

Vocational interests among Palestinian students

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Abstract

The objectives of the study were to identify the vocational interests among Palestinian students, and explore factors that can affect vocational interests. The vocational interests was evaluated using a 42-item index scale based on Holland's (1997) RIASEC model that was administrated to three hundred and thirty-three secondary school students at southern Hebron district. The data was statistically analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings revealed that Palestinian students had a moderate level of vocational interests. Of the students surveyed, 70.4% revealed vocational interests. The results demonstrated significant statistical differences in the vocational interests' scores among the students according to their gender, stream, family birth rank, and parents' educational level. Academic achievement emerged as a significant predictor of vocational interests. The implications of the findings for practice are also highlighted.

Key words: Vocational interests, Palestine, career, students.

Introduction

Individuals tend to prefer a vocation in order to reach their targets such as leading a happy life, nutrition, housing, safety, a good position in society, etc. It is during the adolescence period that a vocation, which is for certain individuals the most important step in life, while for others, it is a rather important step that can be changed and made flexible at any time. Selecting a vocation implies selecting a life style (Deniz et al., 2014).

Nowadays, the world experiences extraordinary economic, social and technological development, which results in a much broader selection of a career. Consequently, much difficulty is experienced in selecting a vocation as well as succeeds therein. This led to the need for career guidance and counseling. The primary purpose of having a job is not to merely ensure life requirements but include social and psychological responsibilities. The result hereof is the need to study the person's characteristics (emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual) in order to guide him/her for the best career by concentrating on his/her tendency without being affected by social and cultural traditions (Hoseen, 2011).

Vocational tendency is one of the most important factors that abets an individual to decide his/her field of study. If an individual deliberates the decision scientifically on the basis of vocational interests, it would enable one to succeed in life and be innovative in the field of choice. Each individual has work preferences based on personal interests and desires (Aldahri, 2005; Tortillas, 1999).

According to Turner & Lapan (2005), vocational interest is a fundamental factor which serve as a guide and directs individuals to select their fields of specialty, which eventually culminates in success and develops their creativity (Mahasneh & Farajat, 2015).

Based on the researcher's work and experience as a psychological and educational counselor, it was observed that a number of students selected unsuitable fields of study which did not suit their vocational tendency. Other students changed their field after one or more than a year of study because they had realized that the current field was unsuitable and continuation in the current field was a waste of time and money. The latter is the result of not following the appropriate strategy in selecting a suitable field of study. A suitable field selection is one of the most crucial stages of one's life since it affects, *inter alia*, parents, relatives and friends; curriculum; attitudes and experiences; tendency; and employment opportunities.

Background and Literature Review

Studies conducted in America revealed that the choice of careers is a national problem. The studies reported that post-secondary education statistics revealed that 20% to 60% of the freshmen class being undecided or uncertain of their career choice (Feller, 2003; Herr & Creamer 2000; Hayes, 1997; Orndorff & Herr, 1996).

In Lebanon, tertiary graduates undertake certain career paths that are inappropriate with their college majors. Many enroll in Law on a 'temporary' basis until they are certain of their career paths. Thereafter, they change to more appropriate majors, resulting in overcrowding in certain college major lecture theatres (Abdul-Reda and Abouchedid, 2003).

Edward K. Strong (1943), a leader in research studies in vocational interests, explored the word "interest" as a reaction to "liking," "not liking," or "being oblivious" to someone, something or an action (cited in Herr & Cramer, 1996). According to A Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychological and Psychoanalytic Terms the word "interest" is defined as

differentiating an object or a case, or a kind of approach or sense which comes spontaneously (cited in Savickas, 1999). Strong, a leader in studies related to surveying vocational interests, followed the definition of interest according to Webster's Dictionary, which defines the word as "a kind of attention or coming into action towards an object." Strong highlighted four key elements in this definition: the first and second are the continuity of attention and sense related to an object; the third is heading towards (an individual approaches or moves away from something liked or disliked); and the fourth is activity (an individual is active about that in which s/he is interested). Certain sociologists and psychologists have opposed the preceding definitions of interest. For example, the Harper Collins Sociology Dictionary highlights possible benefits of interest defining it as, "beneficial results for a private person or group" (Deniz, 2013).

The National Career Development Association (2007) defines the word interest as "activities which are going to be performed by a person".

According to Holland (1985), vocational interests are indicators of personality in terms of jobs, courses of study, hobbies, leisure time activities and choices. An individual responds to particular vocational interests, general vocations and activities with responses such as "I enjoy," "I do not enjoy" or "It does not matter" (Savickas, 1999). Despite the different points of view, there are many common issues with regard to defining vocational interest. On the basis of those given above, vocational/occupational can be redefined as an inherent process in which an individual pays attention to an object willingly without a special effort, carries on this attention for an extended time and is aware of and transforms this into a response and an attitude.

Vocational interests can be categorized as expressed and measured. Expressed interests are usually determined through answers which are derived from open-ended questions. Measured interests occur when individuals discover their career choice in a better way than through an inventory of vocational interest. Even though there are different methods utilized to measure one's vocational interests, the most widespread methodology used is the inventory of interest (Silvia, 2006). Inventory of interest is widely used because an individual expresses his/her own interests noting and comparing different vocations (Deniz, 2013).

Strong defined vocational inclination as: the natural tendency of the attention given something or standby because the individual is interested in a specific thing (Savakis &

Spokane, 1999) is known as Andrew Carson (Andrew, 2005; Sharf, 2006) Vocational Interests in the Dictionary of Occupational Psychology Dictionary of Vocational Psychology as part of the central building of the character, Vocational interests in the Dictionary of Occupational Psychology Dictionary of Vocational Psychology as part of the central construction of the character, this part has decision-making in vocational choice, adapts to the chosen profession, and refers to the activities and processes that are related to the areas of the profession (Nathan & Hill, 2006).

Several studies have revealed that a comprehension of the vocational interests helps to guide the individual to determine the decisions that must be owned in every stage of vocational growth, and an understanding of the evolution of vocational interests helps counselors to intervene timeously and effectively in order to modify any defect in vocational growth (Rojewski & Kim, 2003; Alnaseer & AlSaud, 1993; Abu dlo, 1993).

Larson et al. (2002), asserted that there are several factors which help in the formation of vocational interests, including: the personal experience, the experience of others, hobbies, academic achievement, personal characteristics of the individual, the needs of the individual as well as the constituent elements as cited in (Mahasneh & Farajat, 2015; Altlaheen, 2008; Alsbejan, 2008; Brown, 2007; Haj, 2002) as follows:

1. Emotional component: this aspect includes feelings of the individual associated with the practice of trends such as joy, happiness, anger, hatred and discomfort. They have an important role because if the individual practiced something and felt certain pleasure and joy, that leads to creativity, innovation and increased productivity.
2. Component of knowledge: includes what information and knowledge the individual has about the tendency. An individual attend the course and believe that this specialization is best based on his/her knowledge and beliefs that could be true or possibly not. It is essential that the individual has self-belief of his/her health, accuracy of the information and specific beliefs about this tendency.
3. Behavioral component: the information or cognitive aspect refers to the method of disposal, while feeling refers to the expected outcome and desire.

Further Related Studies

Vocational interest is a popular topic of debate in the field of education and social science. Several articles and studies which have been published, researched this topic as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, as well as addressed theoretically and through applied research. Kemboi et al. (2016), posit that there was a relationship between personality types, and career choice. The majority of the students (73.3%) were satisfied with their choice of study. An appropriate career choice by students would enhance satisfaction and success in their studies and future employment.

The study by Amoah et al. (2015), revealed that students strongly agreed that career guidance and counseling, career goal identification, organization of career days and conferences and administration of occupational interest inventory of students were career intervention roles by the school counselor which influenced their choice of career. A positive correlation was established between the role of the counselor and its influence on the student's choice of career. Mahasneh & Farajat (2015) asserted that statistical significant differences in the vocational interests between the experimental and the control group in various professions, the occupational practice develop actual vocational interests for students.

Moreover, Deniz et al. (2014), concluded that the current departments of higher-education and vocational interest (except for mathematics) of individuals do not differ significantly. Moreover, there is a significant difference of gender among individuals in terms of the fields which they study including their interests. However, the study by Liu et al. (2014), revealed that career maturity was positively related to job attainment, and both emotional intelligence and social vocational interest amplified the positive relationship between career maturity and job attainment.

Furthermore, Vock et al. (2013), concluded that gifted participants reported stronger investigative and realistic interests, with lower social interests than less intelligent participants, while highly achieving participants reported higher investigative and higher artistic interests. In another study, Kantamneni and Fouad (2013) revealed that contextual variables such as acculturation, cultural values, and gender did not predict congruence but predicted vocational interest themes, while gender, acculturation, and individualistic and collectivistic cultural values predicted "Realistic" and "Social" interests.

The data by Iliescu et al. (2013), conclusively revealed that the structure of vocational interests become clearer with age. The relationship between character strengths and vocational interests was tested by Proyer et al. (2012). The findings revealed that intellectual strengths yielded primary relations with investigative and artistic interests, and social interests demonstrated relations with strengths of transcendence and other-directed strengths and enterprising interests with leadership strengths.

Purpose and Scope

The objectives of the study were to identify the vocational interests among Palestinian students, explore the primary vocational interest indicators among the students; explore the factors that can affect vocational interests; and open new prospects for further studies in the related field.

The study addressed one of the fundamental aspects of personality, namely: vocational interests which plays an effective role in guiding and directing individuals to select their specialties, which leads to success and develops their creativity. According to Holland (1985), vocational interests are indicators of personality in terms of jobs, courses of study, hobbies, leisure time activities and choices. The study, considered to be the first and leading of its kind, revealed that vocational interests, through empirical surveys was relatively limited in the Palestinian occupied society where unemployment is considered a risk factor.

Definition of Terms

Vocational interests is an expression of an individual's personality in work, school subjects, hobbies, recreational activities and preferences (Holland, 1997).

Academic achievement is success; outcome of education; traditionally, the grade point average (GPA) (Astin, 1993). Participants were asked to self-report GPA during 2015/2016 second semester.

Hypothesis

Based on the reviewed literature, the set objectives, questions and variables of the study, the following hypothesis is proposed:

There are no statistical significant differences at $\alpha \leq 0.05$ in the vocational interests among Palestinian students according to their gender, stream, family birth rank, parents' educational level, and academic achievement (GPA).

Delimiting variables for the scope of the study was based on participants' demographic characteristics which included gender, stream, family birth rank, parents' educational level, and academic achievement (GPA), in addition to the vocational interests' index.

Methodology and Design

The study adopted the quantitative research approach. The questionnaire is appropriate for the exploratory nature of the research. The population of the study was limited to the students of the secondary school in southern Hebron district during the 2015/2016 academic year.

The overall sample comprised of three hundred and thirty-three students (130 males and 203 females) at southern Hebron district. The sample was selected based on gender and stream. The sample size was calculated using the sampling web, <http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm>, sample size calculator, with a margin error of 0.05. The target population consisted of secondary school students in the southern Hebron district during the 2015/2016 academic year, which included two thousand four hundred and eighty-four students: 968 males to 1517 females (Palestinian Ministry of Education, 2016).

Vocational interests were evaluated using an index of a 42-item scale introduced by Holland (1997), and took into consideration the cultural appropriateness in the Palestinian society. A 5-point Likert scale (always, often, neither, rarely, never) was used to measure the responses. The participants were requested to complete the questionnaire in selected secondary schools in the southern Hebron district. The sampling survey instrument sought background information such as the participants' gender, stream, family birth rank, parents' educational level, and academic achievement (GPA).

Validation of the instrument proceeded in two distinct phases. The initial phase involved a group of referees and expert arbitrators who provided comments on the tool. The second phase involved the implementation of a pilot study (N=40) to validate the survey using exploratory factor analysis. Factor loading for all items exceeded 0.55 (0.58 to 0.79), which

implied that those items were suitable to measure each item of vocational interest among the sampled students.

The reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha and Guttman split-half coefficients to ascertain reliability and consistency of the survey. Cronbach's Alpha and Guttman split-half for the survey instrument was 0.89 and 0.85, respectively, indicating excellent reliability and consistency.

The demographic breakdown of the participants was as follows: gender, stream, family birth rank, parents' educational level, and academic achievement (GPA). In total, the sample comprised three hundred and seventy students. The respondents' GPA was between 50 and 98 points (M 77.15 SD 11.45). The females represented 61.0% of the participants, while the remaining 39% were males. The sample was drawn from the arts and science faculties. The arts represented 67.3% of the sample, while 32.7% from the sciences. Half (57.7%) of the participants were middle family birth rank; their parents were less-educated; 50.2% of the fathers had a secondary educational level compared to 52.6% of the mothers.

Data Analysis and Findings

Data was analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS). The questionnaire items were rated on a 1–5 Likert scale (1=always, 2=often, 3=neither, 4=rarely and 5=never), the highest score indicated a high level of vocational interests. Descriptive statistics gauged vocational interests' scores among the sampled population. The following statistical techniques were measured: Pearson correlation, T.test, One way analysis of variance, Tukey test, Cronbach's Alpha, Guttman Split-Half Coefficient and Factor Analysis.

The mean score of vocational interests scale as experienced by the sample of three hundred and thirty-three participants was moderate (M 3.52 SD 0.52). The study observed that almost (70.4%) of secondary school students had a moderate level of vocational interests.

Furthermore, the findings revealed the vocational interests indicators ranked in descending order as follows: I like helping people (M 4.30 SD 0.93); I like working outdoors (M 4.17 SD 1.04). The students emphasize that they like to try to influence or persuade people (M 4.16 SD 0.98); in addition to trying to help people solve their problems (M 4.14 SD 1.07). Moreover, students indicated that as an ambitious person, they set goals for themselves (M

4.13 SD 0.99); enjoy learning about other cultures (M 4.00 SD 1.05); like to analyze things (problems/ situations) (M 3.92 SD 1.18); enjoy trying to discern how things work (M 3.91 SD 1.08). Students also indicated that they pay attention to details (M 3.89 SD 1.11); and like to organize things (files, desks/offices) (M 3.86 SD 1.19).

Moreover, the study investigated demographic breakdown of vocational interests among Palestinian students with the aim of identifying differences. The findings revealed that a mother's level of education does not signify any significant difference. However, it was found that gender, stream, family birth rank, father's level of education, and academic achievement are significant variables. In relation to gender, the differences favored males (M 3.61 SD 0.48) compared to (M 3.47 SD 0.53) for females: T.test value was (2.495 P=0.013). As for stream, the differences favored science students (M 3.63 SD 0.47) compared to (M 3.47 SD 0.53) for arts participants: T.test value was (2.782 P=0.006).

Furthermore, differences were found in student's family birth rank, which favored senior students (M 3.63 SD 0.55): F-value was (6.920 P=0.001). In terms of the father's level of education, the differences favored the well-educated fathers (M 3.68 SD 0.38): F-value was (2.784 P=0.041).

Finally, the findings also denoted that there are statistical significant positive correlations between academic achievement (GPA) and the average score of vocational interests among Palestinian students of which the R-correlation was (0.188 P=0.001).

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that secondary school students had a moderate level of vocational interests. The above results reflect the difficulties facing the Palestinian educational system, taking into consideration the high unemployment rate among the graduated students that exceeded 45% among science graduates and 65% among arts graduates under the on-going Israeli occupation, which created negative trends among the secondary school students. Moreover, the dependent socialization process in the Palestinian family, the lack of educational strategy and database of the specialties in the Palestinian universities, and the inadequate number of qualified educational counselors, reflects negatively on the student level of vocational interests.

According to the study's results, the males scored a higher level of vocational interest than females. The above findings are considered normal in the Palestinian society which has conservative customs and traditions, male patriarchal dominance and social upbringing which is based on gender inequality. Patriarchal ideology is deeply rooted in the Palestinian society, where the notions of father and brother are prevalent. According to these notions, male dominance supports the structure that keeps men in positions of power, authority and control (Barakat, 1993). This creates a larger space for males compared to females in relation to the nature of social ranks, roles, freedom, participation in decision-making, responsibility, large scale engagement in labor market and development of potential and skills. These reflect on the development of the students' personalities; their interest, and increase their ability to identify their attitudes and career decisions.

Vocational interest increased among the science students compared to the literary students. This result confirms the personality differences and self-efficacy which plays a critical role in secondary school student life. Furthermore, the nature of science influences individuals as being sociable by nature and live in peer groups. Scientific students spend most of their time at the school; give more importance to community issues; join both voluntary work and extracurricular activities managed in the school; and feel concern and responsible for others at the school. Consequently, science students are more qualified to interact and understand others needs and emotions as well as help to solve problems. Therefore, this contributes towards their vocational interest.

Moreover, the differences established in students family birth rank, favored the senior students. The researcher inferred that the reason for the aforementioned is that the first born baby has the focus of attention and care of the family and does not have a simulated model in the family according to (Watson, 1930) the learning simulation theory.

Furthermore, differences were found in terms of parent's level of education which favored the children whose fathers possessed a bachelor's degree or higher. Education is a significant stage in the formation and development of one's personality; it represents a critical turning point in the life of both parents and their children, which fulfills their aspirations, meet their abilities, preferences and interests. Education also fulfills social interaction that contributes to the development of the personality of the children, reinforces their abilities in learning and thinking; make decisions for their actions (Banat & Rimawi, 2014) and vocational interests. Firjani (1998: 3) holds that the benefits of the essential role played by higher education in the

development of backward societies are much higher than the anticipated economic calculations considering that higher education plays a substantial role in the formation of a higher level of human capital in society. Institutions of higher learning lay the foundation for the cognitive revolution of knowledge and sophisticated abilities namely: higher levels of human capital which is the mainstay for progress in this century.

The study also revealed that a mother's level of education does not denote any significant difference in vocational interests among Palestinian students. This implies that vocational interests are not actually influenced by this variable and is more likely to be affected by other factors other than a mother's level of education.

Finally, a positive relationship was found between student's academic achievement and their vocational interest. Academic achievement emerged as a significant predictor of vocational interests. This is a reflection of the importance of the affective domain, the surrounding environment, creativity, self-concept, career aspirations, and interpersonal skills to make informed choices, in addition to the cognitive domain in academic achievement. The findings of this study are similar to certain findings in the related studies while certain aspects disagreed with others as well. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. There is a need to address the Palestinian curriculum with vocational interest's concept as an important component in academic performance.
2. A need to establish an advanced psycho-educational advising unit at the Palestinian schools to offer advice, developmental, and remedial services focusing on vocational interest.
3. Implication of training school counselors in vocational and academic counseling.
4. Raise students' and parents' awareness of the importance of developing vocational interest and decision-making by hosting seminars and workshops; invite specialists; arrange morning school programs; and implement vocational days at schools.
5. Further studies to establish a clearer understanding of vocational interests among Palestinian students is recommended.

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