

THE VALIDITY OF RETROSPECTIVE REPORTS  
OF VOCATIONAL PREFERENCES<sup>1</sup>

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Problem

The Career Pattern Study, a longitudinal study of vocational development now in its eleventh year has, like many studies, from time to time used questionnaires that require the subject to recall behaviors that occurred several years prior to the administration of the questionnaire. A fundamental assumption of this fairly common practice is that an individual will be able to recall and report accurately the behavior in question. This assumption has not been adequately tested: review of psychological abstracts from 1940 to the present revealed no studies which dealt with the accuracy of recall of earlier preferences, vocational or otherwise. Data in the files of the Career Pattern Study offered an opportunity to investigate how accurately individuals do recall earlier vocational preferences.

Description of the Study

When the Career Pattern Study subjects were seniors in high school, age 17 to 18, they were asked to state what kind of work they then wanted most to go into. Three years later, at age 20, they were

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asked not only to give their present vocational preference, but also to recall their vocational preference at age 17. Five years later when the subjects were 25 years old, they were again asked to recall their vocational preference at age 17 and also at age 20.

These data afforded the opportunity to compare the original vocational preferences of the subjects with what they remembered their preferences to be several years later. It was possible to make three comparisons: original age 17 preference compared to recall at age 20 and at age 25, and the original age 20 preference compared to recall at age 25.

#### Subjects

The subjects were 142 males, all of the boys in the ninth grade of Middletown High School in Middletown, New York, when first contacted by the Career Pattern Study in 1952.

#### Scoring Procedures

Each subject's original vocational preference and his recalled vocational preferences were first rated for occupational field and level according to the Moser, Dubin and Shelsky (1956) revision of Roe's occupational rating scale. In rare cases in which there was some doubt about how to classify a given preference or in which two equal preferences were expressed, two ratings for field and level were allowed for comparison purposes with either the original or recalled preferences of that level. All preferences were rated independently by two psychologists with a rater reliability coefficient of .89.

Recall accuracy scores derived from a comparison of original and recalled preferences were assigned in the following manner:

- 1) Accurate. If the original and recalled preferences agreed in field and level, a score of three was assigned.
- 2) Partially Accurate. If the original and recalled preferences agreed in field or level, a score of two was assigned.
- 3) Inaccurate. If the original and recalled preferences agreed neither in field nor level, a score of one was assigned.
- 4) No Attempt. If the subject had an opportunity to answer the question regarding his past vocational preference but made no attempt, a score of one was assigned. Although this category may reflect motivational attitudes towards the study, the assumption was made that no attempt constituted an inaccurate recall since the subject evidently didn't remember enough about his past preference even to guess what it had been. Because this category is ambiguous in meaning, however, frequencies and correlations are reported separately.

### Correlates

In an attempt to understand some of the factors which might predict or explain the differences in accuracy of recall, Pearson product moment correlations were computed between relevant recall accuracy scores and Otis IQ, composite Vocational Maturity scores (Super and Overstreet, 1960) and educational and occupational levels age 25.

### Results

In Table 1 it is apparent that the majority were able to recall their age 17 vocational preferences at least with partial accuracy both three and eight years later. However, when one looks at the highest standard of accuracy (field and level agreement) one observes a decrease of accuracy with time. Three years after the original preference the majority were able to recall their preferences with complete accuracy, but eight years after the original preference the

majority of individuals were either inaccurate or made no attempt at recall. The number not attempting to recall their original preferences increased sharply with time.

(Table 1 about here)

Table 2 shows that the majority were able to recall their age 20 preference five years later with complete accuracy. Although a sizeable number of subjects made no attempt at recall, those who did make an attempt were able to recall their age 20 preference five years later with greater accuracy than they could recall their age 17 preference three years later.

(Table 2 about here)

In Table 3 it is evident that intelligence and 9th grade vocational maturity bear no relation to the accuracy of recall of adolescent preferences. The correlations of educational occupational levels with the accuracy of recall of young adult preferences when "no attempts" are included are low but significant.

(Table 3 about here)

### Conclusions

One may conclude that asking individuals to recall previous vocational preferences involves error. Although the majority can recall them accurately, a sizeable minority recalls them inaccurately. More important, the risk of inaccuracy increases as the time between the expression of a preference and its recall increases. The recall of adolescent preferences is less accurate than the recall of early adult preferences. This may indicate that accuracy of recall increases with age or it may reflect the fact that preferences of the adolescent are less stable than the preferences of the young adult and therefore

harder to remember.

The variables which govern ability to recall preferences accurately are presumably numerous. This study throws little light on them. We can conclude that intelligence has nothing to do with accuracy of recall. Similarly, the ability to recall vocational preferences accurately is not related to early vocational maturity. It may be that superior intelligence and vocational exploration complicate memory as much as they aid it. Both educational level and occupational level attained are related to the ability to recall accurately, but the relationship is slight. As expected, those with more education tended to recall vocational preferences more accurately. Since education is a long term career-oriented investment, one would expect that the best educated would have thought more about vocational goals and would therefore remember better their vocational preferences. The low but significant correlation with occupational level also supports this view since the attainment of higher occupational status by age 25 also requires effort, planning, and thought about occupations.

#### Summary

Career Pattern Study subjects were asked to recall their vocational preferences at age 17 and age 20 several years later. Recall accuracy scores were obtained by comparing field and level ratings of the original preferences with recall of those preferences. The results indicate that although the majority does recall preferences accurately, a sizeable minority does not. Accuracy of recall diminishes with time and is less for adolescent than for early adult preferences. Accuracy of recall is unrelated to intelligence and vocational maturity. It is somewhat related to educational level attained and to the level of the present occupation.

### Bibliography

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Tables

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Table 1  
Accuracy of Recall of Age 17 Vocational Preferences at Age 20 and Age 25

Accuracy of Recall	Age 20		Age 25	
	N Excluding "No Attempts" N=103	% Including "No Attempts" N=112	N Excluding "No Attempts" N=79	% Including "No Attempts" N=112
Field and Level Agreement	70	68	39	49
Field or Level Agreement	21	20	20	38
Neither Field nor Level Agreement	12	12	10	13
No Attempt at Recall	9		33	29
Not Rated: Data Missing at Age 17, 20, or 25.	30		30	
Totals	142	100%	142	100%

Table 2  
Accuracy of Recall of Age 20 Vocational Preferences at Age 25

Accuracy	N	% Excluding "No Attempts" N=93	% Including "No Attempts" N=117
Field <u>and</u> Level Agreement	71	76	61
Field <u>or</u> Level Agreement	12	13	10
Neither Field <u>nor</u> Level Agreement	10	11	8.5
No Attempt at Recall	24		20.5
Not Rated:			
No Age 20 Preference	4		
Data Missing at Age 20 or Age 25	21		
Totals	142	100%	100%

Table 3  
Correlates of the Accuracy of Recall

Accuracy of Recall Scores	Otis IQ Grade 9	VM Age Grade 9	Educational <sup>1</sup> Level Attained Age 25	Occupational <sup>2</sup> Level At Age 25
Age 17 Preference Recalled at Age 20 Excluding "No Attempts"	.16 (N=103)	.14 (N=79)		
Including "No Attempts" as "Inaccurate"	-.12 (N=112)	.12 (N=88)		
Age 20 Preference Recalled at Age 25 Excluding "No Attempts"			-.06 (N=93)	-.02 (N=61)
Including "No Attempts" as "Inaccurate"			-.21* (N=117)	-.22* (N=82)

<sup>1</sup> CPS Education Rating Scale

<sup>2</sup> Roe Scale

\* Significant at the .05 level