Universality of Gender Differences in Vocational Interests: Moderating effects of cultural dimensions

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Are men and women more similar or different in their interests in careers? This question has propelled decades of research into the association between gender and vocational interests. However, our understanding of this question in an international context remains limited. I will summarize a recent study where we examined gender differences in vocational interests across national and cultural contexts by exploring whether national cultural dimensions would be associated with gender differences in the structure and mean levels of vocational interests in people/things, ideas/data, and prestige. Our findings support similarity in the structure of vocational interests for men and women across 42 countries. General trends of gender differences in interests emerge such that in comparison to men, women tend to report a large preference for working with people (versus things; d = 1.04), and smaller preferences for working with ideas (versus data; d = 0.29) and with prestige (d = 0.18). National cultural dimensions appear to moderate gender differences in interests beyond the influences of national gender inequality. Specifically, gender differences in interests in people (versus things) tend to be larger in countries of higher uncertainty avoidance and higher indulgence whereas gender differences in ideas (versus data) tend to be larger in countries of higher indulgence, uncertainty avoidance, and lower power distance. This study highlights how a better conceptualization of the influences of culture can inform vocational psychologists, gender studies researchers, and career counselors’ work with men and women in understanding their vocational interests.