

Gender differences in vocational interests decrease with age, study finds

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Gender differences in vocational interests increase drastically during puberty but tend to decrease across the lifespan, a new study found.

The researchers also suggest that the optimal time for gender-diversity programs to begin recruiting females for male-dominated fields may be during late adolescence.

More than 20,000 people ranging in age from 11 to 42 were included in the study, which was led by Kevin A. Hoff, a doctoral student in industrial-organizational psychology at the University of Illinois.

Hoff and his co-authors conducted a meta-analysis of 49 longitudinal studies on vocational interests to explore when gender disparities emerge and how they change across different developmental periods from early adolescence to middle adulthood.

In examining patterns in vocational interests, Hoff and his co-authors found significant [gender disparities](#) when youths were in middle school; however, males' and females' interests in occupations stereotypically associated with the opposite sex began to increase by late adolescence and continued through the participants' early 40s.

The study utilized the typology developed by psychologist John Holland that classifies the working world into six vocational-interest categories, which also represent the differing personality types that best fit these work environments.

The current study focused on just two of Holland's categories – realistic and social interests, which are stereotypically associated with men and women, respectively.

Realistic interests are occupations such as farmers, carpenters or locksmiths, which involve working with one's hands, tools or materials. And social interests comprise people-oriented, nurturing or helping professions such as nursing, teaching or counseling.

The researchers found that [gender differences](#) in these vocational interests widened significantly during early adolescence.

During middle school, both boys' and girls' interests in realistic vocations declined, but girls' interest declined much more steeply than boys' during that time, Hoff said.

Conversely, girls' interest in social-oriented vocations increased slightly during middle school while boys' interest dropped off sharply.

However, Hoff and his co-authors found that these patterns began to reverse as youths entered late adolescence. Girls' interest in realistic vocational activities, such as those that involved using tools or manipulating objects, began to increase around age 14 and continued to rise throughout their young and middle adult years.

By contrast, men's interest in realistic work activities remained constant from late adolescence through their early 40s.

Similar trends were found with social interests. Women's interest in people-oriented occupations remained relatively constant from early adolescence onward, while males' interest in working with people increased significantly.

"Vocational interests associated with the opposite gender increased during young adulthood, while interests stereotypically associated with their same gender remained constant," Hoff said.

"Men's interest in people-oriented activities may be influenced by the roles they take on during adulthood – as marital partners, parents and professionals," co-author James Rounds said.

Rounds is a professor of psychology and of educational psychology at the U. of I.

Although schools often begin assessing children's interests and aptitudes during [middle school](#), the current study found that might not be the optimal time.

"Children's interests in basically everything plummets during [early adolescence](#)," Hoff said. "If we want to spark kids' interest in careers, it may be best to wait until late adolescence – when they're in high school, for example – and their interest levels increase again."

The same might be true for gender-diversity programs seeking to attract females to male-dominated fields, Hoff said. These programs might have greater success if their outreach and recruitment efforts targeted females in late adolescence, when girls' interest in realistic activities begins to rise.

Psychology professor Daniel A. Briley and graduate student Colin J.M. Wee also were co-authors on the study, which was published recently in the American Psychological Association's journal *Psychological Bulletin*.

More information: Kevin A. Hoff et al. Normative changes in interests from adolescence to adulthood: A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies., *Psychological Bulletin* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/bul0000140](https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000140)

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