"Calling" and career decision making

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"A happy man marries the girl he loves; a happier man loves the girl he marries." – Arab proverb

Much like falling in love, researchers have shown that an occupational calling can be perceived has “inevitable” and “fortunate” for those who experience it (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). However, as it happens when one falls in love with the wrong person, pursuing a calling might have negative effects on one’s career prospects (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012).

The issue of calling is of special relevance nowadays. Hunter et al (2010) have noted that the time frame between adolescence and “adulthood” is getting longer. Young adults wait longer to get married and this gives them more time to think about their desired occupation. Additionally, globalization and new technologies are allowing a greater independence between individuals and organisations. Autonomous work and job switching are becoming more frequent, which implies more transitional self-exploratory periods (Hall & Chandler, 2005).

A problematic definition

But what is exactly a calling? The definition is problematic. As argued by Berg et al (2010), calling has been historically associated with the Lutheran idea of vocation. The notion has progressed with a new secular definition of calling, mainly with the seminal work of Wrzesniewski et al (1997). According to this author, people may have three distinct relations towards their occupation: either they consider it is a job (just for necessity), a career (focus on advancement) or a calling (characterized by intrinsic fulfillment and extrinsic social usefulness).

However, even in this modern secular definition, authors still do not agree to what extent the intrinsic or extrinsic factors define a calling. For instance Bunderson & Thompson (2009) propose a more intrinsic approach to calling, as if a desired occupation was “hardwired” in the nature of a person. On the other hand, other authors place a higher emphasis on societal external
factors. Rosso et al (2010) argue that the “unification” (social identification) and “contribution” (perceived impact) of an occupation play a very important role in the recognition of a calling.

To bridge this gap, other authors have argued that there is a fundamental interdependence between internal and external factors. Hall & Chandler (2005) have shown that while a calling is self-exploratory and ultimately personal, factors such as socio-economic status might influence whether the calling is enacted or not. Similarly, Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas (2011) define a calling as a “consuming, meaningful passion people experience toward a domain”. However, they also argue that behavioural involvement and social comfort are strong predictors for the development of a calling.

Understanding the bittersweet effects of calling

The initial efforts for measuring calling (Wrzesniewski et al 1997; Bunderson & Thompson 2009) were characterized for being cross-sectional studies. The calling orientation scale developed by Wrzesniewski et al (1997) allowed them to differentiate calling from the “job” and “career” orientations. In terms of antecedents, no significant age differences were perceived between those that saw their occupations as a calling or those who not. In terms of consequences, Wrzesniewski et al (1997) showed the correlation between enacting an occupational calling and higher job satisfaction and health. In addition, a person that was pursuing a calling was on average better paid. Another cross-sectional study was undertaken by Bunderson & Thompson (2009), in the sector of zookeeping. They established a theoretical “neoclassical model” that related calling to higher work meaningfulness and occupational importance (mediated by occupational identification) and higher willingness to sacrifice and perceived organizational duty (mediated by moral duty). While Wrzesniewski et al (1997) focused mainly on the positive effects of calling, Bunderson & Thompson (2009) discovered that pursuing a calling might have its risks. Zookeepers were more prone to supervisory abuse, personal sacrifice and vigilant attitude. In this particular case, they were also willing to sacrifice their pay.

A later cross-sectional study addressed the issue of people that is unable to answer their callings in their occupations (Berg et al, 2010). Authors showed that people uses two techniques
to overcome this situation: job crafting and leisure crafting. On one hand, job crafting includes techniques to incorporate in their occupation elements of their unanswered callings. This is done primarily through three methods: job emphasizing (highlighting tasks), job expanding (adding tasks) and role reframing (altering the perception of the role). On the other hand, leisure crafting consists in incorporating elements of the calling in the free time. The two main techniques are vicarious experiencing (fulfillment through others’ participation) and hobbies (practicing activities). Authors propose that individuals resort to leisure crafting when the strength of their work situation does not allow them to undertake job crafting techniques. According to them, while these techniques might be beneficial for job and life satisfaction, there are nevertheless risks associated with states of regret with people left wanting for more.

These previous studies lacked however the dynamic character that would allow establishing the interdependence between calling and career development. This is why some authors (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012; Dobrow, 2013; Dobrow & Heller, R&R) propose a dynamic model of calling, influenced by antecedents and changing over time. Thanks to a longitudinal study of musicians, they were able to gather new insights for the antecedents, the evolution and the consequences of calling. In terms of antecedents, Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas (2011) established that there is no relation between initial ability and early calling, although social comfort and behavioural involvement do predict calling. The absence of ability as antecedent has been confirmed by Hirschi & Herrmann (2013), who show that self-efficacy does not precede calling. Contrary to the concept of calling of Wrzesniewski et al (1997), Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas (2011) defend that a calling can appear towards a particular domain without actually working in the domain. Finally, Dobrow (2013) rejects the notion of calling as being binary (Berg et al, 2010) and defend that it is a range (a calling may be weak or strong, but there is one).

In terms of evolution, the same antecedents that shape calling (social comfort and behavioural involvement) will vary over time, thus making difficult to sustain the same level of calling over time Dobrow (2013). Ability can play a role in the development of calling, but Dobrow & Heller (R&R) show that the career pursuit in a calling domain is not related with the actual ability but with the perceived ability. The same result was reached by Hirschi & Herrmann (2013), who argue that self-efficacy is highly correlated with the evolution of calling. The
dynamic character of calling has also been stressed in the theoretical model of Hall & Chandler (2005). These authors argue that the calling process is a dynamic cycle of adaptation to the career environment, with the individual updating his personal goals through self-exploration and discernment.

Lastly, in terms of consequences, pursuing the “siren song” of a calling might have serious negative consequences in one’s career. In the particular case of musicians, Dobrow & Heller, (R&R) explain how they might face a dismal employment market once they have concluded their musical studies. This effect is aggravated by the fact that people with strong callings have a tendency to ignore potentially useful but negative career advice (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012). They suggest that trying to practice the calling in the free time might be an alternative, a point of view in agreement with Berg et al (2010).

New lines of study

Assuming calling is a range and not a binary concept, there are two main groups of individuals that might have serious negative effects with calling. Both of these groups will be composed by people that experience a medium-to-high degree of calling towards a domain. First, there are people that cannot pursue their calling in their occupational life and cannot craft their job because of the limitations of the task (they are not able to “love the person that they married”). These individuals will have to resort to leisure crafting, with the consequent risks explained by Berg et al (2010). Second, there are people that experience a calling towards a domain in which they are not particularly skillful. Lacking the required ability, they will be underperformers and they will face career problems (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012). Once these two problems have been identified, how can future research tackle them?

In the leisure crafting group, it is important to minimize the negative effects of regret that individuals might experience. Complementing Berg et al (2010) study, further research could explore the effects of different leisure crafting techniques. One can anticipate that vicarious experiencing will have more negative effects than hobby participating. A high degree of frustration might arise of watching someone practice something that you want to do but cannot.
Precisely, more research should be undertaken to understand this phenomenon of vicarious experiencing. Does someone really have a calling on a domain if they enjoy watching other people doing it but they refuse to do it themselves? Unless there is a physical limitation, almost all kind of roles or activities can be performed in an amateur/volunteering level. A better understanding of these phenomena would allow to better guide individuals on what to do in their free time, hence reinforcing the positive effects and reducing the negative effects of leisure crafting.

Secondly, it is necessary to understand why people choose to follow a calling in a domain in which they do not excel. There is a whole market and structural component in this issue. Are educational institutions aligned with what labour market is demanding? But these problems fall outside of our scope of research. In the personal level, as Dobrow & Heller (R&R) have noted, the issue is not as simple as discouraging individuals and painting them a dark future: this behavior can have unforeseen effects on a young person who has been experiencing a calling for years. It would be useful if further research could focus on understanding which underlying forces explain a calling. For example, when an individual has a calling for dancing, there might be unseen deeper motives that explain this vocation: it might be a sense of precision, of rhythm or a will of social appraisal. Discovering these trends could allow counselors to redirect callings from domains in which the individual does not have great ability to others where he might be more skilful or the labour market might be in better shape.

A possible method for undertaking this research would be the following: in a longitudinal study, one should examine the evolution of people that had a strong initial calling but that on a later stage they did not pursue a career in the calling domain. Then, it would be necessary to identify the individuals who in their new occupation have found a “new” sense of calling. Through qualitative methods, the researchers could try to match the links between the initial calling and the new occupation in which they feel satisfied. This study would provide counselors and educational centers with relevant information to orient their students. It could be useful as well to adults with unanswered callings trying to do a career change.

On a final note, and related to this last point, research should put a greater emphasis on the phenomenon of calling in later stages of life. At least in the developed world, working just for a living is becoming less prevalent, leisure times are increasing and societies move to a
higher added-value economies. Thus, it can be anticipated that calling in the adulthood may become a more frequent phenomenon.

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References


