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## Work value development from adolescence to adulthood

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines three forms of development in work values, or the importance people attach to various rewards of working, including whether young people become more selective in their work values with age, whether work values become more stable with age, and whether work values become more predictive of later work outcomes with age. Drawing on multi-cohort panel data from ages 18 to 30 (the Monitoring the Future senior classes of 1976–1990), we find that the range of job features valued highly narrows with age; that interindividual differences in work values become more stable with age along seven dimensions of work values; and that with age, work values become stronger predictors of both the pay and intrinsic rewards of jobs. Despite significant social change altering the context of vocational development in adolescence and early adulthood, these developmental changes were highly similar across cohorts who were high school seniors between 1976 and 1990.

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## 1. Introduction

Major changes have occurred in the labor market over the past forty years, tied to an interlocking set of factors including globalization, technological innovation, and a changing relationship between employers and employees (Danziger & Ratner, 2010). Educational careers have lengthened (Fitzpatrick & Turner, 2007), there are fewer life-long careers (Farber, 2007), and both the costs of and returns to higher education have risen dramatically (Goldin & Katz, 2007). Adolescents' occupational planning in the U.S. is increasingly occurring in a context of uncertainty, with high stakes, and without the same degree of institutionalized structures linking school and work as in other Western industrial nations (Kerckhoff, 2003).

Adolescents' work-related preferences and values have long been considered important to understanding occupational planning and career outcomes (e.g., Davis, 1965; Rosenberg, 1957). Along with educational expectations,

occupational aspirations, and other work-related orientations, work values help adolescents navigate their way through schooling and occupational opportunities (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999:4; Schulenberg, Vondracek, & Kim, 1993) to eventually work in jobs of varying statuses and other qualities (for reviews, see Mortimer, 1996; Schleicher, Hanson, & Fox, 2011).

Whereas adolescence has been the life stage of most interest for understanding the development of these orientations, work values and occupational aspirations are unlikely to be set by the end of adolescence (Jacobs, Karen, & McClelland, 1991; Johnson, 2001b; Schulenberg et al., 1993). Moreover, the lengthening of educational investments and ongoing occupational exploration that occurs during an increasingly drawn out transition to adulthood may produce even more development in these preferences and goals.

Understanding ongoing development in work values is important for several reasons. First, work values influence both educational attainment and the levels of key work rewards of later jobs, including pay and autonomy (Johnson, 2001a; Johnson & Elder, 2002; Lindsay & Knox, 1984). They are also believed to be a source of motivation

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for workers (Brown, 2002; Vroom, 1964), and various models of job satisfaction point in one way or another to work values or the match between work values and job characteristics as major sources of job satisfaction (Brown, 2002; Kalleberg, 1977). To the extent social scientists can identify the types and forms of change in people's work values, we will gain better leverage in understanding the goal-attainment link in the work arena, as well as worker well-being. Finally, major changes in the structures of the economy and labor markets may alter patterns of work value development and change. As noted above, adolescents finishing high school towards the end of the twentieth century faced a different world than even that of several decades earlier.

Drawing on the panel data from the Monitoring the Future (MTF) surveys (for the senior classes of 1976–1990), this paper considers development in work values from twelfth grade (approximately age 18) through age 29–30. More specifically, we pursue analyses to address three research questions:

- (1) Do individuals become more selective about what work features they value highly during the transition to adulthood?
- (2) Do interindividual differences in work values become more stable as adolescents become young adults?
- (3) Are work values assessed at older ages better predictors of work features in adulthood compared to those assessed in adolescence?

The multi-cohort panel data from the MTF surveys also provides us with a unique opportunity to assess cohort differences in young people's work value development from the mid-70s to 1990, a period of change in both the labor market and in educational institutions.

### 1.1. Work values

Work values lie within a set of orientations that guide adolescents through a maze of important decisions affecting their future attainments. These work orientations have been studied under a variety of names, including work, job, or occupational "values" (Davis, 1965; Schulenberg et al., 1993), or alternatively, "judgments about work" (Johnson, Mortimer, Lee, & Stern, 2007; Kohn & Schooler, 1969). They indicate the importance young people place on a range of potential work features that transcend occupational categories, such as pay, job security, autonomy, and opportunities to be creative. Work values are more general than occupational aspirations, making them particularly useful during times of social change. While specific occupations come and go, each can be characterized by these sorts of features. Work values develop in childhood and adolescence and reflect differences in occupational opportunities and socialization by class, gender, and race (Bridges, 1989; Lindsay & Knox, 1984; Marini, Fan, Finley, & Beutel, 1996; Martin & Tuch, 1993; Weisgram, Bigler, & Liben, 2010).

Work values are usually conceptualized along multiple dimensions, with most configurations distinguishing extrinsic and intrinsic orientations, though often identifying

additional dimensions as well (Johnson et al., 2007). Herzog (1982) and Marini et al. (1996), both drawing on the same measurement instrument as the current study, have distinguished among seven types of work rewards that may be highly valued. Extrinsic rewards include instrumental and status-attainment rewards, such as income, advancement opportunities, and prestige. Security captures work stability. Intrinsic rewards reflect the inherent interest of the work, the learning potential, and the opportunity to be creative. Influence, though often combined with intrinsic rewards, refers to the opportunity to exercise power through involvement in decision making and performing challenging work. Altruistic rewards are derived from doing things for others, such as directly helping others or making a contribution to society. Social rewards are interpersonal and include positive relations with co-workers, the opportunity to make friends, and working with people. Finally, leisure includes the opportunity for free time, vacation, and freedom from supervision.

### 1.2. Zeroing in

Adolescents generally consider a wide range of job rewards to be very important (Johnson, 2002; Marini et al., 1996), evidencing a degree of "wanting it all" in their work values. We expect, however, that one important change in work value development during the transition to adulthood is in increasing selectivity about what one truly considers important in one's work. Thus, our first study objective is to evaluate whether young people become more selective in their work values with age, a process we refer to as "zeroing in," and to determine how quickly this occurs. We develop a measurement strategy to capture this process that, to our knowledge, has never been examined in-depth before.

We expect to observe zeroing in for two reasons. First, a substantial body of research documents that change in work values over the life course operates through a process of reinforcement and accentuation. Workers tend to prefer and obtain jobs with features that are consistent with their importance ratings (Johnson, 2001a; Judge & Bretz, 1992; Mortimer & Lorence, 1979). Beyond this selection into jobs, workers also come to place greater importance on rewards that they obtain in their jobs (Johnson, 2001a; Mortimer & Lorence, 1979). Adolescents' work values generally exceed what will be available to them in the labor market as adults (Marini et al., 1996). As such, becoming more selective with age is part of becoming more realistic, letting go of desires for rewards that are not received in sufficient quantities. Second, more intense periods of vocational exploration may make potential work rewards more salient and therefore entail heightened importance ratings on a variety of work rewards before young people eventually settle into their preferences (Schulenberg et al., 1993).

The tendency to value a wide range of potential work rewards in adolescence has been evident among cohorts of teenagers at least since the 1970s, but there has been no attempt to track its extent over time. In contrast, studies have monitored educational and occupational aspirations quite closely, documenting growing ambitiousness. Both educational and occupational ambitions have risen

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