

Understanding Interests and Why They are Important in Career Development by Janet E. Wall

Career development professionals generally believe that abilities or aptitudes, interests, values, preferences, and beliefs are critical concepts as individuals evolve in their thinking about the selection of daily life choices, careers, and life planning activities. An individual's abilities, interests, values, preferences, and beliefs can be matched to an environment's ability requirements, its opportunity to satisfy one's interests, its ability to fulfill one's values, satisfy preferences and deal with beliefs. In the world of career development models, this is called Person-Environment Fit.

The greater the match or fit between the characteristics of the person and the characteristics of the environment, the more satisfied and productive the person is likely to be. This person-environment fit concept applies to an individual's choice of work, school subjects, leisure activities, hobbies, and general preferences. In the word-of-work, when there is a high degree of match between the characteristics of the individual and the requirements and characteristics of an occupation a more optimal career fit results. This notion is illustrated in the graphic below.

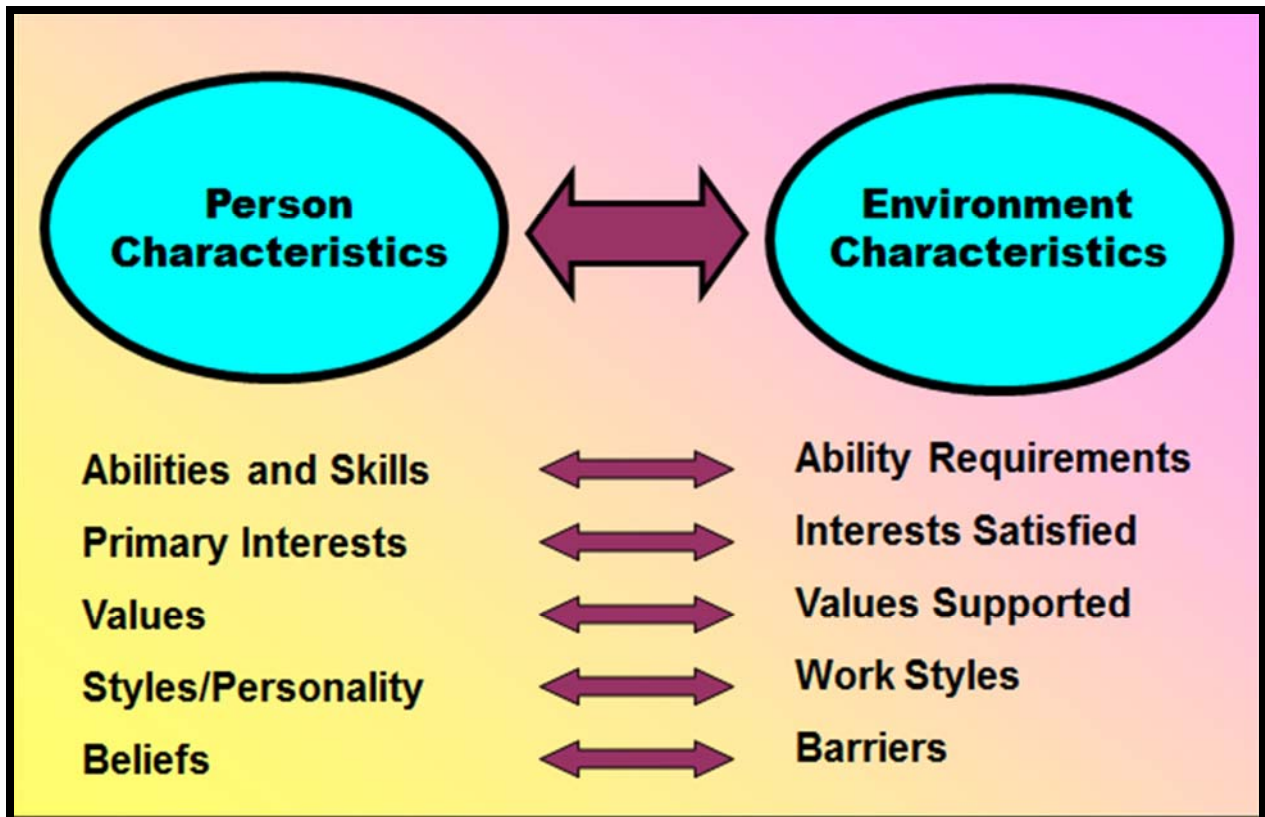


Figure 1

This document deals primarily with the **interests** part of this model and how interests relate to occupations, school subjects, hobbies, and other leisure activities. Although there are several schema that have been used to represent interests frameworks, this document focuses on the Holland Vocational Personality Theory model because of its

strong research base and the ease with which counselors, students, and clients can grasp the basic concepts and use them easily and effectively in career development and life planning activities.

The Role of Interests in Career Development

According to many theorists and researchers, occupational and life choices are based on personal behavioral style or personality. Interests are expressions of that personality, and thus play a key role in the process of career development.

Holland (1997) suggested several principles or themes related to personality and occupational choice:

- The choice of an occupation is an expression of personality (p.7).
- Interest inventories are inventories of personality (p.8).
- The members of an occupational group have similar personalities and similar histories of personal development (p.10).
- Because people in an occupational group have similar personalities, they will respond to many situations and problems in similar ways (p.11).
- Occupational achievement, stability, and satisfaction depend on degree of similarity between one's personality and the job environment (p. 7-11).

In refining his theory, Holland proposed four assumptions:

- People can be categorized as one of six categories or types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, or conventional (p.3).
- Environments can be categorized in the same six groups or types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, or conventional(p.3).
- People search for environments that allow them to exhibit and use their skills and abilities, express their attitudes and values, and take on agreeable problems and roles(p.4).
- Persons behave as determined by an interaction between his or her personality and the characteristics of the environment (p. 2-4).

The RIASEC Areas

Holland's six areas -- realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising or conventional -- are handy because they are used to describe both people and the environment. The six areas are fairly easy to understand, serve as useful labels for description and conversation, and provide a common language for career development professionals and the people they serve.

Holland (1997) specified that people can be described in the six categories by the characteristics listed below:

Realistic (R). People in this category have a preference for the use of tools, working with their hands, working with animals, and working with objects and materials. Activities tend to be concrete and practical. Example occupations include instrument repairers, surveyors, mechanics, carpenters, airline pilots, and jewelers. Descriptors of **Realistic** people include frank, genuine, persistent, thrifty, conforming, materialistic, practical, natural, and asocial.

Investigative (I). Persons in this category have a preference for analytical work that involves observations, symbols, systematic problem solving, trouble-shooting and the creation and use of knowledge. Example occupations include scientists, researchers, statisticians, surgeons, pharmacists, and market research analysts. Descriptors of **Investigative** people would include analytical, critical complex, curious, intellectual, precise, rational, and reserved.

Artistic (A). People in this category enjoy creative work in the areas of music, writing, dance, performance, and art. They prefer to be in environments where they are free from systematized and ordered activities. Free expression is important. Example occupations include models, floral arrangers, dancers, sculptors, and musicians. Descriptors of **Artistic** people include complicated, emotional, expressive, idealistic, imaginative, impulsive, nonconforming, and sensitive.

Social (S). Persons in this group prefer working with and for people in a helpful and assistive way. They like to be involved in informing, teaching, training, solving personal problems for others, and curing people. Example occupations include nurses, physical therapists, teachers, clergy, and security guards. Descriptors of **Social** people would include cooperative, friendly, generous, helpful, idealistic, kind, sociable, and warm.

Enterprising (E). People in this category like to work with people in a persuasive way. They like to lead people, take risks for economic gain, sell, and achieve organizational goals. Example occupations include telemarketers, managers, program directors, sales representatives, coaches, and travel agents and guides. Descriptors of **Enterprising** people would include adventurous, ambitious, domineering, energetic, extroverted, self-confident, and talkative.

Conventional (C). Individuals in this category prefer activities that are ordered with systematic rules and procedures. They like record keeping, filing materials, and organizing things into categories according to a precise plan. Example occupations include economists, tax preparers, librarians, accountants, and budget analysts. Descriptors of **Conventional** people would include careful, conforming, conscientious, efficient, inflexible, methodical, obedient, and thrifty (Holland, 1997, pgs.23-28).

The Holland Vocational Personality Theory contends that the environments, like occupations, leisure activities, and selection of courses and training programs can be described according to the same six areas. These environments tend to reinforce and reward the behaviors of people of similar type.

RIASEC Codes

For ease of use of Holland's system, we often refer to the shorthand of **RIASEC** codes when discussing the characteristics of a person, occupation, or activity. The term **RIASEC** is derived from the first letter of each of the interest areas of **R**ealistic, **I**nvestigative, **A**rtistic, **S**ocial, **E**nterprising, and **C**onventional.

Generally, occupations, hobbies, leisure activities, and other life choices are best described by more than one interest area. For example, the occupation geologist can satisfy an interest of a person who is **Investigative (I)** because geologists collect and interpret information in order to solve a problem. Geologists also like to be in the field collecting data, working with their hands, and using equipment. That would show that a geologist is also **Realistic (R)** in nature. A similar situation would occur for a science teacher who wants to help people (**S**), but enjoys problem solving and the scientific method (**I**).

The same is true for people, as we do not fit nicely into one and only one category. In reality we tend to be a combination of all six interests; some interest areas are just stronger or more dominant than others.

Though general practice is to use two or three interest codes to describe people and environments, it is important to note that throughout this book, for purposes of simplicity, we refer to the primary interest area or primary interest code of an individual, a hobby, an education program, or an occupation. Sometimes two codes are used, but must stress that it is general the highest codes or primary code that influences our decisions and actions.

The activities in Chapter 2 of this book generally call for the use of one interest area, but you could modify the activities to use 2 or 3 interest areas, if you feel it necessary, useful, or practical to do so. Young people may easily be confused by using multiple **RIASEC** descriptors, but individuals who have an understanding of occupations and life planning may find this additional complexity to be more appropriate and accurate. You, as the counselor or facilitator, should be able to make that judgment.

Basic Characteristics of the Holland Model

The Holland model is often displayed as a hexagon (See Figure 2), showing the relationship between each of the **RIASEC** areas. Based on data collected in research studies, it has been determined that the characteristics of people and occupations in categories that are adjacent are most similar. For example R and I and R and C are more similar than R and A or R and S or R and E. In fact, it is often stated that there is somewhat of an aversion to activities and occupations with characteristics in categories that are the opposite point of the hexagon. For example, Artistic people tend to have an aversion to activities and occupations in the Conventional category and Investigative people tend to have an aversion to occupations and activities in the Enterprising

category. For persons who have dominant interests in adjacent points, their profile is said to be consistent.

People and occupations do exist with these inconsistent codes; but according to the research, they are comparatively rare. I can attest to the existence of persons with inconsistent codes since I am a strong I and E, with S in second place. It certainly makes life interesting and challenging to work with these somewhat polar opposite codes that generally put me in a category very unlike my colleagues.

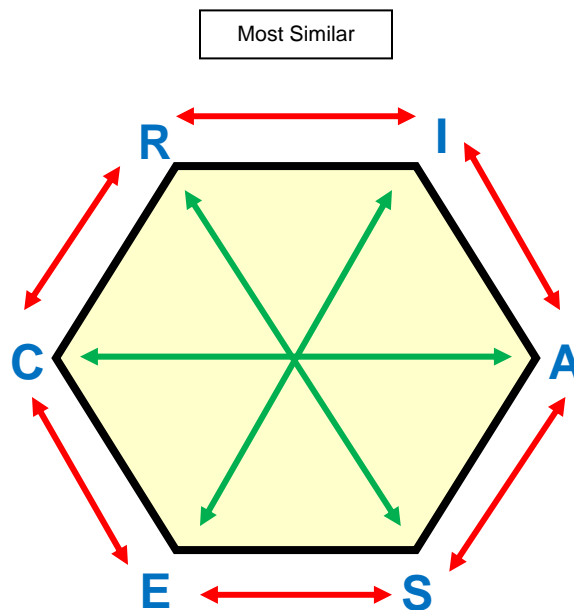


Figure 2

Holland Hexagon

The Holland Vocational Personality Theory is widely accepted as a useful mechanism for helping people understand themselves and for using that information to locate, and connect with, compatible activities and occupations. There are, however, three other concepts that are critical to the use of interests in career exploration and life planning. These are differentiation, congruence, and identity.

Differentiation. Differentiation refers to how well defined one's interests are. Most people have profiles that are defined or differentiated to some extent. That is, they may have a high interest in one, two, or three areas, and lower or less dominant interests in the other three areas. Their profile looks like a combination of peaks and valleys. With a differentiated profile, it is easier to understand how the person's interests match up with other activities, occupations, and jobs.

An example of this is in Figure 3, where two areas are dominant and the other four are not. A person with this profile would probably find occupations and activities in which the

S and I interests areas are strongest to be compatible with them. Looking at occupations and activities in the R, A, E, and C areas would likely not be a fruitful for finding compatible occupations.

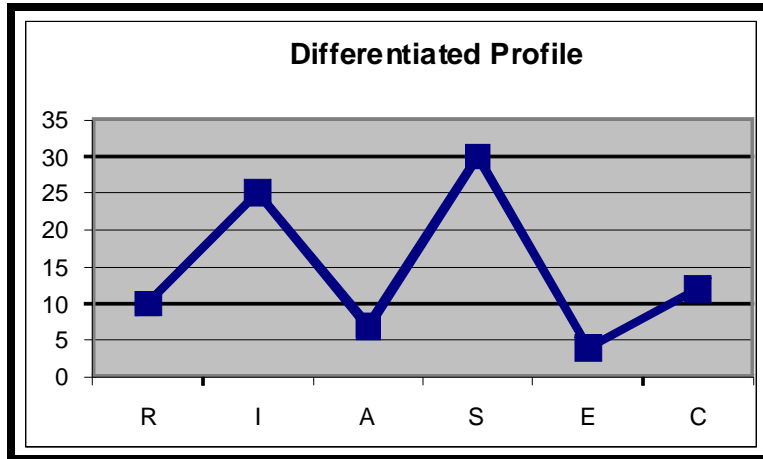


Figure 3

Undifferentiated profiles are more difficult to interpret and use. Some individuals may have high interests in all six areas or very low interests in all six areas. These types of profiles would be considered undifferentiated. Though this occurs on occasion, undifferentiated profiles are not particularly useful or helpful in career development. Individuals who have undifferentiated profiles that may not have had sufficient life experiences to have developed stable or strong interests.

Undifferentiated High Profiles. It is quite possible that on interest measures or surveys, some individuals will indicate that they like or are interested in all the activities, occupations, and situations presented. Figure 4 shows an example of this type of profile.

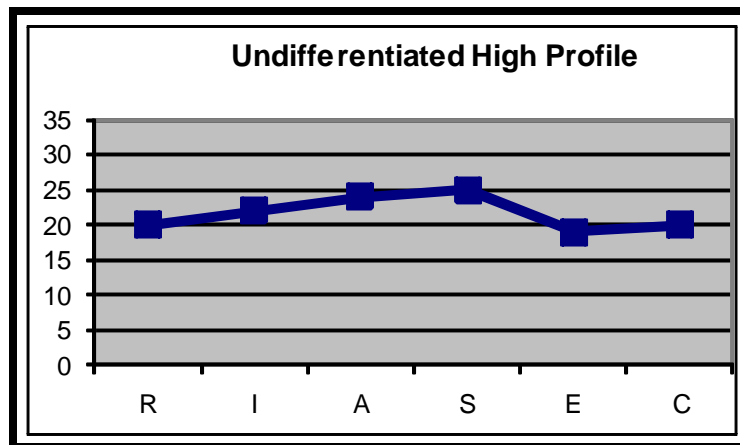


Figure 4

High, undifferentiated profiles may suggest the person is interested in just about everything. That situation would require further intervention and assistance from a counselor to determine verifications and explanations, and to identify priorities. This profile may change as the person gains experiences and begins to have preferences for some activities over others. It could also suggest that the person was careless in answering interest inventory questions, that the inventory was scored incorrectly, or the person was not truthful about their preferences for some reason.

Low Undifferentiated Profiles. A low undifferentiated profile may suggest that a clinical intervention is appropriate. It may be the individual's mood, temperament, outlook on life, or lack of meaningful experiences contributed to the lack of interest in any area. It may well be that the individual is not sufficiently mature, or too young, to have experienced enough of life to know what he or she prefers. Like the high undifferentiated profile, it could also suggest that the person was careless in answering interest inventory questions, that the inventory was scored incorrectly, or the person was not truthful about their preferences for some reason.

An undifferentiated profile would be represented by Figure 5.

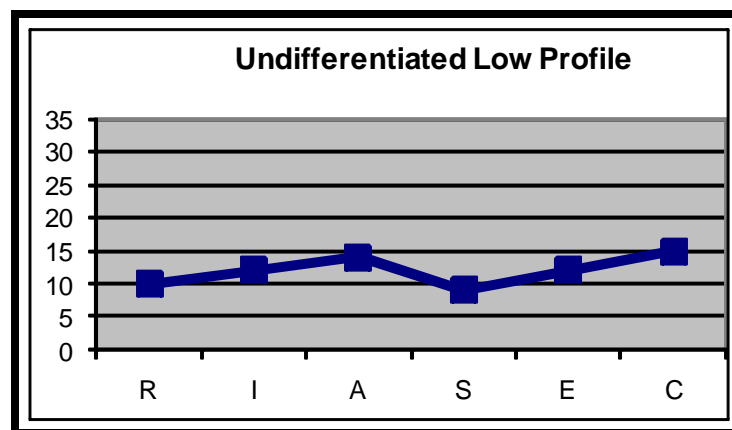


Figure 5

Interests develop with time and experiences. Sometimes very young individuals have not had a sufficient number of life experiences to really know what their interests are. In these cases, even well produced interest measures or surveys may not be very helpful. The best way to develop interests is to be exposed to a wide variety of experiences.

Congruence. For purposes of life and career planning, congruence may well be the most important and practical concept in the Holland theory. Congruence refers to the degree of match between the individual's interests and that of the activity, job, occupation, or plan of action. Congruence is high if the person is in a job or other activity that satisfies that person's interest area or areas. For example, a person who has a high interest area in the Realistic category and works in an environment that allows that interest to be expressed, experiences high congruence. If an Artistic person had to work in a Conventional occupation, the congruence would be low.

It has been shown that when congruence is high, job satisfaction, job performance, and longevity on the job is high. People are satisfied and happy when they are working in an environment that satisfies their interests. As career development professionals, we try to assist people in finding those occupations that are congruent with the person's interests.

Identity. Identity refers to how clear and stable one's goals, interest and traits are. If a person is interested in many occupational goals, they do not have a clear identity.

The importance of interests in occupational and life planning is evident and it is important that students and clients understand their interests and how they relate to and influence choices that they make in life.

An important part of the Holland model is the need for self-knowledge and knowledge about occupations. Only then can good, and more informed, choices be made.

Along with abilities and values and other characteristics, interests are a very important part of knowledge of self and the knowledge of occupations and other environments. This book intends to help in the clarification of one's interests and to see how those interests relate to various aspects of one's life.

Summary of Key Concepts

- People and environments can be described according to six categories of Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional. These are the RIASEC Codes.
- People and environments exhibit varying strengths of these interests, with some more dominant than others.
- When interests of a person are satisfied by the environment, there is congruence, and that congruence leads to job satisfaction and better job performance.
- It is important to understand how one's interests relate to occupations, education, training, hobbies, and leisure activities.

Holland, J.L (1995). *Making vocational choices – A theory of vocational personalities and work environments.* (2nd ed). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.