

Calling or Falling? A spiritual perspective on career development

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Paper presented at NICEC conference 'Rethinking Career Development for a globalised world', Derby, September 2016**

Abstract

Career has often been treated, in theory, policy and practice, as a wholly secular notion. On the other hand, contemporary definitions look to the whole of life, not just initial decisions about paid work. For many people, this holistic perspective includes the spiritual. How then, does the career development practitioner (who may practice under a range of labels including career guidance, career coaching or career counselling) work within this arena?

The session explores the benefits and pitfalls, means and ends for career practitioners who seek to work in this way. We will explore the extent to which calling as a concept is helpful for the person seeking to determine a career direction. Tensions between individualising discourse around career and the relational aspect of spirituality, connecting the individual to the 'other' and the world around them, will be discussed with reference to the guidance process.

We will consider the process needed to establish a shared agenda that respect diversity of belief.

Introduction

The concept of 'Calling' as a relevant construct in conceptualising career choice and development is currently 'trending' in our field. From an academic perspective, in the Journal of Vocational Behavior alone, fourteen articles have been published with the word 'calling' in their title in last five years (2011-2016), compared to four articles in the previous five (2006-11). Popular interest in the concept has also grown with self-help resources around career choice exploiting the concept. Duffy and Dik (2013) note several examples of this, albeit in a US context, and identify 2007 as the tipping point of interest.

I have noticed this trend and indeed it informed the inclusion of a module called 'Career, Vocation and Calling' in our Career Development and Coaching Studies suite of postgraduate qualifications.

In writing this paper I've drawn on the material for that module, as well as a reflexive account of the process of designing, developing and teaching Career, Vocation or Calling. I

am incorporating students' views and perspectives on the issues covered, one of whom coined the first part of the title as expressing a dualism in considering career choice – are people 'called' forward, proactively into an area of work, or do they 'fall' back into something predetermined. I also share my personal perspective on this area as a person of faith. We consider career studies to be transdisciplinary, and so I am weaving in the discipline of theology, or 'God talk'.

I contend that looking at calling, whether it intends to or not, brings spirituality into career spaces. Spirituality is a nebulous concept, another one widely used in contemporary discourse. Whilst its origins can be argued to be religious (Sheldrake, 2012) in itself it is distinct, and may or may not be expressed through religion. Sheldrake comments that it "embraces an aspirational approach, whether religious or secular, to the meaning and conduct of human life" (2012:1). As a practising Christian, religion is central to the meaning and conduct of my life. I serve as a spiritual director in Coventry area of the Church of England; a role which I find highly congruent with my career coaching background as it involves helping people make sense of their journey of faith. Their career decisions will inevitably be a part of that.

For this paper I would like to begin by mapping the field and exploring theoretical perspectives on career, vocation and in particular 'calling'. I will then move on to consider Christian spirituality and vocation and calling before moving on to consider the benefits, pitfalls and some ways and means to incorporate it in practice.

We all know that career is a broad term, full of associations and contrasting definitions which reflect people's own particular theories and worldview. Some focus on the external, the objective, and speak of careers in the plural as different areas of work, with connotations of progression. This objective view can dominate and indeed the traditional canon of career studies has been criticised for neglecting how individuals make 'meaning' for themselves through their career (Bloch and Richmond, 1997).

However, I, like many of you I imagine I define the term career very broadly, in ways which prioritise the subjective experience of the individual in relation to their work. My favourite of the range of definitions I use in teaching is one from Mark Savickas: "The stories people tell about their working lives". Hall and Chandler (2005) remind us of the interdependence of the subjective and objective, and within the positive psychology tradition relate that to calling.

But like 'career', the meaning of 'calling' can be multiple and hard to decode. For example, this is a response to a 'call for papers'. In these sessions we might 'call one another out' on unsubstantiated or dodgy claims. Also slippery is the term 'vocation', which comes from the latin word 'vocare', meaning 'to call'. In relation to an individual it is perhaps best

understood as one’s calling, or motivation, to participate meaningfully in the world. Hall and Chandler call it “work that a person perceives as his (sic) purpose in life” (2005: 160)

However we also speak of vocational qualifications, or use it to reflect something opposite of academic.

Perspectives on calling

Many of the scholars writing about calling in this wave of interest begin by breaking the concept down into religious and secular perspectives (Hall and Chandler, 2005) and framing that as classic and contemporary (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009).

In considering classical perspectives, the influence of religion is clear. Particular attention is brought to the impact of the protestant reformers and in particular Martin Luther who “transformed work from necessary evil to divine offering” (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009: 32). This shifted attention away from calling as something that happened to a few who were called into a sequestered life in Holy Orders to something available to all, whatever their work. This in turn elevated the dignity of all work.

In the early twentieth century, Max Weber linked this interpretation of callings to the growth of modern capitalism, drawing attention to a “Protestant work ethic” and thereby linking callings with the development of Western society and associated drive for individual pursuit of success. Calling in this sense remains external and is associated with sacrifice and duty. Weber’s enduring influence has continued to inform this view of work.

In contrast with this external sense of calling, a post-religious, contemporary use of the term is suggested for people who would not normally attribute such things to a higher power but still consider work a calling. Calling in this sense gives work both social and personal significance. This binary view is presented by Hall and Chandler as depicted in table 1.

	Religious view	Secular view
Source of calling	From God/higher being	Within the individual
Who is served?	Community	Individual and community
Method	Discernment (prayer/listening)	Introspection, reflection, meditation, relational activities
Meaning	Enacting God’s purpose	Enacting individual’s purpose

Table 1: Two views of calling (Hall and Chandler, 2005: 162)

Duffy and Dik (2013) distil other key facets of this contemporary perspective:

Novak (1996)	Weiss et al (2003)	Dobrow (2004)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each person’s calling is unique • Involves preconditions such as talents, openness to discovering calling, love for the work involved • Provides energy, enjoyment and vitality • Not easy to discover: requires reflection, dialogue, trial and persistence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness that one has a calling • Awareness that one’s work serves others • Process of introspection and discernment to arrive at the ‘right path for oneself’ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passion • Identity • Need/urgency • Engulfs consciousness • Longevity • Sense of meaning • Self esteem <p>Repeat instances of work engagement (Kahn, 1990) or ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)</p>

Table 2: Contrasting components of calling

They go on to summarise as follows:

*a calling might best be defined as an approach to work that reflects the belief that one's career is a central part of a **broader sense of purpose and meaning in life** and is used to **help others or advance the greater good** in some fashion. A **calling source** is integral to most conceptualizations of the term but is **variable**, and may arise from an **external summons, a sense of destiny, a sense of fit** with one's passions, or other areas which have not yet been assessed. The role of the perceived source in how a sense of calling develops is not yet well-understood, a point we review below. However, in research to date, the **perceived source** of an individual's calling **appears to play very little role** in the degree to which an individual is **living out her or his calling** or is satisfied with work and life. (Duffy & Dik, 2013: 429)*

Of note here is the different views presented of the ‘calling source’ to which we now turn.

Christian spirituality and vocation and calling

I argue in my abstract that career is seen as a secular notion, not a spiritual one. That can be the case when definitions of career focus on the external, the objective. But to incorporate the subjective, some writers have sought to address that by explicitly considering spirituality and career. (Bloch and Richmond, 1997; Lips-Wiersma, 2001). If we connect spirituality with meaning, connectedness and transcendence, Christian spirituality sees this transcendence as accessed through a Trinitarian divine. As such, there is something to explore about a Christian spirituality of work and relating this to understandings of vocation and calling.

Treatment of calling within Christian traditions makes its own binary distinction – that between a universal or primary call of the gospel to be in relationship with God or be ‘in Christ’, and a specific call to an area of ministry or work. This is sometimes described as the distinction between calling as a disciple or apostle, or a primary and a secondary calling. This can then easily lead to the preferring of some areas of work over others, in particular ordained ministry.

Theological perspectives on work then become relevant. The classic view of call gives attention to God through one’s work rather than a focus on the self. This indicates a tension with the dominant discourse around career management of self-actualisation. This is perhaps the key distinction, rather than whether the call is external or internal. Many of the means of determining a call in table 1 can apply whatever the source of the call. In research with people of faith about their decision making processes, Hambly (2011) identified the interdependence of a combination of means that included those specific to people of faith (prayer and meditation) as well as those which people of no faith might identify (community interaction, researching opportunities, being open to the unexpected and listening to inner voice or feelings).

Christian spirituality focuses us on the process of discerning and following a call and the decisions we take along the way, as a response to a call. It also confirms, through its positive affirmation of all creation and humanity, not just the what of work, but the ‘how’. This inherent dignity in being is also found in other spiritual traditions which encourage an abnegation of self and the drive to attain. As Thich Nhat Hanh said; “The purpose of a rose is to be a rose”. If the purpose of the spiritual journey is simply to be, then what we do is secondary, as reflected in the Zen statement “Before enlightenment, I chopped wood and carried water. After enlightenment, I chopped wood and carried water.” (Moonlight, 2015).

Ultimately, the source of the call is of perhaps of lesser importance to career development practitioners than the process of discernment.

Why Calling?

Having considered the nature of call, we now turn to exploring some of the benefits and potential pitfalls of incorporating this in work with clients. The career calling literature has identified many benefits:

Generally, perceiving a calling has been linked to greater career maturity, career commitment, work meaning, life meaning, job satisfaction, and life satisfaction. These links are especially pronounced when individuals report that they are living out their calling within the career to which they feel called.

(Duffy and Dik, 2013: 434)

If these are the outcomes we seek for career development work, then it follows that helping people find ways to identify and live out calling is important. Hall and Chandler would see this as an important part of 'psychological success' or subjective career, and therefore is good for self-esteem, wellbeing and satisfaction. The truism that the workplace has become harder to negotiate in late modernity with an accelerated pace of change suggests that identifying and living out calling has become even harder to achieve. Surely then all the more important to be intentional about it.

Organisational literature has looked for, and found the positives. Yet Duffy and Dik go on to identify critical gaps in particular need of attention.

The primary pitfall I have identified goes back to the Lutheran notion of duty, whereby we live out calling dutifully through whatever work or "station" one occupies in life. This might be easier to reconcile with wellbeing and satisfaction for some stations than for others.

Largely, the discourse around call ignores social structure as a significant factor in determining where people end up. Social position can have a conscious impact on someone's ability to enact a calling, and the resultant compromise can be painful. Where economic survival is the priority, calling would be hard to present as relevant. Moreover, there are structural inequalities in accessing positions that might be associated with a calling. Someone called to be a doctor who cannot get a place at medical school may feel this just as acutely as a Roman Catholic woman who feels called to priesthood.

Poverty dramatically affects the pursuit of paid work as a vocation, both in the ways that it limits experiences that might otherwise contribute to vocational development, and in the simple fact that survival needs take precedence over needs for self-fulfilment (Ebberwein, 2009: 1027)

A further pitfall of focusing on call at the exclusion of other aspects of career self-management is the risk of exploitation, neglect of other life domains and burnout. A feeling of calling amongst staff affects both organisations and their employees. In Bunderson and Thompson's zookeepers study, potential exploitation and heightened expectations about management's moral duty related to their work lead to an employment relationship characterised by vigilance and suspicion. Indeed, this drawback often slip under the wire whilst the benefits are stressed, so it's all the more important we are alert to them:

"Individuals with a stronger sense of calling toward their work tend to have higher work and life satisfaction, find work more meaningful, put forth greater effort at work, feel their work makes the world an better place and feel more motivated to remain in their specific jobs *even if they were no longer paid* (my italics)" (Wrzesniewski, Dekas and Rosso 2009: 324).

There are further tensions between spirituality and career, if career is seen as solely about the self. Stephen Cherry (2013) writes:

"True spirituality does not deliver more "me". True spirituality delivers a deeper connection with reality and ultimate purpose. It draws us out of ourselves and into relationship with God, other people and creation" (Cherry, 2013: kindle location 265).

Working with calling

Having considered why we might want to incorporate calling into career development provision, let's turn our attention to the process of how this can be done appropriately.

A starting point in engaging people with career coaching is to be explicit that calling might be a feature of the conversation. This might occur before clients enter a career coaching encounter, or at the start of a coaching session when a learning alliance is being established. Simply acknowledging that emotional and spiritual reflections on career can be included in the agenda can be liberating for clients who might expect a cognitive rational process.

A concomitant skill for the practitioner therefore is to have some ways to handle this if and when it is presented. A fear of actual or perceived discrimination has perhaps made it harder to have conversations about faith in the public arena. Practitioners need religious and spiritual literacy to be able to have conversations with those of any faith tradition or none.

Hall and Chandler identify 'metacompetencies' of identity awareness and adaptability which are required for people to work with calling as a construct, so in turn we can usefully focus our work on these.

Our discussion above also draws our attention to the 'how' of work rather than the 'what', and we can explicitly assure potential and actual clients that we are interested in more than what work they do. Moreover, career development leads to downs as well as ups, and spiritual constructs such as grace, humility, forgiveness and forbearance can be useful resources for discussion when success is not experienced.

Finally, we can recognise the overlap between religious and career development organisations, and help those experiencing both to reconcile the two. Many churches focus their adult education work around calling, and there is scope to recognise this as non-formal career development learning and to inform it with career development theories.

Conclusions

In this paper I have outlined some key dimensions of the concept of calling as helpful for both the career development practitioner and the person seeking to determine a career direction. At the outset, the sense of calling was contrasted with a more passive 'settling' which is often presented as diametrically opposed to following a call. I have sought to present ways in which more nuance can be brought to bear so that calling can actually be helpfully connected to career development.

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