



Full Length Article

Vocational interests across 20 years of adulthood: Stability, change, and the role of work experiences

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ABSTRACT

Vocational interests demonstrate high rank-order stability during childhood and adolescence. However, few studies have investigated the development of vocational interests into adulthood. The present study examined rank-order and profile stability, mean-level and correlated change, and individual differences in change in RIASEC scores across 20 years of adulthood. In addition, life events were examined as moderators of change. Rank-order stability was strong across vocational interest dimensions. Mean-level changes also occurred, with increases in Realistic interests and decreases in Investigative interests for men, increases in Enterprising interests for women, and decreases in Artistic interests for men and women. Individual differences in change indicated that not everyone changed in the same manner, with occupational experiences, such as job loss, related to greater change.

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1. Introduction

Of all psychological constructs, one of the most consistent from childhood to young adulthood is vocational interests. Their rank-order stability surpasses that of personality traits and even some measures of IQ over the lifespan (Deary, Whalley, Lemmon, Crawford, & Starr, 2000; Low, Yoon, Roberts, & Rounds, 2005). It is critical to understand the development of interests, as the repercussions of many life decisions depend on their long-term stability. For example, a girl who dreams of being an astronaut during adolescence may choose advanced science courses in high school, enter a major in aerospace engineering during college, and choose a career as a flight test engineer in adulthood. Because such early decisions set people on specific educational and occupational paths, disruptions to an individual's vocational interests may have major ramifications for downstream job satisfaction and performance. However, much about the developmental course of vocational interests is unknown, especially during adulthood. While many studies have documented the rank-order stability of vocational interests, less is known about other types of change, such as mean-level change, individual differences in change, and correlated changes in interests. In addition, little is known about

interest development past early adulthood, a time when people make important career decisions such as changing jobs or seeking additional education. Finally, it is unknown whether experiences in adulthood are associated with changes in vocational interests. The present study followed participants over 20 years from their mid-20s to their mid-40s to examine interest stability, interest change, and the effects of life experiences on trajectories of interest development.

1.1. Vocational interest development

Vocational interests are conceptualized as dispositional and trait-like, describing the types of occupational activities and environments that people prefer. Holland's theory of vocational personalities, currently the most ubiquitous model of interests, outlines six basic categories that can describe both the characteristics of specific occupations and the interests of the people who choose them (Holland, 1997). Interest dimensions include *Realistic* (mechanical or outdoor activities); *Investigative* (problem-solving or research activities); *Artistic* (creating or appreciating art); *Social* (helping others); *Enterprising* (influencing others); and *Conventional* (managing and organizing data) (Bubany & Hansen, 2011).

Counselors use the results of RIASEC interest assessments to guide individuals toward educational and career paths (Low & Rounds, 2007). Understanding interest development is thus critical to theories underlying vocational counseling and career selection.

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To obtain the full picture of development for a particular trait, it is necessary to analyze multiple types of stability and change (Caspi & Roberts, 1999). Past studies of vocational interests have focused predominantly on differential change, also called *rank-order* or *test-retest stability*, to assess the consistency of individuals' interest scores relative to a group. Evidence from longitudinal studies suggests that interests reach a peak stability of about $r = 0.64$ around emerging adulthood (age 18–22), and then plateau to remain highly stable throughout middle adulthood (Low et al., 2005; Swanson & Hansen, 1988). Though many studies of the rank-order stability of vocational interests extend into adulthood, they commonly begin in adolescence and have only one assessment in adulthood. Thus, these studies are unable to examine the developmental course specific to adulthood.

Beyond examining the rank-order stability of a single interest category, it is possible to examine the rank-order stability of all categories simultaneously, through *profile* or *ipsative stability* (Caspi & Roberts, 1999; Furr, 2008). Profile correlations of vocational interests represent the relative ordering in the configuration of an individual's interests over time. For example, a student's increased interest in Artistic activities may not alter her Artistic interest ranking relative to her peers, if her peers also increase in Artistic interests to the same degree. However, this increase in her Artistic interests may change its ranking among the other interest variables within her own profile, causing her Artistic interests to become higher than her Enterprising interests. Profile correlations for vocational interests typically follow the same developmental patterns as rank-order correlations, but tend to have higher average stability estimates (Low et al., 2005), though these profile correlations may have been inflated by normativeness (Furr, 2008).

Mean-level, or *absolute change*, represents the degree to which people increase or decrease in their vocational interests as a group. Evidence from longitudinal studies suggests that vocational interests undergo normative, mean-level changes over the lifespan (Tracey & Sodano, 2008). A meta-analysis of 39 studies of mean-level change in vocational interests from early adolescence to early adulthood revealed either positive or no change for each of the RIASEC interests during this period, ranging from no change on average in Realistic interests (Cohen's $d = 0.01$) to increases in Social interests that are large for a dispositional construct ($d = 0.48$; Low, 2009). The greatest mean-level changes in vocational interests occurred between late adolescence and early adulthood (ages 16–22), after which change then stagnated (ages 22–25). Stagnation may occur because opportunities for interest exploration are likely limited after leaving college and beginning a career, due to societal pressure to commit to a single career (Low, 2009). However, because so few of the studies followed participants into mid-adulthood, it is mostly unknown how absolute levels of vocational interests change beyond age 25.

Though information on absolute change after early adulthood is limited, recent studies suggest that mean-level changes can occur after age 25. Decreases in Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, and Social interests were found over 15 years from early to mid-adulthood (Wille, Tracey, Feys, & De Fruyt, 2014). Also, a study analyzing scores on the Kuder Occupational Interest Survey from high school into mid-adulthood found small decreases in Artistic and Literary interests for men, and in Social Services interests for women (Rottinghaus, Coon, Gaffey, & Zytowski, 2007). These declines in interests during young adulthood mirror findings within the goal literature that the number of life goals decreases during young adulthood (Hill, Jackson, Roberts, Lapsley, & Brandenberger, 2011). As people enter careers and start families, it is difficult for them to invest time and effort into all life domains equally, which results in de-emphasizing goals, and potentially interests, within certain domains.

Though most people follow the mean-level pattern of interest change, some may not adhere to the normative trajectory. Changes occurring at the level of the individual, which may not necessarily follow the normative pattern of change, are known as *individual differences in intra-individual change*. It is currently unknown to what extent individuals differ in the degree to which their interests change, as only one study has examined this question. Using the Reliable Change Index (RCI) to index individual differences in interest change, no significant individual differences in change were found across a one-year period (Lent, Tracey, Brown, Soresi, & Nota, 2006). However, individual differences in change exist across most psychological constructs during adulthood (Allemand, Gomez, & Jackson, 2010); thus, it is not unreasonable to expect variation in the degree to which vocational interests change. Moreover, the RCI is a very conservative index of change, initially developed to evaluate the effectiveness of psychotherapy. It requires that individuals change more than two standard deviations on a trait to be classified as demonstrating reliable change. This stringent cut-off obscures our ability to detect smaller, but potentially meaningful change in personality or other individual differences, when often it is these small changes (e.g., a half-standard-deviation increase in neuroticism), that have been shown to have consequences for individual outcomes (Roberts, Wood, & Caspi, 2008, chap. 14). Less-conservative indices of change than the RCI, paired with longer timeframes (as that study examined change over a single year), may reveal individual differences in change.

Individual differences in change are important for several reasons. First, if individual differences in change exist, this suggests that environmental influences may be operating on individuals' interests during adulthood. Second, individual differences in change can index the joint development between RIASEC dimensions. Systematic developmental changes can reflect underlying associations between the RIASEC dimensions and common causes. Correlated changes have been found within the Big Five personality dimensions (Allemand, Zimprich, & Hertzog, 2007; Allemand, Zimprich, & Martin, 2008; Klimstra, Bleidorn, Asendorpf, van Aken, & Denissen, 2013; Soto & John, 2012), indicating the potential for joint development of RIASEC dimensions.

1.2. Mechanisms of stability and change

What contributes to vocational interests' patterns of stability and change? The strongest mechanism driving vocational interest stability is likely person-environment transactions (Low & Rounds, 2007). These processes promote stability through selection and socialization; individuals select into environments based on existing interests, and those environments reinforce the interests responsible for the initial attraction. During late adolescence, individuals often leave home to enter college or the workforce. There they encounter opportunities to immerse themselves in contexts and activities that align with their interests, eventually leading to the stabilization of those interests (Tracey, Robbins, & Hofsess, 2005).

Less is known about mechanisms of interest change in adulthood. While immersion in particular occupations may shift interests to align with the demands of those environments (Meir & Navon, 1992), these ideas have never been adequately tested. Other studies suggest that life experiences can affect interest-related constructs. For example, changes in gendered interests have been associated with youths' time spent with mothers (for girls) or fathers (for boys; McHale, Kim, Dotterer, Crouter, & Booth, 2009), and different magnitudes of change have been found for men and women across the lifespan (Low, 2009; Tracey et al., 2005), suggesting that cultural contexts may affect interests. Additional evidence for the possibility of vocational interest

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