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The dynamic between work values and part-time work experiences across the high school years [☆]

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ABSTRACT

The work value system, its development, and its relationship with work experiences can be modeled as an adaptive control system [Ford, D. H., & Lerner, R. M. (1992). *Developmental systems theory: An integrative approach*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications]. This study employed longitudinal data from 1000 participants (Youth Development Study; Jeylan Mortimer, Principal Investigator) and three work value domains to test the assertion that work values and experiences change in concert from the 9th to 12th grade. The results suggest that work values and experiences exhibit cohesion and discrepancy reduction patterns which serve to maintain a dynamic link within the work value system and between the value system and part-time work experiences across the high school years. Envisioning a future career seemingly has a greater influence on adolescent vocational development than do part-time work experiences.

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1. Introduction

Work values regulate and evaluate thoughts, behavior, and events associated with work and they are thought to be organized into a system (Brown & Crace, 1996; Porfeli & Vondracek, 2007). A work value system is composed of some number of work values and the structure of the system is defined by the relationships between the constituent work values. Much work has been done to identify the essential work values within the work value system and how the system is structured (Pryor, 1982; Super, 1995; Super & Hendrix, 1968).

Over the past century, several models depicting the composition of the value system have emerged (Allport & Vernon, 1931; Kluckhohn, 1951; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987; Super, 1962; Super & Sverko, 1995). A great deal of work has been conducted to establish the existence and assess the impact of the value system on human functioning (Feather, 1990; Kilby, 1993; Kluckhohn, 1951; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987) and particularly work behavior (Brown, 1995, 1996; Brown & Crace, 1996; Johnson, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Mortimer & Lorence, 1979; Super, 1957, 1990, 1992, 1995) and to affirm that human development is partly defined in terms of value system development (Kluckhohn, 1951; Rokeach, 1973). This literature suggests that values and behavior mutually influence one another, yet little work has been conducted to determine how the value system develops over time.

Recent research has begun to hypothesize and test patterns of value stability and change reflective of a dynamic system regulating and evaluating thoughts, behavior, and events pertaining to work and career (Porfeli, 2007). This research

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suggests that adolescents exhibit predicted processes of change and stability that are presumably governed by a dissonance mechanism, which ultimately serves to promote value system development and maintain harmony within the value system (Porfeli, 2007). The present study extends this previous work by testing whether a dissonance mechanism, consisting of these processes of cohesion and discrepancy reduction, govern the relationships between work values and part-time work experiences during the adolescent years.

Part-time work is a ubiquitous experience of adolescents in the US and research suggests that it may be an important context for vocational development and the formation of work values. While one body of research suggests that part-time work during adolescence is associated with dysfunctional behaviors (e.g., Bachman & Schulenberg, 1993; Mortimer, Finch, Shanahan, & Ryu, 1992a; Paschall, Ringwalt, & Flewelling, 2002; Steinberg & Avenevoli, 1998; Wu, Schlenger, & Galvin, 2003), other research points to functional outcomes like the formation of work values associated with central work tasks (Skorikov & Vondracek, 1997), personal responsibility, and the development of social skills (Kablaoui & Pautler, 1991). Part-time work may even serve as a “steeling” context that prepares adolescents for the normative work distress experienced during young adulthood (Mortimer & Staff, 2004). Part-time work appears to have a meaningful impact on adolescent outcomes and the present study will add to this literature by examining the relationships between part-time work experiences and related value system development during the high school years.

1.1. A work value system concept model

Values presumably serve as durable references evaluating and directing behavioral tendencies and plans, but values do not necessarily dictate any particular action or choice during any particular moment (Boldero & Francis, 2002; Feather, 1992; Kluckhohn, 1951; Rokeach, 1973). Previous conceptual models of the value system aimed to classify values into mutually exclusive categories such as Rokeach's (1973) terminal versus instrumental values categories. In contrast, Boldero and Francis (2002) suggested that each value may be employed in both a standard- and goal-oriented fashion. Standard-oriented applications of the value system deal with what a person prefers to *be* and from this perspective values are engaged in the management and direction of ongoing experiences, while goal-oriented manifestations of the value system reflect what a person wishes to *become* and thus values are seen as being principally engaged with behavior directed toward anticipated future experiences and outcomes. Accordingly, a value is not necessarily either terminal or instrumental; rather, each value may be employed as a standard and/or a goal influencing behavior.

1.2. Patterns of change maintaining within-person and person-within-context harmony

The connection between values and present-oriented behavior is conceptually rooted in dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and cybernetic models akin to an adaptive control system (Ford & Lerner, 1992), suggesting that values influence behaviors and experience in a reciprocal fashion across time (Boldero & Francis, 2002). Value system development is presumably indicated by increasing harmony between standard- and goal-oriented manifestations of a value and between the value system and experience.

When values are applied as a standard, then Boldero and Francis (2002, p. 233) predict that discrepancies between what a person prefers to be (the standard) and what a person actually is will yield a “negative psychological state,” presumably similar to Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance. This will in turn prompt behavior or value change to reduce the discrepancy and the negative psychological state associated with the discrepancy. On the contrary, Boldero and Francis (2002) predict that the discrepancy between the goal-oriented value and the current situation will not necessarily yield a negative psychological state. Goal-setting is generally associated with positive affect and often involves the act of invoking a discrepancy between one's current and desired state. Continued positive affect hinges on the rate of progress toward the established goal rather than the discrepancy between a value and the corresponding behavior. Therefore, the rate of progress toward a goal influences positive affect, which in turn influences goal-oriented value and/or behavior change over time. Given the theoretically predicted differences in the relationships between experiences and standard- versus goal-oriented values, part-time work experiences are predicted to be principally related to standard-oriented part-time work values and to be associated with goal-oriented values in an indirect or mediated fashion. Standard-oriented part-time work values are therefore predicted to mediate the relationship between part-time work experiences and goal-oriented career-related work values (see Fig. 1).

Previous research suggests that harmony or an absence of dissonance within the work value system can be maintained through interacting *discrepancy reduction* and *cohesion* processes of change across time (Porfeli, 2004; Porfeli & Vondracek, 2007). The cohesion process is reflected by the salience of two values moving together across time. As a value increases, decreases, or remains constant, so should other associated values. When two values exhibit a notable discrepancy, then a discrepancy reduction process of change is necessary to reduce the discrepancy before a cohesion process can be employed to maintain the reduction. The discrepancy reduction process can be reflected in an increase or decrease in one or both values to achieve convergence. In this study, the same predictions are made concerning the relationships between work values and experiences. For example, a person may place a strong value on income and determine that his or her income is presently insufficient. To resolve this discrepancy, a person may seek more income, devalue income, or do both over time. During the following period of discrepancy reduction, income may increase, the value of income may decrease, or both changes could occur to reduce the difference between the two and thereby reduce the dissonance associated with the difference between one's income and how one values income. Under the condition of a large discrepancy between a value and an analogous

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