

ED389961 1995-00-00 Interest Assessment. ERIC Digest.

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ERIC Identifier: ED389961

Publication Date: 1995-00-00

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Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services Greensboro NC.

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The assessment of interests through the use of interest inventories is big business in the field of testing today. Although publishers closely guard their data on the number of inventories given, an estimate of 3,000,000 administrations per year probably is

conservative. The first formal assessment of interests using a published inventory occurred in 1927 with the appearance of the "Strong Vocational Interest Blank." Since that time, the "Strong" has survived numerous revisions and continues to be a popular and widely used interest inventory.

Interests were assessed prior to 1927 using, basically, four techniques. The earliest of these techniques was "estimation", which simply involved asking an individual to indicate her or his feelings towards an activity. Because estimates were not always accurate, individuals often were encouraged to "try-out" activities as another method for assessing their interests. Obviously, try-outs could be quite time-consuming and costly, and "rating scales" and "checklists", precursors to interest inventories, were developed to identify interests more systematically. The interest inventories that we use today differ from early checklists and ratings in that they use statistical methods to summarize responses to pools of items representing various activities and occupations (Hansen, 1984).

DEFINITION OF INTERESTS

The definition of interests, as used by inventory developers, researchers, and counselors, typically reflects five components that may be characterized as determinants: personality, motivation or drive, expression of self-concept or identification, heritability, and environmental influences (e.g., learning and socialization; Hansen, 1990).

One of the most popular theories for describing interests and their relationship to jobs, people, and environments is that of John Holland. Holland (1985) states that both people and environments can be divided into six vocational personality types or some combination of the six types: Realistic (outdoors, mechanical), Investigative (science, math), Artistic (art, language, music), Social (helping, teaching), Enterprising (selling, business) and Conventional (details, clerical). Holland's theory has had a tremendous impact on the fields of career counseling and interest assessment, and many interest inventories include scales that measure interests related to Holland's six types.

PURPOSE OF INTEREST ASSESSMENT

Interest assessment is used in a variety of applied and research settings for several different purposes. Career exploration, that leads to decisions such as choosing a major, selecting a career, or making mid-career changes, probably is the most popular and frequent use of interest assessment. Within this context, college and high school counseling services are the most typical providers of interest assessment and career counseling experiences. However, employment agencies, vocational rehabilitation services, social service agencies, corporations, consulting firms, and community agencies such as the YW or YMCA also provide career counseling opportunities that incorporate interest assessment.

Researchers use objective assessments to operationalize the construct of interests in studies that investigate variables relevant to understanding the world of work. Current trends in vocational psychology research include analyses of (1) the structure of interest; (2) the relationship of interests to other psychological variables such as personality, satisfaction, and success; and (3) the role that interests play in career development.

To a lesser extent, interests are assessed for use in selection and classification evaluations. In some instances, assessed interests, which add valuable data to career choice predictions, are used even after selection to help an employee find the right position within a particular organization (Hansen, 1994).

CURRENT INTEREST ASSESSMENT INVENTORIES

Numerous inventories designed to assess interests have been published. The available choices range from those inventories that measure a small number of relatively broad interests and are self-administered and hand-scored to those that report over 200 scores and must be scored by computers (Kapes & Mastie, 1994).

The "Self-Directed Search (SDS)" and the "Unisex Edition of the ACT Interest Inventory (UNIACT)" are based on John Holland's theory of vocational personalities and assess the six types that Holland hypothesizes. The "SDS" is self-administered, self-scored and self-interpreted while the "UNIACT" is computer scored and uses a computer-generated narrative report to relate the scores to a World-of-Work Map.

The "Vocational Interest Inventory" ("VII"; 8 scales), the "Career Occupational Preference System Interest Inventory" ("COPS"; 14 scales), the "Ohio Vocational Interest Survey" ("OVIS"; 23 scales), and the "Jackson Vocational Interest Survey" ("JVIS"; 34 scales) feature basic interest scales that are composed of homogeneous groupings of items often identified by cluster or factor analysis. With the exception of the "COPS-R" and the "JVIS", which can be hand or computer-scored, all of these inventories are scored by computer. Typically these inventories measure some configuration of basic interests such as mechanical activities, athletics, nature, science, military activities, mathematics, aesthetics, social service, teaching, clerical activities, religious activities, business management, persuading, selling, health, or language.

The "Campbell Interest and Skill Survey (CISS)", the "Kuder Occupational Interest Survey (KOIS)", the "Career Assessment Inventory (CAI)", and the "Strong Interest Inventory (SII)" all require computer scoring and include over 100 different measures of interests. The large number of scales allows these inventories to present profiles that include: (1) global measures of interests similar to those that represent Holland's six types; (2) basic interest scales composed of homogeneous groupings of items (e.g., scales that measure an interest in mechanical activities, medical service, or selling); and

(3) scales that measure the interests of specific occupational groups such as engineers, physicians, journalists, guidance counselors, buyers, and accountants.

The choice of the appropriate inventory to use with a particular population depends on factors such as their age, the purpose of the interest assessment, the amount of time available for testing and interpretation, and the funding available to purchase materials and pay for scoring. Generally, the smaller the number of scales offered by the inventory, the less expensive the materials and scoring will be.

COMPUTERS AND INTEREST ASSESSMENT

The option now exists to use personal computers for every phase of interest assessment, including administration of the inventory, in-house scoring of the scales, production of the profile, interpretation of the results, and integration of the assessed interests into computerized career counseling sequences (Hansen & Sackett, 1993). The most important advantage of using personal computers in interest assessment is in-house scoring that eliminates the need to mail answer sheets to a scoring service for processing, thus reducing the lag between inventory administration and interpretation of the results. A second advantage is the financial savings realized through the use of interactive computerized career guidance programs. Although these programs do not eliminate the need for counselors to work with clients, computers do provide an effective mechanism for identifying and conveying routine information and data to the client.

SUMMARY

The assessment of interests originally developed as an outgrowth of efforts in education and in industry to supplement special and general abilities information about individuals. However, the most powerful uses of interest assessment continue to be in the context of other data, such as values, reinforcers, abilities, personality, and biographical information, that captures the life experiences of an individual. As both education and industry have discovered, the integration of a variety of information, including the assessment of interests, can contribute effectively to improving individual and institutional decision-making.

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Title: Interest Assessment. ERIC Digest.

Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);

Descriptors: Affective Measures, Aptitude Tests, Career Choice, Elementary Secondary Education, Evaluation Methods, Interest Inventories, Interest Research, Interests, Personality Assessment, Personality Measures, Psychological Evaluation, Testing

Identifiers: ERIC Digests

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