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THE DEVELOPMENT OF CALLING: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF MUSICIANS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the dynamics of the sense of calling over time. Results of a four-wave, 3 ½-year longitudinal survey study of 567 young musicians suggest that participants' calling was shaped by their ongoing behavioral involvement and social encouragement in the calling domain. Counter to expectations, level of ability was not a significant predictor of calling; neither were demographic characteristics.

The sense of calling can be a powerful psychological force. Researchers have begun to examine this phenomenon, both in terms of theorizing about the construct itself (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; 2005; Weiss, Skelley, Hall, & Haughey, 2003; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997), as well as exploring calling as a predictor of outcomes, such as life and job satisfaction, better health, and fewer reported days of missed work (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). As yet, researchers have not investigated the conceptual or empirical origins of this potentially powerful force, nor have they explored what factors influence the development of calling over time. The goal of this study is to begin this exploration of the dynamics of calling.

The existing work on calling, along with the popular literature on this topic (e.g., Finney & Dasch, 1998; Levoy, 1997), is based on many assumptions that have not been tested empirically. Regardless of whether the calling is presumed to be located internally (e.g., hidden deep inside of people) or externally (e.g., it is out there in society, the labor market, with God), the calling is generally assumed to be a coherent, stable entity that is awaiting discovery. Further, it is often assumed that people either “have” a calling, which is generally viewed as a very positive condition, or they have not yet found their calling, which is viewed as a less desirable situation. (An exception to this binary perspective on calling is Wrzesniewski et al.'s (1997) research, which measures work orientations, including the calling orientation, continuously.)

From a temporal perspective, the few existing empirical studies on calling have not yet questioned whether calling is, in fact, a stable construct. If calling is viewed as a dynamic construct, questions can be raised about what factors influence its change over time. Additionally, some existing conceptualizations of calling (e.g., Hall & Chandler, 2005) are based upon individuals' conscious recognition or acknowledgement that their current work is their calling. The risk of this approach is that the strong connotations associated with the word “calling”—whether they are positive or negative—along with the multitude of definitions of calling in both the academic and popular literatures, make it unclear what the “calling” is that participants claim to “have.” Moreover, a cross-sectional approach to understanding calling cannot untangle whether people enter into their careers to fulfill the sense of calling they experience toward these domains or whether people rationalize being in their specific career situation by believing that they are experiencing a calling (Vroom, 1966). Thus, to develop our

understanding of calling, it is imperative to separate the *experience* of a calling in a domain from the *career choice* of working in that domain, rather than conflating them.

The present study aims to contribute to the nascent study of calling by exploring the following questions: 1) Does calling change over time? 2) What predicts differences in these changes in calling over time? These questions are examined in a 3 ½-year longitudinal survey study of musicians. Level of ability, behavioral involvement, and social encouragement factors are tested as predictors of calling. The present study views calling as a subjective orientation toward a particular domain, and is comprised of seven core elements, passion, identity, urgency, engulfs consciousness, longevity, sense of meaning, and domain-specific self-esteem.

To be answered, the research questions required a population in which the calling phenomenon was likely to be found, whose members were at a phase of their career path that would be the most critical for examining the early development and evolution of calling, and whose members have been significantly involved in the focal calling domain, but who have not yet committed to pursuing a career in that domain. Based on these criteria, this study focused on high school musicians ($N=567$).

A DYNAMIC VIEW OF CALLING

The Calling Construct

The present study views calling as a subjective orientation toward a particular domain. Through a grounded theory approach combined with research on calling and calling-related constructs

¹, I developed a view of calling comprised of seven core elements: passion, identity, urgency, engulfing consciousness, longevity, sense of meaning, and domain-specific self-esteem. This sense of calling is oriented toward a specific domain (e.g., one experiences a calling *toward* music or *toward* academia, etc.) rather than experiencing a general sense of calling (e.g., a calling orientation). Second, the sense of calling is conceptualized as a continuum from low to high, not as binary. In other words, people can experience stronger and weaker senses of calling, rather than “having” or “not having” a calling. The combination of calling being domain-specific and continuous contrasts with the view that we all have a single calling that awaits discovery. Instead, people can experience a low to high calling toward zero, one, or more domains.

Whereas some definitions of calling are based on explicitly Christian ideas (Weiss *et al.*, 2003) or strongly suggest that contributing to society is a critical part of calling (e.g., Gardner *et al.*, 2001; Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 1997), my view of calling takes the broader stance that a subjective career construct should apply to people of any (or no) faith, not just to Christians or to people that hold particular moral views. Further, the present view of calling does not require that the experience of calling be conscious.

Change in Calling

Previous research has either viewed calling from a static perspective (e.g., assuming that calling is a stable personality trait) or has not considered whether people’s sense of calling might change over time. For instance, research has suggested that work interests and personal values remain stable over time (Feldman, 2002). Insights from numerous areas of research, including cognitive dissonance reduction and childhood and adult development theory (e.g., Ginzberg,

1951; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978; Levinson & Levinson, 1996) suggest that calling could change over time, however. While these areas of research suggest varied predictions about the direction and mechanisms for change in calling over time, the fundamental point is that calling should be viewed as a dynamic, rather than static, construct:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Calling changes over time.

Antecedents of Calling

Consistent with the notion that careers and career phenomena, such as calling, are multifaceted and may be influenced by a broad set of factors (Hall, 2002), I posit that three categories of constructs shape calling: ability in the calling domain, behavioral involvement in the calling domain (both formative experiences, or characteristics of people's work experiences prior to their current employment situation; and ongoing experiences, or characteristics of people's current work experiences), and social encouragement in the calling domain.²

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Level of ability in the calling domain is positively associated with calling.

Hypothesis 3a (H3a): Formative behavioral involvement in the calling domain is positively associated with calling.

Hypothesis 3b (H3b): Ongoing behavioral involvement in the calling domain is positively associated with calling.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Social encouragement in the calling domain is positively associated with calling.

METHOD

Research Context and Strategy

To understand the nature of calling over time, I conducted a 3 ½-year longitudinal survey study of young musicians (2001-2005). This method allowed for the temporal separation of the experience of a calling toward a domain from the career choice of working in that domain, rather than conflating them as has cross-sectional research on calling.

The participants were students at two prestigious high school summer music programs in the United States in Summer 2001. The first two timepoints of data, Time 1 and Time 2, occurred during Summer 2001 while the two music programs were in session. The next survey occurred during early Summer 2003 (Time 3; response rate=57%, $n=296$) and the final data collection occurred during Winter 2004-05 (response rate: 68%; $n=301$).

The surveys included two core elements: (1) a 28-item scale to measure calling, collected on three occasions, Times 1, 2, and 4; (2) antecedent variables³:

Level of ability. In order to gain admission to the two competitive summer music programs included in this study, the young musicians had to audition for an expert panel of judges. These *audition ratings* constituted the external assessment of ability used to test H2.

Behavioral involvement. Formative behavioral involvement in music (H3a) was operationalized in two ways: (1) *age at which participants first began their musical activities* and (2) participants' *amount of specialized arts education*, which was assessed through a measure of whether or not they had attended an arts high school. Ongoing behavioral

involvement in music (H3b) was also operationalized with two different measures: (1) participants' *subjective experience of a salient work activity*, perceived enjoyment of and efficiency at practicing, using a new 3-item scale and (2) participants' *level of involvement in musical activities*, which was operationalized as the number of musical activities they engaged in during the school year (e.g., chamber groups, private lessons, competitions, etc.).

Social encouragement. Four measures of social encouragement (H4) were examined. Two aspects of parental influence were included, (1) *parents' degree of artistic involvement*, ranging from neither parent having an artistic activity to both parents being active professionally, and (2) *type of career advice received from parents*, in terms of whether they supported pursuing a calling toward music or not. The (3) *type of career advice received from participants' primary music teacher* was also included. Lastly, (4) *social encouragement from peers* was operationalized as the degree to which participants enjoy and feel comfortable being in the company of fellow musicians (measured with a two-item scale).

Control Variables. Several control variables were included in the analyses in order to rule out alternative explanations for variations in calling: gender, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, religiosity, and type of musical involvement (instrumentalist vs. non-instrumentalist).

Analysis Strategy

The analyses utilized individual growth modeling, a method that simultaneously addresses within-person and between-person questions about change over time. This method produces growth trajectories for each individual and for the population from two estimated parameters: the trajectories' initial level (intercept) and rate of change over time (slope). Once it has been established that there is variance to be explained in the growth trajectories' intercepts and/or slopes, the sources of this variance—i.e., antecedents—are explored.

RESULTS

First, I examined descriptive results for change in calling over time. Next, I examined the overall trajectory of calling over time, as predicted by an unconditional linear growth model. Finally, I examined ability, behavioral involvement, and social encouragement as predictors of differences in calling over time.⁴

Change in Calling over Time

Descriptive Results. Descriptive results showed that there was considerable variation in both the direction and magnitude of change in calling over time: 52% ($N=136$) of participants experienced a decrease in calling over time, 12% ($N=32$) remained stable, and 36% ($N=95$) increased. On average, calling decreased by .19 points (on a 7-point scale) over the 3 ½ years of the study. These results provide initial support for H1.

Individual Growth Modeling Results. Two individual growth models were estimated: (1) the unconditional linear growth model, or the baseline model in which time serves as the only predictor (for H1); (2) full model including all predictors (for H2-H4)⁵. The average initial calling predicted by the unconditional linear growth model was 5.55 (on a 7-point scale), thus

indicating a relatively high degree of calling. The slope estimate of $-.06$ ($p < .001$) shows that for the overall sample, calling decreased by .06 points each year, or .20 points over the 3.5 year time span of the study. Combining the descriptive and individual growth modeling results, H1 was strongly supported: calling changes over time.

Explaining Variability in Trajectories

Level of ability. Musical ability was not significantly associated with calling ($\beta = .004$, $p = .93$) in the full model. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Behavioral involvement. In the full model, the first formative behavioral involvement variable, age of starting one's musical involvement, was not a significant predictor of initial calling. However, attending an arts school was positively associated with calling at a marginally significant level ($\beta = .20$, $p = .06$). Thus, there was little support for Hypothesis 3a. Both of the ongoing behavioral involvement variables were significant and positive predictors of calling: enjoying practicing ($\beta = .18$, $p < .001$) and level of musical activities ($\beta = .07$, $p = .002$). Thus, there was strong support for Hypothesis 3b.

Social encouragement. In the full model, participants whose parents were more involved in the arts had higher initial calling than participants whose parents were less involved in the arts ($\beta = .05$, $p = .01$). Neither of the calling-oriented career advice variables—from parents or from teachers—was a significant predictor of calling. Lastly, enjoyment of socializing with other musicians was a positive and significant predictor of initial calling ($\beta = .12$, $p < .001$). Thus, given that two of these variables were positive and significant predictors of calling, there was moderate support for Hypothesis 4.

Control variables. Type of musical involvement was significantly associated with calling, such that being a non-instrumentalist was associated with higher levels of initial calling ($\beta = -.33$, $p < .001$). None of the other variables—gender, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, religiosity—was significantly associated with calling.

In sum, the full model shows that neither H2 (level of ability) nor H3a (formative behavioral involvement) was supported. In contrast, both H3b (ongoing behavioral involvement) and H4 (social encouragement) received support.⁶

DISCUSSION

This paper explored two questions: (1) Does calling change over time? (2) What predicts differences in these changes in calling over time? Using longitudinal data drawn from 567 young musicians, I tested hypotheses regarding both change in calling (H1) and whether ability (H2), behavioral involvement (H3a, H3b), and social encouragement (H4) were predictors of calling. The results highlight that calling can change over time, and calling depended on ongoing behavioral involvement in the calling domain and social encouragement received in the calling domain, from both parents and peers. In sum, musicians who enjoyed practicing more, who were involved in more musical activities, whose parents had a higher level of artistic involvement, and who enjoyed socializing with other musicians more developed a higher degree of calling than those musicians who scored lower on these dimensions. Interestingly, attributes of the person, including ability in the calling domain and demographic variables included as controls, were not significant predictors of calling. Thus, generally speaking, it is not who one is

that influences a sense of calling; rather, it is what one does and who one does it with that matter.

These results have implications for several areas of theory and research. First, this study's results, which indicated that calling changed over time across people, suggest that calling's *temporal dynamics* must be considered in both conceptual and empirical research. Second, the finding that *ongoing behavioral involvement* was a significant predictor of calling demonstrates that as personal and internal as a calling might seem to be on the surface, it was not the product of individual differences (e.g., ability or demographic characteristics). Given the participants' career stage—being on the cusp of making a major decision about whether or not to pursue professional music careers—this ongoing behavioral involvement may reflect experimentation with a trial identity, or “provisional self,” as a musician before fully developing their professional identity (Ibarra, 1999). Third, the significance of *social encouragement* from both parents and peers in the analyses again highlighted that calling is not solely an internal, personal phenomenon. Interpersonal influences, particularly in the form of developmental relationships, have been found to be very important for career choices (Hall & Associates, 1996; Higgins, 2001) and identity formation (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005; Fletcher, 1996; Kram, 1988; Levinson et al., 1978; Levinson & Levinson, 1996). Through examining a population that is younger than the focal populations in most previous relational influences research, these results suggest that the various categories of developers may be more or less influential across different career stages.

Conclusion

This research provides novel insights to the subjective careers literature and to our understanding of career dynamics and the meaning of work. Given the previously uncharted territory of understanding calling from an empirical, longitudinal perspective, this study opens up avenues for future research, while also answering questions about the way calling changes with time and the antecedents of calling. Future research that builds upon the present study to examine other possible antecedents of calling, the evolution of calling in other contexts, and calling over a longer time horizon is warranted.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR

¹ Work preferences, particularly intrinsic motivation (Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, & Tighe, 1994); work engagement and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Kahn, 1990; May, Gilson, & Harter, 1999); work orientations, particularly the calling orientation (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997); good work (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2000, 2001); and a discerned, conscious sense of calling (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Weiss et al., 2003).

² Supporting logic for each of these hypotheses is offered in the full-length version of this paper. Please contact the author for details.

³ Details on the psychometric characteristics of the measures included in the analyses are found in the full-length paper.

⁴ All tables and figures are included in the full-length paper and are available from the author upon request.

⁵ The full model explained 38% of the variation in calling over time (pseudo- $R^2=.38$).

⁶ The survey also included Wrzesniewski's (2005) 5-item calling orientation scale, which was adapted for use with a young musician population. A second set of individual growth models was run with this measure as the dependent variable instead of my calling scale. Both analyses demonstrated the same general pattern of results: H1 and H3b were supported, while H2 and H3a were not. Using Wrzesniewski's measure to test H4, the socializing with peers variable was statistically significant, while the parental artistic background was significant at only the $p<.10$ level. This additional set of analyses offers support for the validity of the analyses presented here.