessments, competitions, and uncertainties. Rejection of manuscripts, undue delay in promotions, inability to obtain grants, excessive teaching loads, lack of representation on decision making boards and work-life balance issues are among the stressors. Gendered expectations and inequities add to such common academic burdens for women academics. Resilience thus becomes a crucial resource for persistence and continuity.

The literature does not only conceptualise resilience as a personality trait but sees resilience as a dynamic process involving personal strengths as well as institutional and social conditions (Ungar, 2011; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). This is significant. Without a structural approach, resilience can be viewed as an individual trait, and a discourse of personal toughness can be developed. Understood as relational and contextual, however, we can ask what sorts of environments can help female academics to be productive, hopeful, and engaged. As seen from this lens, resilience is fostered through supportive relationships, systems of equity, recognition by professionals, and access to coping resources.

Resilience is relevant to the success of academic women in a number of ways. It promotes perseverance in rejection, sustains to keep investing in research and pedagogy, lessens the risk of dropping off academic pursuits, and aids women to keep their self-confidence despite institutional attention being uneven (Omojola & Adebayo, 2022; Akinbobola & Adeleke, 2023). Resilience, however, should not be seen as the ideal state. A strong academic student can work well in an inequitable setting but it does not make the setting acceptable. The most useful take-away from this review is that whilst resilience is a necessary but not a sufficient condition, its effects are enhanced when paired with mentorship and organisational justice.

Organisational Justice and the Experience of Fairness

Organisational justice is the employees' perception of fairness in the organisation (Greenberg, 1990; Cropanzano et al., 2007). There are four types of justice, namely distributive justice, procedural justice, interpersonal justice and informational justice, which are usually distinguished in the literature. In school settings, these dimensions relate to equity in reward distribution, equity in promotion and decision making processes, respectful treatment by leaders and peers, and clear communication of decisions and policies. These perceptions of justice are crucial for female academics because they play a pivotal role in shaping the institution's perceived merit, support, and desirability for long-term engagement.

The review indicates that organisational justice has a strong connection with the career experiences of women in higher education. Across the three domains of promotion process opacity, workload inequities, and leadership communication in an excluding way, female academics are more likely to experience injustice in their academic context (Ogbogu, 2020). Such perceptions have the potential to erode job satisfaction, trust, institutional engagement and a sense of equitable reward. On the other hand, if procedures are open and respectful,

women are more likely to commit themselves to long-term academic development and to perceive their progress in a positive way (Adewoyin, 2022; Soyemi & Oloyese, 2022).

This review is also of interest to organisational justice, as it influences the effectiveness of the other development resources. Mentoring might not be as effective in a context where the promotion system is still unfair, or if it is placed in an arbitrary fashion. Likewise, a lack of resilience can occur if institutional injustice persists and is ignored. Therefore, justice is not just about predicting career satisfaction, it creates the environment where mentorship and resilience either thrive or become insignificant. Thus, organisational justice is a contextual enabler of women's career success (Zhou et al., 2020; Chaudhary & Rangnekar, 2020).

Perceived Career Success as an Integrative Outcome

Career Success is broadly defined as achieving desirable outcomes in the workplace at any stage of a person's career. It is a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses both objective (e.g. rank, salary, promotions, academic publications) and subjective (e.g. job satisfaction, recognition, work-life balance, professional fulfilment) measures (Ng et al 2005; Eketu & Edeh., 2021). Perceived career success is individual evaluation of their career progress, achievement and satisfaction. That is, how they assess the promotion, recognition, autonomy, and career development that they experience during their career path. Perceived career success is considered as the satisfaction that people feel towards their current positions and their prospects for promotion (Uchena., 2019).

Studies further suggest that career success should not be reduced to externally verifiable achievements alone. Rather, it reflects the combined influence of individual attributes, organisational structures, and wider social conditions, since people interpret success in relation to their own values, aspirations, and reference groups (Manzi et al., 2017). This view helps explain why subjective career success remains central to understanding how individuals assess their work experiences. Literature also links perceived career success to career planning, self-awareness, and informed decision-making. In this regard, mentoring is consistently identified as important resources for development because it provides guidance, strengthens confidence, and improves access to advancement opportunities within organisational settings (Nkomo, Thwala, & Aigbavboa, 2018; Mčilongo & Strydom, 2021).

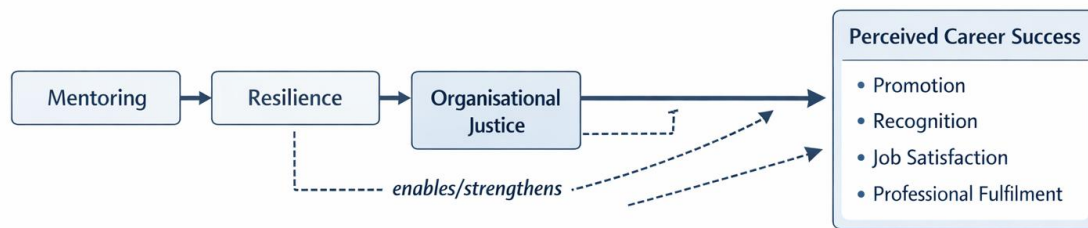
A recurrent argument in the literature is that objective and subjective career success are mutually reinforcing. External achievements may shape how individuals evaluate their careers, while feelings of fulfilment and confidence can also influence subsequent advancement (Joe-Akunne & Ejiofor, 2021). Perceived career success is therefore not defined uniformly, but varies according to individual values, motivations, and preferred outcomes (Shen et al., 2022). Within Nigerian higher institutions, the literature similarly portrays the career success of female academics as shaped by both measurable achievements and lived professional experiences. While promotion, salary progression, and research productivity remain prominent markers, studies also emphasise recognition, job satisfaction, and professional fulfilment as central to how women evaluate success. Importantly, these outcomes are presented as being conditioned not only by competence and aspiration but also by institutional practices, gender relations, and socio-cultural expectations (Eze & Nwankwo, 2021).

A consistent theme in this scholarship is women's slower progression through academic ranks despite comparable qualifications. This pattern is frequently associated with institutional bias, limited access to research funding and influential networks, and the unequal burden of domestic responsibilities. Objective career success, in this sense, reflects not only merit but also the extent to which institutions confront gender inequity in academic advancement (Ejike, Igwe, & Ukpere, 2025). The review further indicates that subjective career success among female academics is strongly influenced by institutional recognition and organisational climate.

Although many women derive fulfilment from teaching, research, mentoring, and service, their sense of success may be diminished where such contributions are insufficiently acknowledged or where gendered constraints persist (Kaymakcioglu & Thomas, 2024).

Mentoring, professional networks, and supportive institutional policies are also repeatedly identified as important enablers of women’s academic advancement. Where women have access to sponsorship, guidance, flexible work arrangements, and gender-sensitive organisational support, they are more likely to experience improved productivity, retention, promotion prospects, and career satisfaction (Ogunyemi & Ajayi, 2021; Adeyemi & Jegede, 2023). Overall, the career success of female academics in Nigerian higher institutions is shaped by personal ambition, mentoring, institutional support, and wider socio-cultural realities. Although many women make significant professional progress, structural barriers continue to affect both their advancement and their experience of success. More equitable promotion systems, stronger mentoring structures, and gender-responsive policies are therefore essential for improving women’s career outcomes in Nigerian higher education. The Figure 1. presents the connection between the variables mentoring, resilience and organisational justice

Perceived Career Success Among Female Academics in Nigeria: The Role of Mentoring, Resilience and Organisational Justice



Theoretical Basis: Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Figure 1. Framework of the relationship between mentoring, resilience, organisational justice, and perceived career success among female academics in Nigeria.

DISCUSSION

One of the main findings of this review is that the concept of mentorship, resilience and organisational justice are intertwined and affect perceived career success. Mentorship offers knowledge, validation and network. Resilience enables women academics to endure difficult times and continue working in their Academic career. Perceptions of institutional justice influences the perception that efforts are worthwhile. In a sense, these constructs explain the

different experiences of fulfilment and stagnation, or even of withdrawal, that some academics will have in demanding settings, as compared with others (Ng et al., 2005; Zhou et al., 2020).

There are at least three ways of interaction that are supported by the literature. Firstly, mentorship can help build resilience by helping to desensitize and normalise failures and difficulties, and by providing a model of adaptive processes. Second, organisational justice can enhance the positive outcomes of mentoring by helping to avoid negative outcomes stemming from biased systems. Thirdly, resilience can support academics in adapting to imperfect institutions, but long-term sustainability of resilience requires access to support and equity (Kim & Beehr, 2021; Zhou et al., 2020; Chaudhary & Rangnekar, 2020). All these pathways indicate that it is possible that interventions targeting one variable will have only a limited effect if others are not accounted for.

The framework also resolves an information gap in the literature. Majority of the literature focuses on mentorship, on resilience, on organisational justice, and in most studies, one or more of these areas is studied outside the context of Nigeria, outside the academic environment and/or without paying attention to women. When female academics are examined in research, it tends to be on issues of barriers to leadership or work-life balance but does not relate these experiences to perceived career success. This integrative review can thus be said to have added value by demonstrating that developmental support such as mentoring, adaptability (resilience) and institutional equity, when combined, influence academic careers.

Recommendation

The review has implications for the practice of university leadership, faculty development units, and regulatory agencies for higher education. Mentorship should be more structured than it is currently. It should first be institutionalised, not left to chance. Mentoring programmes for early and mid-career female academics may enhance access to information, sponsorship, and leadership training (Aina & Adebayo 2021; Afolabi et al., 2022). These programmes should provide scope for a range of mentoring arrangements such as peer mentoring, inter-institutional mentoring and networks, that can include both senior women and men who support such arrangements. Secondly, universities should take a proactive approach to building resilience rather than passively hoping it will just happen. Supportive conditions that enhance resilience development can be strengthened through professional development, workload management, supportive supervision, and family-friendly policies. Thirdly, it is necessary to make tangible changes in promotion systems, communication, committee representation, recognition, and access to research resources. Transparency and consistency are especially key when informal influences in the environment have an impact on academic opportunities (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Adewoyin, 2022; Soyemi & Oloyese, 2022).

In the case of Nigeria, one must appreciate the difference between public and private universities at the regional and institutional levels by public policy. Interventions might require adaptations for variations in governance, workload, resource levels and organisational culture. This implies that efforts to enhance women's career success in academia must be multi-faceted, that is, policy, faculty development, and institutional accountability (Igiebor, 2021; Ojo & Abodunrin, 2022). Further research should go beyond models using individual predictors and utilize the combined pathways from mentorship to resilience, to organisational justice, and to perceived career success.

Improved research is also needed in the Nigerian higher education sector focusing on gender, but with a comparative lens, both within and between public and private institutions, disciplines and regions. Longitudinal designs would be beneficial to discuss women's changes in career success perception over time, while mixed methods research would help to correlate the measured results with the lived experiences of women who felt supported, excluded and progressed in their careers (Shen et al., 2022; Ogbogu, 2020; Eketu & Edeh, 2021). The

relationship between the attainment of career success and the work-family arrangements, leadership aspirations, and institutional reform efforts should also be explored in future research.

Conclusion

The integrated model of combining mentoring, resiliency and organisational justice is shown to be the best approach to understanding perceived career success among female academics in this narrative review. Mentorship gives women developmental help and opportunities to advance their careers, resilience gives women the ability to persevere in the face of stress, and organisational justice helps organisations turn effort into fair opportunities and reward. These constructs are not marginal in higher education systems where gender inequality is prevalent, but they are integral to women's academic development (Aina & Adebayo, 2021; Omojola & Adebayo, 2022; Ogbogu, 2020). This review, therefore, calls for a multi-faceted approach to enhancing women's success in higher education in Nigeria that goes beyond individual efforts. It demands fairness in institutions, intentional mentorship systems and positive environments that enable resilience to be sustained, not just a means of survival. The repetition of this integrative approach to the literature offers a more robust basis for further research and reforms to help women academics not just stay in academics but excel.

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