

Counseling for Business & Industrial

Holland's Inventories Self-Directed Search (SDS)

3.1 History - Theoretical Background

John Holland's theory was developed in 1966 and continually improved in 1973, 1985 and 1992. *The theory of vocational choice* was an immediate success because it provided professional Counselors with a comprehensible and easy to apply conceptual framework, whereas clients entering the social and work life understand how personal and environmental factors interact, and ultimately how this process facilitates decision making. Two instruments support the application of Holland's theory: *Vocational Preference Inventory: VPI* (1985) and *Self-Directed Search: SDS* (1994).

The essence of Holland's and his collaborators' theoretical development consists in the fact that making vocational choices is *“an extension of the personality”* of any individual, who finds in the particularities of career development the road to self-assertion through interests and values. Thus, the distinct way of structuring in the personality of any individual a system of interests and attitudes shapes the direction of career guidance. The degree of compatibility between interests and a certain career choice awards personal satisfaction regarding the tasks of one's own profession.” (Jigau, 2001).

Holland states that we can speak of the presence or absence of satisfaction in work to the extent that a number of personality traits match several aspects of the same work environments. In other words, if the Realistic personality type, for instance, matches several factors in the Realistic vocational field, we can anticipate the professional satisfaction of individuals belonging to this type. Holland concludes that:

- individuals have different combinations of specific individual traits;
- certain traits become relatively stable after adolescence (recent research has confirmed the fact that the process of building interest patterns become stable by the age of 25);

- choosing an occupation is a way of self-expression;
- the members of the same activity field have similar personality structures and histories;
- professionals in certain fields who have similar personality structures will react in the same way in similar work situations;
- satisfaction, stability and professional status depend on the congruence between one's own personality and the work environment;
- the majority of individuals can be grouped into six personality types and as many work types: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising and Conventional; individuals aspire to those work environments and activities that allow them to capitalize on their qualities and personal values;
- success in an occupation / profession requires certain combinations of traits / characteristics on the part of individuals; these combinations (of aptitudes, interests, temperamental aspects, attitudes, values) are relatively similar for people in the same profession;
- the results of evaluation through psychological tests of traits / characteristics and the analysis of the set of factors leading to success in a certain occupation for those who are already performing it, may represent a basis to identifying the suitable occupation for someone or the right person for the job and, implicitly, a means of anticipating the success at the workplace and personal satisfaction.

Holland's theory regarding the vocational choices represents the conceptual background of the SDS Inventory. The privileged categories of relationships: ***“trait-factor”*** or ***“matching the person to the environment”*** are supported by a series of hypotheses targeting the existence of distinct personality categories and as many specific work environments. In these terms, it is estimated that people will seek those positions which they believe will enhance personal and professional success, satisfaction and advancement, self-expression and sharing of the values they believe in.

The ***“trait and factor”*** theory stems from the premise that there is a strong connection between people's system of interests and their operational aptitudes. The choice of a profession (job) is thus a specific process reflecting a characteristic

stage for each individual, namely maturity of personality. Holland also states that personality types correspond to as many types of work or lifestyle. Thus, any person will opt for a position or lifestyle which will allow making use of and putting into practice his or her aptitudes, abilities and skills with a view to establishing one's value as a person." (Jigau, 2001).

3.2 Method Presentation

Self-Directed Search is an Inventory exploring aspirations, interests, activities and competences, that allows clients (through self-administration and self-scoring) to understand the way these factors might be connected with certain occupations (since there are several professions suitable for each person, that match their personality structure).

SDS consists in an "evaluation brochure" facilitating the identification of the occupation corresponding to the personal code obtained as a result of applying the inventory of interests. Holland identifies six personality types characterized by professional preferences. He states that work environments can also be classified by the same criterion. Consequently, vocational choices will be determined by how lasting these preferences for the six domains of human activity are.

In addition, Holland affirms that the types of rejections people operate accordingly, also characterize each category of individuals:

Personality types:	Activities Rejected:
Realistic	social and educational
Investigative	persuasive, social and repetitive work
Artistic	systematic, office, business
Social	manual, technical, work with materials and machines
Enterprising	scientific, analytic, systematic
Conventional	unstructured, unsystematic, artistic

3.3 Personality Categories

The six connected personality categories and work environments are: Realistic (R), Investigative (I), Artistic (A), Social (S), Enterprising (E) and Conventional (C).

Realistic (R) - *The Realistic environment*: requires physical activities, tool, apparatus, machines handling and consequently an individual must have technical competence that allows working with objects rather than interacting with people.
***The Realistic personality type*:** realistic individuals enjoy using tools, instruments,

caring for plants and animals, working outdoors; they have or develop physical and handling aptitudes in the area of practical activities and exhibit higher motivation for things, money, status and less for human relationships.

The behaviour of Realistic clients: they expect concrete, direct answers from the counselor, which should be immediately applicable to the problem that brought them to there in the first place; occasionally they have difficulties in expressing the precise need for counseling, expressing feelings, motives and interests; they enjoy talking however about their practical activities and hobbies.

Investigative (I) - *The Investigative environment:* requires the investigation of the causes behind various phenomena and the seeking of solutions to problems through specific methods and techniques. ***The Investigative personality type:*** they prefer systematic and independent research, in order to find out causal explanations, observe, learn, evaluate, analyze and find solutions to problems; to this end they make use of personal resources of intelligence, abstract thinking, intuition, creativity, capacity to identify and solve problems.

The behaviour of Investigative clients: they are distressed by unsolved problems and unanswered questions; for them these represent challenges they like to have under control; the counselor is a discussion partner in their dominantly rational and much less emotional process of career development.

Artistic (A) - *The Artistic environment:* is open, free, with unstructured working hours, requiring initiative and appreciating to the maximum a personal way of artistic and emotional expression. ***The Artistic personality type:*** individuals with artistic aptitudes, abilities, intuition, open to an emotional approach to the world; they enjoy making recourse to imagination and creativity and express themselves in an original and unsystematic manner.

The behaviour of Artistic clients: they prefer an approach to counseling in an unconventional manner, making use of examples, written materials, criticizing, comparing, joking; they prefer individual counseling to group counseling, and the decision-making is dominantly emotional and to a lesser degree rational and systematic.

Social (S) - *The Social environment:* offers the opportunity to discuss, be flexible, listen to others; communication skills, sympathetic attitude, generosity, friendliness, desire to help others are highly valued in the fields of education, social work, health care, etc. ***The Social personality type:*** enjoy working with

people, so as to inform, counsel, help, instruct, educate, train, take care of; can use language creatively to this end.

The behaviour of Social clients: oriented towards social exchange, explicitly express the aspirations to relate socially in an altruistic manner, enjoy group activities, cooperation, informal activities; offer to help the Counselors in their activity; they are on occasion too garrulous.

Enterprising (E) - *The Enterprising environment:* leads and persuades people to act in order to attain the purposes of an organization, financial or economic as a rule; such environments offer power, high social status and prosperity. ***The Enterprising personality type:*** self-confident, assertive people who enjoy taking risks, persuading, leading and influencing people for the attainment of purposes of an organization, be it their own businesses, reaching important social positions and wealth; they prefer leading to being led.

The behaviour of Enterprising clients: dominantly affirmative, they express their feelings and intentions (when socially accepted), moreover they rather persuade others to act according to their own convictions instead of helping them; on occasion they overestimate themselves and inaccurately value their competences and skills; they are exceedingly competitive and often clash with their peers, anxious to reach key positions in organizations.

Conventional (C) - *The Conventional environment:* it implies organization and planning, work is usually done in offices and concerns keeping evidence, making statistics, drawing up reports; work with documents of any nature is orderly, any activity is predictable and conforms to a routine, indications come from superiors or coordinators.

The Conventional personality type: enjoy working with numbers, data and information, meticulously, accurately, in a detailed and systematic manner; do not mind receiving instructions from other people; prefer to be in control, not improvise in critical situations or make decisions.

The behaviour of Conventional clients: behave conventionally, are orderly, systematic, with a sense of hierarchy, and trust; they are less willing to approach the possibility of occupational alternatives and poorly structured working environments; their need for order can show its worth in fields such as finance, banking, organization of educational activities, conferences, accounting, data processing.

In order to have a synthesis image of the characteristics attached to the personality types defined by Holland it is useful to consult the following lists of traits specific to the categories these inventories operate with – RIASEC (also useful as a self-evaluation instrument):

Realistic	Investigative	Artistic	Social	Enterprising	Conventional
conformist	analytic	complicated	persuasive	adventurous	conformist
franc	cautious	disorderly	cooperative	Ambitious	diligent
honest	critic	emotional	friendly	preoccupied	careful
humble	curious	expressive	generous	dominating	conservative
material	independent	idealistic	helpful	energetic	inhibited
natural	intellectual	imaginative	idealistic	impulsive	submissive
persistent	introvert	impractical	perspicacious	optimistic	orderly
practical	methodical	impulsive	kind	pleasure- driven	persistent
modest	modest	independent	responsible	popular	practical
timid	precise	intuitive	sociable	self-confident	calm
stable	rational	nonconformist	tactful	sociable	unimaginative
calculated	reserved	original	understanding	garrulous	efficient

3.4 The Holland Code

There are very few cases of “*pure*” personality types and work environments; more often we encounter combined types. This is precisely why “*The Holland Code*” employs three letters to describe each personality type and work environment (e.g.: EIA, ISE, CAS); these letters are the initials of the categories described above (R, I, A, S, E, C). For instance, a library worker (Sharf, 1997) will not be labeled with C (conventional) alone; he or she could be Conventional (C) firstly, but Investigative (I) second, and Social (S) third; in sum, the code will be **CIS**.

For a counselor, the Holland personality code could be **SAE** (type S – Social is dominant, with two additional types: A – Artistic and E – Enterprising). Three supplementary concepts complete the conceptualization of the “trait and factor theory”; they are: *congruence, difference and consistence*.

Congruence - Congruence refers to the relation between the personality type and the type of work environment; the closer the codes, the more congruent the relation. For instance, if a Realistic type works in a Realistic environment, it is said that the relation between the personality type and the type of work environment is congruent; on the other hand, if a Social type is employed in an Artistic environment, the relation is incongruent, and the person will be relatively frustrated and unsatisfied.

A person to whom we can attribute the code RSI will have a high degree of satisfaction if the work environment is also RSI (case of high congruence) and a lower degree of satisfaction if the work environment is RSA (less congruent). Consequently, an RCA type environment will be less congruent with the personality type RSI (mentioned above) and totally incongruent with the type AEC, for example. These concrete situations are frequent in counseling and if we take into account the congruence factor we greatly enhance adequate counseling to the system of interests and values of the client; it is the counselor's task to evaluate and assist clients in finding the appropriate (congruent) work environment, in accordance with the beneficiaries' personality structure.

Difference - Difference refers to the relation between types and their relative importance. People and work environments differ in that they belong to one or several types. There are people who fully conform to some of the Holland codes, whereas others seem to have characteristics from all six types; the same can be for the work environments they prefer.

People who like to do some things and dislike others can be easily distinguishable by interests; similarly, there are people who can perform any activity well and consequently they will not be differentiated in the Holland's approach.

A high score in any type indicates a differentiated profile, while a non-differentiated profile comes from low scores. Just like types of people vary in terms of difference, so do the work environments. This is precisely why some types of people can find professionally satisfying categories of activities (congruence) in various work environments (incongruence), because work environments vary with respect to the degree of difference.

People undifferentiated as type may encounter difficulties in decision-making with respect to selecting a career. The counselor's role in these situations is supporting clients in identifying interests more accurately and setting priorities, that is "***differentiating***" themselves and thus becoming more likely to select a work environment suited to their structure of interests and aptitudes.

Consistency - Consistency refers to the level of similarity between types when compared. It has been found that certain personality types have more in common with certain others.

Work environments can also be judged in terms of consistency: a Realistic and a Social environment are inconsistent (RS), whereas a Social and an Enterprising

one (SE) are consistent. The number of occupations with low consistency in types is small. Nevertheless some can be found to combine Artistic interests with numerical skills – the Conventional type – and those in an Enterprising environment – ACE (for example, starting a personal business in selling music devices: audio tapes, CDs, sound equipment, etc.).

An additional aspect related to these three concepts (Congruence, Difference and Consistency) is **Identity**. It refers to the stability of the professional interests and the clarity of the aims in one's career. Identity is an important goal of counseling and it directly results from it: having clarified their objectives, having made a decision and drawn up a career plan, individuals are aware of the advantages and obstacles of their choices. These aspects are investigated through *My Vocational Situation* (MVS).

Vocational Preference Inventory (VPI) was used by Holland for two purposes: to develop a theory with respect to the relation between the personality types and the work environments, and together with the *Self-Directed Search* (SDS) to verify and validate the theory; both instruments consistently coming to the aid of individual counseling.

3.5 Method Evaluation

It is useful for a counselor to know a client's personality code beforehand or to find it out by applying the Holland inventories. This code gives important clues regarding an individual's range of interests and helps Counselors associate clients' personality characteristics to information on professions and occupations, give advice on the recommendable work environment. At the same time, the code is important when the counselor recommends related work environments, in case the clients wish to change their place of work or engage a different occupation or profession.

Recent studies show that a high congruence of personality types and work environments is not linearly correlated with the professional satisfaction or lack of stress. In addition, the Holland personality types are noticed not to be found in other personality types investigated by means of psychological instruments. These facts do not diminish in any way the practical importance of the ***“trait and factor theory”***, since, as Holland himself affirmed, it is destined for career support and not psychological evaluation.

Holland's theory and the practical aspects resulting from it are widely accepted by

Counselors because it is an instrument easy to apply, easily comprehensible by clients during the interview, practically concerning the (primary) systematization of personality types and work environments (so diverse in real life). Their hierarchic description by means of three code letters is another important operational element.

Holland's theory and the adjacent SDS instruments do not offer an explicit and complex image of the process of how vocational choice works; nevertheless clients and Counselors prefer the inventory and its logic. No doubt, the critics of Holland personality types are right about its simplicity, as well as the statistical support of some key concepts of the theory (consistency, difference), the justification of the **“association”** between occupations and personality types. The data regarding the predictive value of the **“code”** in its **“confrontation”** with the entire occupational reality throughout the life of a client, as well as the validity of this typology regarding certain population categories are still under debate.

Specific research has been made regarding the relationship between Holland types and:

- professional aspirations (partial correspondence with Holland personal code);
- gender characteristics (or identification with a gender-specific role);
- academic interests;
- education levels of the clients;
- influence of cultural patterns (professional stereotypes) on vocational choices;
- self-image or self-evaluation of the personal aptitudes;
- results obtained with other instruments (*Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*, *Strong Interest Inventory*, *Career Thoughts Inventory – Sampson*);
- relation between parents' Holland codes and those of their children (mainly congruent), etc.

Comparative studies have been made between the paper-pencil SDS versions and the computerized ones or those on the Internet, in terms of the clients' preference regarding their administration (the computer version is preferred), the equivalents of the results obtained by filling out the various formats (results are relatively similar), administration time (the Internet-based version is the shortest, then the computer one and ultimately the paper-pencil), the degree of **“dependency”** on the counselor (lesser or null in the case of the electronic versions).

As unanimously admitted, among the **advantages** of this means of evaluation we enumerate: ease in administration, easy scoring, easy calculation of the Holland personal code, and quick identification of occupations with a code similar to the personal one.

It is qualified as a relative **disadvantage** the fact that some clients need several sessions subsequent to testing in order to receive answers related to the logic of the Inventory, the marking, the use of the answer sheet, the way of identifying occupations suited to the personal code. It is also to be mentioned that the Inventory has limited predictive power, because the clients who conformed to the reasoning and the “*suggestions*” of the personal code in their vocational choice are not as a result significantly happier with their profession compared to people not having followed such protocol.