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Career Interests

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Umbrella Summary

Career Interests

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What are career interests?

Career interests reflect individuals' "trait-like preferences for activities, environments, and outcomes that motivate goal strivings and achievement" (Jones et al., 2020). Simply put, interests are a series of likes and dislikes that develop alongside one's cognitive abilities and personality to shape human behavior (Jones et al., 2020; Low et al., 2005). Interests, thus, drive the amount of time and effort individuals spend acquiring knowledge and abilities within a certain domain and their pursuit of educational and career goals (Jones et al., 2020).

According to vocational choice theory, individuals tend to seek work that aligns with their interests, and when this congruence occurs, they should have greater motivation, performance, persistence, and satisfaction with their job (Holland, 1959; 1997). Similarly, congruence theory suggests that when an applicant's interests align with a work environment, they will be more likely to choose to work there, be satisfied working there, and desire to stay in that work longer (Holland, 1973; 1997). In this way, research on career interests largely relates to the idea of [employee fit](#), which suggests that similarity between a person and their work environment will lead to more positive work attitudes and behaviors.

Career interests are thought to fall into six categories, known collectively as the RIASEC (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, Conventional) model (Holland, 1997). The six categories are detailed further below:

- **Realistic:** Individuals with realistic interests prefer working outdoors or working with their hands, tools, or machinery. Jobs that cater to realistic interests include construction work or farming.
- **Investigative:** Those with investigative interests enjoy scientific, mathematical, or intellectual work. Examples of highly investigative jobs include working in archeology or biology.
- **Artistic:** Individuals with artistic interests prefer jobs that are unstructured and allow for creative expression, such as through the arts or writing. Example jobs include graphic design and acting.
- **Social:** Those with social interests prefer jobs that allow them to help, develop, care for, or interact with other people. Jobs that cater to social interests include social work or teaching.

- **Enterprising:** Enterprising individuals enjoy positions that allow them to lead, persuade, and be assertive with others. Examples of enterprising jobs include work in real estate, sales, or law.
- **Conventional:** Those with conventional interests enjoy routine activities and well-structured environments. Individuals with conventional interests might enjoy working in the business world, accounting, or banking (Jones et al., 2020).

Importantly, both individuals and occupations can be categorized using this model, and the fit between the two can then be assessed. Individuals often take interest inventories in order to assess their top interests, whereas occupations are assigned interests that are derived from careful job analysis (Oswald et al., 2019). Based off of this, the Occupational Information Network (O*NET) houses information on the top interests for every occupation in their database. For example, the job of a child welfare social worker is categorized with its top interest as social and its second top interest as enterprising (O*NET OnLine, n.d.).

Individuals often use interest inventories to see which career paths might be best suited to them, and organizations may, after proper validation, use these inventories to gauge potential applicants' fit (Hoff et al., 2020). In general, interest inventories ask respondents to select whether they like, dislike, or are neutral towards a variety of items. Items often cover specific activities, school subjects, occupations, types of people, characteristics, etc. (Low et al., 2005). Items are then grouped into specific interest scales that can tell individuals which RIASEC dimension they most identify with or which occupations seem to fit them best. Some of the most commonly used commercial inventories include the Campbell Interest and Skill Survey (CISS; Campbell, 1995), the Strong Interest Inventory (SII; Strong et al., 2004), the Self-Directed Search (SDS; Holland et al., 1994), the Career Assessment Inventory (CAI; Johansson, 1975) and the Vocational Preference Inventory (VPI; Holland, 1965). In addition to these commercially available inventories, the Interest Item Pool (IIP) is an open access item pool. The IIP website offers public domain vocational interest scales that assess Holland's six categories as well as 31 basic interests. Additionally, the O*NET website presents online materials that facilitate interest exploration (O*NET OnLine, n.d.).

There are also different measurement methods that can be used to assess career interests and the fit between an individual and an occupation. The three main methods include using matching interest scales, congruence indices, and occupational scales (Hoff et al., 2020). Matching interest scales work by examining a respondent's intensity of ratings within the RIASEC category that most closely matches the occupation they are considering pursuing (Holland, 1997). For example, the job of a social worker best matches with the social category, so someone interested in becoming a social worker taking a matching interest scale would be evaluated on their intensity of ratings within the social category, and a higher rating would translate as better fit. Congruence indices use formulas to determine how the rank-ordering of an individual's interests aligns with the rank-ordering of interests that are associated with a given occupation (Brown & Gore, 1994). Lastly, occupational scales are created for a specific job and include items that people in that job tend to endorse (Strong, 1943). The respondents'

item-level response profile is then assessed for similarity with the profile of individuals who work in that job to determine level of fit. Although all methods have advantages and disadvantages, the use of matching interest scales has been shown to result in stronger relations to attitudes like job satisfaction than the use of occupational scales or congruence indices (Hoff et al., 2020).

Why are career interests important?

Career interests are important because it is thought that when interests align with one's job, individuals will be more motivated, persistent, and effortful in their work tasks. Although the findings differ based on the interest scale used, in general, the meta-analytic evidence indicates that the alignment between interests and one's work tasks is modestly related to greater job satisfaction and less counterproductive work behavior and moderately related to greater task performance, training performance, organizational citizenship behavior, and persistence (Hoff et al., 2020; Nye et al., 2017). Interest fit is also moderately predictive of job choice and helps predict individuals' choice of goals (Hoff et al., 2020; Sheu et al., 2010). Additionally, having high levels of interest in the domain most closely related to one's occupation is modestly related to less turnover and fewer turnover intentions (Van Iddekinge et al., 2011). Lastly, having high levels of interest in a specific RIASEC domain is strongly associated with feelings of self-efficacy in that same domain (Rottinghaus et al., 2003).

What contributes to career interests?

Although it seems difficult to pinpoint exactly where career interests originate for each individual, it is thought that interests have both dispositional and environmental components (Van Iddekinge et al., 2011). Interests tend to emerge during childhood, grow during adolescence, and then become relatively stable during college and remain that way over one's lifespan (Low et al., 2005; Van Iddekinge et al., 2011). Because of their stability during adulthood, it is thought that they are partially driven by one's disposition and personality.

However, research does suggest that interests can be influenced by environmental pressures, such as from the reinforcement one is given through one's social relationships or from exposure to role demands in new activities (Low et al., 2005). Interests can also be predicted by self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Sheu et al., 2010). Specifically, people may be more likely to form interests in areas in which they believe they can succeed and have high achievement and desirable outcomes (Sheu et al., 2010). Thus, the skills and abilities that one develops through various experiences may help drive the development of interests because individuals know the areas in which they can succeed (Brown et al., 2011).

QIC-WD Takeaways

- ▶ Career interests are individuals' likes and dislikes of certain work tasks, activities, hobbies, and environments.
- ▶ Career interests are often categorized as Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, or Conventional.
- ▶ Alignment of interests and work is associated with greater job satisfaction, task performance, training performance, organizational citizenship behavior, and persistence and less counterproductive work behavior, turnover, and turnover intentions.
- ▶ Interests likely have a dispositional component, but can also be shaped by role demands, environmental pressures, and social reinforcement.
- ▶ Interest fit can be assessed using matching interest scales, congruence indices, or occupational scales.
- ▶ Common commercial inventories include the CISS (Campbell, 1995), SII (Strong et al., 2004), SDS (Holland et al., 1994), CAI (Johansson, 1975), and VPI (Holland, 1965).
- ▶ When used to inform hiring decisions, interest inventories are subject to certain professional and legal guidelines. Due to technical requirements involved in developing and validating a selection test, it is recommended that agencies consult with an expert for assistance.

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