

Occupational Choice

Gregory John Vitale, Psy.D.,

Oklahoma City VA

Occupational choice is a multi-determined decision with influences from psychological traits, socioeconomic status, and cultural background. In addition, what a person ultimately does for a living is influenced by what they are capable of, what they like doing, what society requires, and what they can make a living doing. In other words, it is the combination of skill, enjoyment, societal need, and monetary return. This combination, if attained in harmony, is what the Japanese call “ikigai,” or “a reason for being.” Most people grow up thinking this harmony exists for them in some capacity; however, most people must make sacrifices in one domain or another. This, ultimately, is the process of occupational choice; namely, the decision as to which domains are most important to an individual.

Skill is an ability to perform a task well. Being good at something may be innate, but almost always must be polished to achieve its full potential. A skill may be defined as a “passion” if it is something that one loves doing, or it may be a “profession” if it is something one can get paid to do. Enjoyment in activities is another important part of the piece, but perhaps more difficult to implement in the occupational choice process. Attainment of work that is liked and is work that the world needs may be defined as a “mission.” Doing work that society needs gives one a sense of importance in the world and the growing sense that one is needed. When society needs your work and it is work that you can be paid to do, it can be known as a “vocation.” Being paid for work is perhaps the most logistically basic, but perhaps one of the more important factors in

modern society. And so, if one combines “passion,” “profession,” “mission,” and “vocation,” one has acquired ikigai in their occupational choice.

The modern understanding and study of occupational choice holds as its foundation the freedoms expressed by the 50s and 60s. Truly until this period, much was stagnant in the way of choosing one’s occupation, and people began asking what drives people to seek work in certain areas. Early writings on the topic implicated psychological development as an important piece, particularly personality maturation, as greatly influential on the modification and/or variation in vocational interests. Additionally, they emphasized an individual’s upbringing, environment, and intellectual abilities as strongly determining choice in occupation. That is to say, a person who grew up in a poor household, in a blue-collar neighborhood, with a low IQ might be expected to work trade jobs even as early as high school. This, when compared to an individual in a wealthy family, in a highly-educated society, with intellectual gifts may be expected to enter into college.

Perhaps no two individuals have done more to study this topic than John Holland and Linda Gottfredson. Holland’s (1959) theory on vocational choice spawned the Holland Codes, or RIASEC (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional), which have been used in countless career choice tests and by many career counselors over the years to assist individuals in identifying work that aligns with their unique profile. To this day, many jobs search for applicants that are the right “fit,” rather than purely the most qualified applicant. Likewise, aspiring employees often think about the work environment the type of people they would like to work with as a dominating factor in the choice process. Some consider Holland’s principles and taxonomy on the topic the most influential representation of potential employee interests, potential career development, and potential applicant-organization fit.

Gottfredson (1981) defined occupational aspirations as developing more out of a process of elimination (i.e., circumscription). Through this process, people essentially rule-out unacceptable choices while simultaneously compromising in some options that are retained. In her view, then, ikigai would be very difficult to obtain by most people and instead, people find the best choice of all factors as they can. She established important concepts in occupational choice processes including that things we do not want are just as important as what we do, that unconscious processes make a significant impact on the occupational choice, that the match may not be perfect, but may just be acceptable, and that unforeseen environmental factors (such as job connections, geography, etc.) can have a larger impact on the ultimate choice than previously considered.

Further Reading

Gottfredson, L. S. (1981). Circumscription and compromise: A developmental theory of occupational aspirations. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 28(6), 545-579.

Holland, J. L. (1959). A theory of vocational choice. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 6(1), 35-45.