

# **The resurrection of vocational interests in human resources research and practice: Yes we can!**

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## **Abstract**

This short article bundles our reactions to three commentaries on our provocation paper about the resurrection of vocational interests in human resources research and practice.

In this rejoinder, we first of all take the opportunity to sincerely thank all colleagues for their careful reading and the very insightful suggestions complementing our review paper on the resurrection of vocational interests (Wille & De Fruyt, 2023). Their contributions further document how vocational interests are of critical importance in various steps of the HR cycle. We further applaud that they highlight avenues for future research and provide suggestions on how to implement the assessment of interests in selection and development systems in the organization.

Wee, Newman and Su (2023) discuss how the diversity-validity dilemma may be mitigated by the inclusion of interest assessments, raising two important points. Firstly, they clarify how adding vocational interests into the mix of selection predictors has the potential to reduce adverse impact. They specifically illustrate how using different sets of predictor weights generates a range of pareto-optimal solutions, and suggest that including vocational interests into this equation is likely to result in better combinations of diversity and job performance outcomes. Although more research is needed here, this positive and unique feature of vocational interests further underscores our central point, namely that interests indeed deserve greater attention in the HR-cycle (in casu selection).

Secondly, Wee and colleagues also make a case for broadening the type of criterion validity studies, by considering multi-occupation studies in addition to single-occupation studies. Multi-occupation studies have the advantage of comparing the validity of interest scores across different occupational contexts (e.g.: ‘Do Artistic individuals in an Artistic occupation perform better than Artistic individuals in a low-Artistic occupation?’). We fully embrace this suggestion, and argue that research can even go one step further and consider variability within occupations in addition to differences between occupations when making predictions. As we noted in our provocation paper, similar to employees, work environments can be characterized by their relative positions on each of the six RIASEC interest domains (or even using a more fine-grained taxonomy; Wille et al., 2015). Different methodologies exist for this purpose, such as incumbent methods (i.e., using the average interest profile of occupational members), self-ratings of the environment (e.g., using an instrument such as the PCI; Gottfredson & Holland, 1991), or existing databases such as O\*NET (Peterson et al., 2001). The point is that the ‘occupation-level’ still contains a lot of -potentially very informative- diversity (see also Nye & Hoff, this issue), and possibly this diversity even increases as occupational boundaries are currently blurring. One way to deal with this in primary studies is to operationalize fit at the lowest level; that is, by looking at the congruence

between a (future) employee's entire interest profile and that of the specific work role (s)he is in (e.g., using a profile correlation or a related technique) or is applying for. It is this nuanced index of congruence, although not without limitations itself, that can then also be related to performance indicators in search for predictive validity estimates.

Both these excellent points could not be discussed in depth in our provocation paper because of space constraints, but they describe highly relevant considerations when further examining the potential of vocational interests in the selection context.

Similarly, the comment by Nye and Hoff (2023) supplements our provocation article in several valuable ways, by answering specific questions about why vocational interests can be used in high-stakes settings.

Firstly, we endorse their analysis that, based on meta-analytic research on hit rates (Hanna & Rounds, 2020; Nye, Perlus, & Rounds, 2018), a significant number of individuals are currently indeed choosing jobs that do not match their interests, and that therefore organizations will benefit from incorporating interest assessments into the selection process to identify applicants who will actually be interested in the work they will perform. People's interests, however, may be broader than what a current job vacancy has to offer, though this broader interest pattern may eventually become critically important at later stages in a persons' organizational career, underscoring the potential of interest measures to guide the internal career development process. Next to their potential to increase diversity (as also noted by Wee and colleagues), these authors also rightfully point to the incremental validity of interest assessments above and beyond other common selection predictors such as personality and cognitive ability (Nye, Prasad, & Rounds, 2021; Van Iddekinge et al., 2011).

Secondly, we appreciate these authors' more elaborate discussion of faking issues (and non-issues) in the context of high-stakes interest assessments. We particularly echo their call to further explore under which conditions forced-choice measures can alleviate concerns about response distortion, and to examine how such methodologies perform relative to more traditional (i.e., Likert-type) response formats when applied in real-world settings. We further reiterate that faking may become less of an issue when interest measures are included in the selection process, not for selecting-out individuals, but as input for orienting applicants within the organization. For such applications, interest assessments can be preferably conducted immediately after a job offer has been done to an applicant (relying on different selection methods) alleviating impression management tendencies.

Finally, Nye and Hoff raise an interesting point about applicant reactions to interest assessment in the selection context, which was not touched upon in our provocation article. We agree that, next to predictive validity and fairness, this is indeed an additional criterion for evaluating the usefulness of assessment procedures. However, it is unsure whether findings on applicant reactions to personality assessments can serve as a useful guide here, given the significant differences between both constructs. Specifically, a distinctive feature of vocational interests is that they are by definition contextualized, which may enhance applicants' perceptions of their relevance for screening purposes, especially when these interests are assessed by means of 'finer-level' preferences for specific job tasks (as suggested by these authors). Moreover, vocational interests are about people's likes and dislikes, whereas personality assessment is about how people typically behave, think and/or feel. Put differently, personality assessment is meant to uncover aspects of people's identity and reputation, and may for this reason be perceived as potentially more threatening.

In closing, Ziebell and Moreira (2023) describe how attention for vocational interests may affect employees and how they are perceived and treated by their supervisors, additionally discussing how vocational interests may contribute to learning in the organization. These authors focus on the central message of our provocation paper, namely to consider vocational interests in the full HR-cycle (beyond selection). We believe that by analyzing and contextualizing several of the points discussed in our article, these authors raise a very fundamental point, namely that about the different organizational actors involved in this endeavor. Specifically, the authors rightfully indicate that whereas assessment has typically been the main responsibility of HR, vocational interest assessment as discussed in our provocation article requires more actors to be involved in order to have it successfully embedded in the complete HR-cycle. These authors discuss our suggestions regarding retention policies (e.g., the stay interview) in particular to point to the focal role fulfilled by leaders (or supervisors). Indeed, retention is not (only) a responsibility of HR in organizations, but requires leaders/supervisors to engage in assessment-informed discussions with subordinates about their motivational issues and development needs. In our provocation article, we already explained the motivational power of vocational interests and the potential of interests to foster self-initiated ('bottom-up') learning. However, a challenge here could be that leaders/supervisors are less familiar with interpreting (potentially complex) interest assessment results and translating this information into specific interventions (e.g., job crafting, internal mobility, or skill development) or support practices. In this regard, we very

much welcome these authors' suggestion to consider the perspectives proposed by Career Education (Hoyt, 2005) to inform, motivate and inspire different organizational actors who might be less familiar with vocational interests and their implications.

In closing, we think that our provocation paper and the accompanying reactions by colleagues make a strong case for the inclusion of vocational interests in the HR toolbox, hereby also pointing to a number of concrete avenues for future research that will help answer open questions in this area.

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