



Work values and the transition to work life: A longitudinal study



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ABSTRACT

Research on career development has shown that work values play a key motivational role in job selection and career development. In the context of the current economic crisis, it is of particular relevance to examine the role of work values for employment in the transition from school to work. This longitudinal study examined the role of intrinsic (perceived importance of having a job that is interesting and matches one's own competences), rewards (having a good salary and high chance for promotion), and security (having a stable job) work values on subsequent employment status and person–job fit (how an individual's job matches one's own characteristics such as education and job preferences). Finnish participants reported their work values and background variables via questionnaire at ages 20 and 23 ($N_s = 348$ and 415 respectively). Intrinsic work values predicted a higher degree of person–job fit two years later. Rewards work values predicted lower chances of being unemployed; and security work values predicted higher chances of being unemployed later on. Family socio-economic status (SES) was not related to employment outcomes in this Finnish sample.

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1. Introduction

The global economic crisis poses greater challenges for young adults in establishing their career (e.g. Arnett, 2004; Johnson, Sage, & Mortimer, 2012). The transition from school to work has lengthened considerably in the past decades, with prolonged education, more unstable work conditions and delayed access to the job market (Salmela-Aro, 2012). The current Finnish statistics among young adults also show some worrying facts: unemployment rates of people between 25–34 years of age are about 26% (Statistics Finland Population, 2013). Upward and downward mobility of individuals is associated with career development during young adulthood, and hence, a successful transition to employment has long-term consequences for development (Heckhausen, 2002). In this study we consider young adults' work values as a potential personal resource that could shape individuals' career paths and access to employment across the school-to-work transition. Work values refer to what individuals consider important in their jobs (Jin & Rounds, 2012; Mortimer & Lorence, 1979). Research on career development has shown that work values play a key motivational role in job selection and vocational development (Balsamo, Lauriola, & Saggino, 2013; Judge & Bretz, 1992; Super, 1980; Watt et al., 2012). Whether work values are associated with markers of successful transition to employment (such as being employed) and quality of job (such as the degree of person–job fit) is not well-established in the literature. Drawing on a sample of Finnish young adults, this longitudinal study aims to fill in these research gaps.

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Our main research question is whether work values are predictors of a successful school-to-work transition, defined in terms of getting a job (being employed versus unemployed) and the degree of person–job fit. A well fit job provides a good match for employees' personal values and preferences, and also for their knowledge skills and abilities (Cable & DeRue, 2002; Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert, & Shipp, 2006; Scroggins, 2007; Vogel & Feldman, 2009). We developed our hypothesis based on research on work values (Johnson & Mortimer, 2011; Mortimer & Lorence, 1979), self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999) and job crafting (Bakker, Tims, & Derks, 2012; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Given that most research on work values has been conducted in the US, the Finnish context will provide valuable insights into the role of a different social reality, a strong welfare system, concerning this topic. In strong welfare systems, it is likely that the links between family socio-economic background and youth employment outcomes are weaker, given the strong social support and tuition-free education offered by the state.

The most widely used classification of work values has been the classic distinction between intrinsic (focused on opportunities for skill use, self-direction and enjoyment derived from doing the job) and extrinsic work values (focused on external rewards, such as having a job that provides a good income or security; see Jin & Rounds, 2012 for a review). Longitudinal studies on work value outcomes have shown that both intrinsic and extrinsic work values predicted the type of rewards individuals subsequently received in their jobs (Johnson & Monserud, 2010; Johnson & Mortimer, 2011, Lindsay & Knox, 1984). Intrinsic work values predicted higher intrinsic work rewards, such as working in interesting jobs, enjoying more autonomy and having learning opportunities at work. Extrinsic work values were related to extrinsic rewards, such as job security and higher income (Johnson & Monserud, 2010; Lindsay & Knox, 1984). However, the association between extrinsic work values and higher salary seemed to be explained largely by the number of work hours (Johnson & Mortimer, 2011).

Work values are also important antecedents of the types of choices individuals make in their paths to work. For example, valuing helping others predicted teenagers' plans to enter human service or health-related professions, while valuing occupational prestige predicted not aspiring to a human service occupation (Eccles, 1994). Ambition value (the importance placed on being challenged in a job and getting ahead) at age 16 was positively related to adult job status and earnings at age 34 (Ashby & Schoon, 2010). Hence, in the long run, work values seem to direct individuals towards jobs that match those values over the course of one's career development. Whether work values help youth to weather the transition from school to work, in terms of success in employment, has not been the focus of any published work. Previous research has indicated that intrinsic work values facilitate a successful school-to-work transition in terms of keeping higher levels of work engagement (Sortheix, Dietrich, Chow, & Salmela-Aro, 2013). However, to the best of our knowledge, whether intrinsic work values could have consequences in terms of employment and finding a well-fit job has not been analyzed.

Person–job fit refers to the match between personal and job characteristics and comprises two aspects which are generally combined into an overall indicator (Cable & DeRue, 2002; Scroggins, 2007; Vogel & Feldman, 2009). The first aspect indicates the match between job demands and personal competences and abilities (Edwards, 1991). The second aspect of a person–job fit refers to jobs which meet employees' desires, preference and values, and has been the focus of studies on well-being and satisfaction at work (Caplan, 1987; Judge & Bretz, 1992; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; Vogel & Feldman, 2009). Results showed that intrinsic work values were *concurrently* positively related to person–job fit, as indicated by having a job related to one's education (Johnson et al., 2012). To extend this finding, it would be important to examine whether intrinsic work values would predict person–job fit *longitudinally*.

Based on self-determination theory (SDT, Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000), we argue that intrinsic and extrinsic work values provide different sources of motivation for a successful transition to employment. According to SDT, when the motivation for work comes from the enjoyment and interest of the tasks themselves, intrinsic forms of motivation are reflected. When work is done because of its importance and the fact it is in accordance with one's values and skills, identified forms of motivation are shown (see also, Gagné et al., 2014; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Intrinsic and identified motivations reflect more autonomous (versus controlled) motivation which fosters the levels of investment towards work (Dietrich, Shulman, & Nurmi, 2013; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999) and provides sustainable energy that moves individuals towards their goals based on interest and enjoyment (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). In a similar vein, intrinsic work values motivate individuals through the enjoyment and satisfaction obtained from jobs. Intrinsic motivation has also been linked to individuals' capacities to self-manage their careers and to engage in proactive behavior (Quigley & Tymon, 2006). Young people's intrinsic work values may direct individuals to search for jobs that fit their competences and skills with persistence and energy. Also, intrinsic work values could also serve as antecedent motivation for job crafting. Job crafting is a concept that refers to the employee's capacity to job redesign (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). In job crafting, employees independently modify aspects of their jobs to improve the fit between the job's characteristics and their own needs, abilities, and preferences. We expect that higher intrinsic work values will motivate young adults to search for jobs that are intrinsically rewarding and in accordance with their competences and abilities (i.e. a higher person–job fit). More importantly, we expect that young adults who hold higher intrinsic work values are better equipped to craft their jobs to fit their values and will thus enjoy a higher person–job fit.

Extrinsic work values, on the other hand, motivate individuals to pursue behavior based on instrumental reasons. Research has shown that such controlled or extrinsic motivation is related to higher anxiety, lower well-being and higher burnout (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998; van Beek, Taris, & Schaufeli, 2011). In the work context, results indicate that extrinsic work value orientation related negatively to job vitality, job satisfaction and dedication, and increased work–family conflict and turnover intentions (Vansteenkiste et al., 2007). The focus of extrinsic work values on external rewards or security aspects of the job drives individuals to seek out jobs based on salary and working conditions rather than their own interests and abilities. Accordingly, we do not expect work values focused on rewards or security to predict person–job fit.

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