

## SCIENCE

## ‘Find Your Passion’ Is Awful Advice

A major new study questions the common wisdom about how we should choose our careers.

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TOBY MELVILLE / REUTERS

Carol Dweck, a psychology professor at Stanford University, remembers asking an undergraduate seminar recently, “How many of you are waiting to find your passion?”

“Almost all of them raised their hand and got dreamy looks in their eyes,” she told me. They talked about it “like a tidal wave would sweep over them,” he said. *Splosh. Huzzah! It’s accounting!*

Would they have unlimited motivation for their passion? They nodded solemnly.

“I hate to burst your balloon,” she said, “but it doesn’t usually happen that way.”

What Dweck asked her students is a common refrain in American society. The term “Follow your passion” has increased ninefold in English books since 1990.

“Find something you love to do and you’ll never have to work a day in your life” is another college-counseling standby of unknown provenance.

But according to Dweck and others, that advice is steering people wrong.

“What are the consequences of that?” asked Paul O’Keefe, an assistant professor of psychology at Yale—NUS College. “That means that if you do something that feels like work, it means you don’t love it.” He gave me the example of a student who jumps from lab to lab, trying to find one whose research topic feels like her passion. “It’s this idea that if I’m not completely overwhelmed by emotion when I walk into a lab, then it won’t be my passion or my interest.”

That’s why he and two co-authors—Dweck and Greg Walton of Stanford—recently performed a study that suggests it might be time to change the way we think about our interests. Passions aren’t “found,” they argue. They’re developed.

In a paper that is forthcoming in *Psychological Science*, the authors delineate the difference between the two mind-sets. One is a “fixed theory of interests”—the idea that core interests are there from birth, just waiting to be discovered—and the other is a “growth theory,” the idea that interests are something anyone can cultivate over time.

To examine how these different mind-sets affect our pursuit of different topics, the authors performed a series of studies on college students—a group that’s frequently advised to find their passion in the form of a major or career path.

First, students answered a survey that would categorize them as either “techy”—slang for interested in math and science—or “fuzzy,” meaning interested in the arts or humanities. They also filled out a survey determining how much they agreed with the idea that people’s core interests don’t change over time. They then read an article that mismatched their interests—a piece on the future of algorithms for the fuzzies, and a piece on Derrida for the techies. The more the participants endorsed a “fixed” theory of interests, the less interested they were in the article that mismatched their aforementioned identity as a techy or fuzzy.

The authors then repeated a similar procedure, but they had students read first about either the fixed theory of interests or the growth theory. Again, those who learned that interests are fixed throughout a person’s life were less captivated by an article that mismatched their interests.

The authors believe this could mean that students who have fixed theories of interest might forgo interesting lectures or opportunities because they don't align with their previously stated passions. Or that they might overlook ways that other disciplines can intersect with their own.

“If passions are things found fully formed, and your job is to look around the world for your passion—it’s a crazy thought,” Walton told me. “It doesn’t reflect the way I or my students experience school, where you go to a class and have a lecture or a conversation, and you think, *That’s interesting*. It’s through a process of investment and development that you develop an abiding passion in a field.”

Another reason not to buy into the fixed theory is that it can cause people to give up too easily. If something becomes difficult, it’s easy to assume that it simply must not have been your passion, after all. In one portion of this study, the students who thought interests were fixed were also less likely to think that pursuing a passion would be difficult at times. Instead, they thought it would provide “endless motivation.”

Dweck, one of the paper’s authors, has previously studied different types of mind-sets as they relate to intelligence. People who have a growth mind-set about their own intelligence tend to be less afraid of failure, according to her research, because they believe smarts are cultivated, not inherent. Interests are related to, but distinct from, abilities, the study authors told me: You can be interested in something but not very good at it. “I’ve been playing guitar for 25 years, but I can’t say that my abilities have gotten that much better in the past 10 years,” O’Keefe said.

Dweck told me that “find your passion” has a laudable history. “Before that, people were saying, ‘Find your genius,’ and that was so intimidating. It implied that only people who were really brilliant at something could succeed,” she said. “‘Find your passion’ felt more democratic. Everybody can have an interest.” But this study suggests that even the idea of finding your “true” interest can intimidate people and keep them from digging further into a field.

The authors also had students learn about either fixed or growth theory and then exposed them to a new interest: Astronomy. First, they had them watch a video made by *The Guardian* for a general audience about Stephen Hawking’s ideas. It was easy to understand and entertaining. Then the authors had the students read a

highly technical, challenging article in the academic journal *Science* about black holes. Despite saying just moments ago, after viewing the video, that they were fascinated by black holes, the students who were exposed to the fixed theory of interests said they were no longer interested in black holes after reading the difficult *Science* article. In other words, when you're told that your interests are somehow ingrained, you give up on new interests as soon as the going gets tough.

This study was a preregistered replication, meaning the authors stated at the outset what their hypothesis and methods would be. This process is meant to prevent p-hacking, a shady data practice that has cast a shadow over many psychology studies in recent years.

K. Ann Renninger, a professor at Swarthmore College who was not involved with the study, has researched the development of interests and said that “neuroscience has confirmed that interests can be supported to develop.” In other words, with the right help, most people can get interested in almost anything. Before the age of 8, she said, kids will try anything. Between the ages of 8 and 12, they start to compare themselves with others and become insecure if they're not as good as their peers at something. That's when educators have to start to find new ways to keep them interested in certain subjects.

Though the authors didn't examine adults, they told me their findings could apply to an older population as well. For example, people's interest in parenthood tends to escalate rapidly once they have a real, crying baby in their house. “You could not know the first thing about cancer, but if your mother gets cancer, you're going to be an expert in it pretty darn quick,” O'Keefe said.

A different study done on adults' views toward passions suggests that people who think passions are found tend to pick jobs that fit them well from the outset. They prioritize enjoyment over good pay. People who think passions are developed, meanwhile, prioritize other goals over immediate enjoyment at work, and they “grow to fit their vocations better over time,” the authors of that study write. “In conclusion,” they add, “people who have not found their perfect fit in a career can take heart—there is more than one way to attain passion for work.”

How to cultivate a “growth” mind-set in the young, future-psychology-experiment subjects of America? If you're a parent, you can avoid dropping new hobbies as soon as they become difficult. (Your kids might take note if you do, O'Keefe said.)

Beyond that, there's not a clear way to develop a growth mind-set about interests, other than knowing that it's a valid way to think, and that your passion might still be around the corner.

“We're just trying to pull the veil back on the hidden implications of things like, ‘find your passion,’” Walton said. “Is that really how things work? A little bit of knowledge is power.”

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