



Adherence to RIASEC structure in relation to career exploration and parenting style: Longitudinal and idiothetic considerations

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Abstract

We explored the “idiothetic” cognitive structure of RIASEC occupational percepts in a sample of Italian middle and high school students over a one year period, examining the possible bidirectional linkages between cognitive–vocational structure, involvement in career exploration activities, and exposure to authoritative parenting style. The focus was on the extent to which individuals’ thinking deviates from the normative RIASEC circumplex structure. Results indicated that there was less stability in the occupational percepts of middle school students over time, but both student groups showed change in the direction of greater adherence to circular structure. In addition, deviation from the circular model was related to subsequent career exploration, and initial levels of career exploration and parental authoritativeness were predictive of later circular structure, especially in middle school students. The results support the importance of examining individual variation in cognitive–vocational structure in relation to career development models and interventions.

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1. Introduction

Holland's (1997) typology (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional, collectively referred to as RIASEC) is the predominant representation of vocational interests. At the group, or normative level, these are represented by a hexagon or circular ordering which captures the relations among the different types. This circular structure has been found to fit most US late adolescent and adult samples (Day & Rounds, 1998; Tracey & Rounds, 1993). However, the circular structure of RIASEC types is less well established in international contexts and in children. Rounds and Tracey (1996) found that, in the majority of countries examined, fit to circular structure is not as pronounced as in US samples. Likewise, Tracey and Ward (1998) found that circular structure is less prevalent in children under 14. The tendency for circular structure to vary depending on culture and developmental level suggests that Holland-based scales may not have a common meaning across all cultures or age levels.

It is also possible that individuals (regardless of age or culture) differ in the degree to which they adhere to circular structure. This issue relates to the traditional distinction between normative and idiographic representations of individual differences (Allport, 1937). A normative representation, which is exemplified by almost all of the current research in interests, focuses on finding the structure that fits for a group of individuals and then using this common structure to order individuals (e.g., one individual has high scores on R and I themes, while another individual has low scores on these scales). The assumption is that, since the circular structure fits for the group, it will also fit for each individual.

By contrast, an idiographic approach focuses on the examination of how structures differ at the individual level. Each person may have a different way of representing or construing the items, rendering normative comparisons inappropriate and invalid. The advantage of the idiographic approach is that it takes account of the uniqueness of individuals, but it makes it difficult to make comparisons across individuals because the relevant structures may have little in common from person to person. A third approach, which might be termed "idiothetic" (Darcy, Lee, & Tracey, 2004), combines aspects of both the normative and idiographic approaches. It is an assessment of the extent to which individuals vary in terms of how well they fit the normative structure. Such an approach allows for the possibility of idiosyncratic structures yet also provides a basis for inter-individual comparisons relative to a common group structure.

Given the limited current state of knowledge of the cultural, developmental, and normative aspects of RIASEC structure, we chose to examine the means by which this structure may evolve over time in adolescents outside of the US Normative examinations of RIASEC interests in the US have demonstrated that the circular structure does not hold well in younger children but that adherence to the normative circular model increases with age (Tracey & Ward, 1998). Given this pattern of results, we focused on how non-US students (Italian adolescents) construe the RIASEC items and whether their construal changes over time. We hypothesized that a similar positive relation between idiothetic structure and age would be evident in Italian students (i.e., as children age, their occupational perceptions better adhere to the RIASEC circular structure). This result would imply that children learn to construe their world in a manner more similar to the normative RIASEC structure and that this change, in part, reflects a developmental process that occurs across cultures.

Tracey and Darcy (2002) found that US college students whose occupational thinking did not adhere to the normative circular structure reported more career indecision.

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