

BIAPT Summer Gathering 2020: Student papers

Practical Theology as disciplinary conversation partner: getting to grips with 'calling'

Preface

My Doctorate in Education, currently underway at the University of Warwick, is drawing on a range of disciplines and areas of practice which make use of the idea of calling. On the one hand, vocation and calling are well used concepts in my professional world of career development, a transdisciplinary field which already draws on sociology, psychology and organisation studies. Alongside this, when working with people of faith an appreciation of the practical theology of call and of work is valuable, and draws me to it. Specific forms of paid work become then only a small part of our understanding of call as well as an aspect of God's creative *missio dei* that can be neglected by ecclesial structures. Working lives reflect our socially constructed realities, and so for women, gender is likely to be relevant at some level to the areas of work chosen and the path taken through it. For Christian women, how can their faith be made relevant in their work related callings?

As I progress with this action research project, integrating my professional practice as a career development practitioner and educator with the study of practical theology, this paper (delivered at the BIAPT summer gathering of 2020) outlines how I am integrating key components of the theology of vocation and calling with a 'career studies' perspective, outlining overlaps and omissions. Using the framework of noting what is rooted, changed, lost and claimed from Bennett et al (2018) I share the story so far of my practice oriented research project developing resources to equip and support Christian women to discern and enact their call.

Introduction

My professional background is as a careers adviser, and I now teach career development and coaching to new and experienced practitioners in that field. Whilst apocryphal tales of the limitations of careers advice are common, the idea in principle of helping people to reach decisions about what they want to, and are able to, do with their lives remains a compelling one. Whilst owning my bias, I see careers work as able to do that – and from there to equip and support people in the tasks of career development; be it networking, trying things out, making applications, managing transitions, negotiating working conditions – essentially, *learning* about moving through working life. Working life is a part of a wider life space and careers work can also make room for expansive consideration of how one can or should live.

Careers work has significant overlap with my related activities as prayer guide, spiritual director and discernment adviser, both in terms of content (reflecting on who you are as you move through the world) and process (careful listening, questioning and reflecting back to provide space for learning). In my doctoral study I am attempting to integrate these in an action research study. My overall research question is *How can career development and theological perspectives on calling be used to equip and support Christian women in their working lives?*

In this paper I share some of the ‘straw for the bricks’ (Pattison, 2000) with which I am building. I give an overview of career development work (my roots) and introduce the career development world’s understanding of ‘calling’. In considering that, I will notice what I consider it to have lost, namely that its focus is too narrow and it fudges the source of the calling. I shall go on to claim what I think it so valuable in a further section: the attention paid to the dark side, and the benefits of the focus on living a calling. Finally, I end with what I would like to change – the ideas from career development that might add value in church contexts as well as how my developing practical theology of calling can enhance career development work. I hope this will be the outcome of bringing these fields together as conversation partners.

Overview of career development work.

Career development is a field which draws on many different disciplines. Vocational psychologists have given us ways of understanding individuals and how their interests translate to jobs as well as how self concept develops over time. Sociologists have helped us see the impact of context, how labour markets are structured and how that affects the way people view the world. Some mid-range theories have helped us see how community transmits influence and motivation, in all sorts of ways and with all sorts of results. Organisation studies have helped us see how employing organisations also shape career, and what happens when the paths through organisations become less rigid and people start moving within and between in more boundaryless ways.

None of these fields are without criticism. The psychologists can be overly concerned with measuring and differentiating between people, the sociologists are accused of denying agency or assuming deficits and organisational studies makes the elementary mistake of assuming everyone actually cares about their career and self-defines as having one in the first place. All are partial. A framework I am using for my thesis is the Systems Theory Framework of Patton and McMahon (2014), which seeks to integrate the historic theoretical base and map the content and processes involved in constructing meaning.

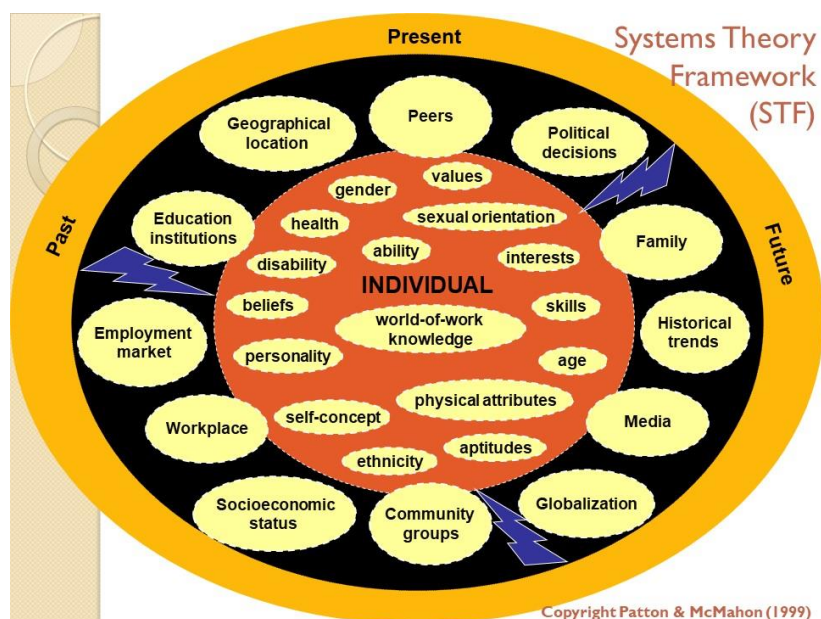


Fig 1: The Systems Theory Framework of Patton and McMahon (2014)

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This is portrayed in fig 1. which shows the individual in context. The orange circle is the individual with their identity characteristics, their personality, learning and interests; the social system overlaps this, with influence from peers, family, media, etc shown. Beyond this, wider societal/environmental issues such as globalisation, political trends, labour markets are depicted, as well as change over time and the impact of chance events (the lightning flashes). All these have dotted lines around them to represent the recursive mutuality of how each of these parts affects the whole. The current crisis is an interesting example when we consider how a global pandemic affects intra-personal perspectives. For the practical theologian who believes that “nothing is sacred but everything is sacred” (Bennett et al, 2018: 29) this is a rich resource that can be used for any one to see themselves in context.

This was first published in 1999 and has been reprinted several times. Calling has since then had a surge in interest as a relevant construct in conceptualising career choice and development and could be described as ‘trending’ in the field. Over 200 articles in the career studies field on the topic have been published in the ten years 2008-2018 (Duffy et al, 2018). More recently, Duffy et al have worked up a theoretical model of ‘Work as Calling’ proposed by Duffy, Dik, Douglass, England and Velez (2018) which I will talk about later. Popular interest in the concept has also grown with self-help resources around career choice exploiting the concept (Steib, 2018; Isay, 2017). I find these interesting artefacts to find on the bookshelf at stations and airports. The reviews online are quite revealing, and contrasting, about who they might be targeting.

Working professionally in this space I find myself reminding my students and colleagues that these are ancient concepts, referenced in many belief systems and philosophies and used as a metaphor for humanity’s innate drive to move forward, find meaning, and grow as well as considering how to be and do in the world. The career literature focuses on one domain of calling: working life. People of faith, arguably, have a much more nuanced, expansive and ultimately useful understanding of calling. My Christian faith enables me to see my calling in very general terms (calling as the basis of my relational awareness of God, my commitment to faith and discernment of Call is the basis for ordering our lives, e.g. marriage, family, worship) as well as specific ones to my work and other activities – even down to the micro scale of which tasks to prioritise, which projects to invest time in, which relationships to nurture, who to spend time showing care for (recognising that I have greater flexibility to do that than some, and less than others). For me and others, these callings are discerned through spiritual practices.

In terms of my Church roots, I’m defining church and religious practices very broadly, but the practices and understandings Christians have about call are **rooted** (maybe in the same contexts as the careers literature but also in scripture, tradition and experience of Church).

Some of those experiences will reflect Church traditions which have prioritised licensed forms of ministry over other outworking of faith. That’s why we have reform and renewal activities in the Church of England to ‘Set God’s People Free’, free from a sense that our value to Church and therefore to God only comes through the rotas we populate in parish life rather than what we do all week. If faith practices are how we perform theological truth claims, this is ripe for critique. True, we SAY that all are called, and callings are equal, but we ACT as though we are concerned about talent pipelines and numbers of stipendiary clergy.

What is lost? 1. Calling for everyone

Now I will explain what I think is lost about calling in the career development world, with its focus on work and work for some only. The careers world has problems with inclusion. As I have hinted before, many folk definitions of career see it as a salient concept for certain subset of the population and a luxury that those for whom work is drudgery, risky, solely a means of economic survival cannot afford. If not everyone has a career, even fewer have a calling. Are callings are only for the privileged?

A classic distinction proposed in a in depth sociological study of American individualism by Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipton in 1986 was between job (work as a means to material benefits), career (work as path to achievement, advancement, power and prestige) and calling (work as fulfilling and socially valuable). This definition of career is inconsistent with the broader one I would advocate – everyone has a career- but in line with the folk theory many use to consider their working lives.

In the 1990s Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rosin and Schwartz, (1997) operationalised this tripartite schema and found them to be equally distributed within the study population, with higher levels of job and life satisfaction reported by those identifying a calling. It is perhaps quite natural that those at the top of the pile are best off! Indeed, research has shown that higher levels of education and income correlates positively with living out a calling.

So emerges the sense that perceiving and enacting calling as an *idealised outcome* for career development work. But the inbuilt assumption that only a proportion of the working population will find this concept salient does inadvertently limit the scope of that work.

The career calling literature has identified many benefits to being called:

Generally, perceiving a calling has been linked to greater career maturity, career commitment, work meaning, life meaning, job satisfaction, and life satisfaction.

(Duffy and Dik, 2013: 434)

To establish calling as a good thing without working out how to make it salient to everyone seems to me to be problematic and excluding. Dik and Duffy, writing for the end user, attempt to do this with the notion of ‘job crafting’ and there are also reminders that dirty work can be a calling. I’ll get into the problems that might be associated with that later. So, like much of the careers literature there is a Western, individualised focus that ultimately divides and excludes.

For us in Church contexts yet we have no trouble saying, ‘all are called’. In principle we are all for inclusion. And yet we also know what we are not. In mutual discernment of call we are excluding many, as we have seen very powerfully recently with examples focused on gender and race. Of course, other factors such as class and sexual orientation are also well documented.

As careers work seeks to become more inclusive and debates whether it can continue to use ‘the C word’ or whether we should talk about ‘working lives’ (Blustein, 2006), and how we can use calling in socially just ways and there are moves within the Church to become more inclusive, we can learn from each other.

What is lost? 2. Calling source

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The second area of loss is around calling source. The careers literature really struggles with the question of who is doing the calling. On the one hand, a few authors recognise and address religious origins of the notion, tied to historic ideas of the nature of work. They will cite reformation influence as reframing work as a divine offering and Weber’s protestant work ethic (1904-5) linking callings with the development of Western society. Whilst Calling in this sense remains external, coming from a source outside the person, and is associated with sacrifice and duty, one can see how late capitalism’s associated emphasis on individual pursuit of success emerges.

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 is developed as a binary; almost oppositional view is presented by Hall and Chandler (2005) 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)

Or as a classical/contemporary binary in the paper detailing a study of zookeepers by Bunderson and Thompson (2009).

Classical	Contemporary
We are destined to play a specialised role for the greater good.	Self-fulfillment and personal happiness
Individuals have God given gifts, talents and opportunities	Calling as something performed for its own sake
Duty: a solemn obligation to seek and respond to calling	Self actualisation from following personal passions
Sacrifices required, enobling	Work that a person perceives as their purpose in life.
	A self-directed search for ‘bliss’ at work
	A personal life choice - my commitment to make or break

Bunderson, J. and Thompson, J. (2009) The Call of the Wild: Zookeepers, Callings and the Double-edged sword of Deeply Meaningful Work. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 54: 32-57

Table 2: Bunderson and Thompson, 2009

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Portrayed as binaries this looks like a diametrically opposed understanding of calls from God as traditional and from the self as modern. More accurately, I believe it is all going on at once.

Duffy and Dik (2013) seek to integrate modern and neo-classical perspectives in an attempt to honour more traditional and enduring views and a diversity of cultural perspectives as well as maintaining contemporary relevance. Crucially they also reclaim the role of calling in what we might call Kingdom work, making positive change to the world. They identify three key features as:

- External summons
- Sense of purpose
- Pro-social orientation

They go on to talk about **calling sources as** "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". (Duffy & Dik, 2013: 429). They leave room for those for whom a calling is experienced as divine by arguing that this is not the main issue at stake here:

*The role of the perceived source in how a sense of calling develops is not yet well-understood.... 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)*

Duffy and Dik argue that from a career studies perspective, the source of the calling is less relevant than if and how it is being lived out by the individual in their career. So, they basically dodge the theological issue!

I think this is further evidenced through the model Duffy et al published in 2018. As fig 2 demonstrates, they identify a distinction between perceiving a calling (on the left) and living a calling (on the right). They are interested in mapping interrelationships and concepts, but evidently place more emphasis on the enacting than the perceiving.

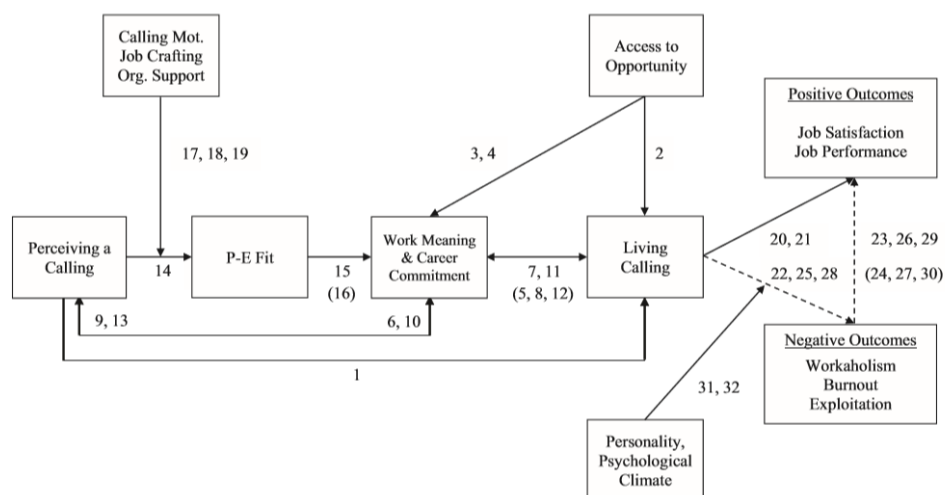


Figure 1. Theoretical model. Note dashed lines indicate proposed negative associations for select individuals. Paths in parentheses are mediation propositions.

Fig 2: Work as Calling (Duffy et al, 2018: 424)

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The first proposition is the relationship between perceiving and living a calling but there is insufficient attention given here to the process perceiving a calling. There is some recognition that access to opportunity will influence what is perceived as within one's range of options, and that callings develop over time, but overall there is not much attention given in the literature to how calling can be perceived.

So in my day job I spend quite a lot of time talking and writing about how career development practitioners can work with that, allowing our client to bring into the conversation all the resources that might help them make a decision and if that includes their faith, letting them talk to us about that. This might feel challenging for practitioners of no faith, a different faith, or even a tradition within a faith that practices subtly differently, and it requires some religious literacy.

However, anyone who has worked as a spiritual director knows that how people see the source, their image of God, is fundamental to their discernment processes. Which leads me to what I consider can be claimed from career studies, an acknowledgement of the problems that can emerge with this.

What can be Claimed: The dark side

One of the great strengths of the career as calling literature I have found is its willingness to embrace the negative, and arguably acknowledge the supernatural subconsciously by talking about the dark side of calling.

There is an open recognition of a pitfall of focusing on call at the exclusion of other aspects of career self-management - the risk of workaholism, exploitation, neglect of other life domains and burnout. A feeling of calling amongst staff affects both organisations and their employees, serving as a 'double edged sword'. In the study of zookeepers by Bunderson and Thompson, they argue that potential exploitation and heightened expectations about management's moral duty lead to an employment relationship characterised by vigilance and suspicion.

For practitioners working with calling we are urged to be attentive to this flipside, to look out for tunnel vision, over work and burnout, because with the self as focus rather than the pro-social outputs of their work (i.e. a better world) they are manifestly running risks of decreased levels of both satisfaction and performance. Risks of organisational exploitation or unhealthy psychological climate in organisations where many of the workers feel called to their work is seen as a factor for everyone working with calling to consider. This may cue hollow laughter for anyone employed by the Church or by a University or both.

What is changed

Using the Systems Theory Framework, I am trying to help the career development world to be increasingly inclusive by paying more attention to the ways that social and societal structures are going to be as a significant factor in determining where people end up. Is it not enough simply to say, as some have, 'sorry, if you're poor, you might not be able to have a calling'.

In terms of issues for both church and careers work, there are important reminders here of how social position can have a conscious impact on someone's ability to perceive as well as enact a calling. This can result in painful compromise. Structural issues in accessing positions that might be associated with a calling are relevant for us all. 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

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priesthood. Likewise, working within the space of that perception process rather than waiting for someone to be called will be better for inclusion.

Job crafting (Dik and Duffy, 2012) is one approach advocated by some writers in aligning perceived and lived call. This approach suggests that when a client presents such a mismatch or is struggling to enact a calling, they can be supported to address it in one of three ways. They can seek to alter their assigned tasks to spend more on those related to calling, add new tasks to their workload that reflect such a calling or cognitively reframe to increase alignment of a job duty with a wider social purpose. Whilst Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) and Duffy and Dik (2013) report positive outcomes from job crafting, there is potential for it to be seen as a naive attempt to address structural disadvantage. We will not serve clients well if they are encouraged to craft their way into denial, exploitation and burnout.

Mode of career development practice based on the Systems Theory Framework and some can help the church develop a wider understanding of discernment of call in all lives. The idea of the 'Missio dei' pre-supposes that spiritual discernment is taking place for people to work out where to join in. The careers world has really grappled with that process of decision making and acting and can help the Church to do more than suggesting people to wait in their room to hear from God and fixate on one calling. We can provide ideas on how to work with context, recognising that calling is relational and contextual.

This discussion of a selection of papers shows the complexity and richness of calling as a concept but there is a lot it leaves out and much more to explore in this field. For example, the literature's is very western (indeed, *Habits of the Heart* by Bellah et al is a sociological study of the US) and its humanistic, self-focused orientation loses a sense of calling as part of how someone makes sense of their contribution to collective responsibilities and other-oriented motivations. Ideas about 'fit' which were important in the genesis of careers work but have now been found wanting, are hard wired into the Duffy et al model. The idea of the importance of 'getting it right' pervades this matching world. Both church and careers work need to move beyond the matching paradigm.

Next steps

My doctoral study, which is being conducted for a Doctorate in Education at the University of Warwick, seeks then to integrate what career studies has to say about calling and a deeper, theological understanding. I am particularly interested in women's experiences. One of the limitations of the careers field is the way research was done on certain populations of men and then, maybe, essentialised gender differences noted as an afterthought. Women's experiences of career and work differ, and their faith development differs (Slee,) so I thought that was a good place to start. I have designed an action research study that positions myself as practitioner researcher reflexively exploring how Christian women can be equipped and supported to use calling as a way of integrating their faith and their working lives. As well as drawing on my experience of spiritual direction and discernment work, I am conducting interviews with lay women about their working lives and will use this to design and deliver some sort of 'event', a retreat, a quiet day, a liturgy as the research suggests, and then consider the outcomes.

I find there to be consistency between practical theological research and the action research stance I am taking of recognising how I am positioned as a 'human document', my own calling, I am carving out my own critical space. I'm claiming career as the missio dei and looking for recursive, mutual influence between Practical theology and career development.

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