

## IAEVG Conference 2020 Conference Paper

Title: Working with Calling in Career Development Practice: lessons from teaching and research

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### Introduction and objectives

Work has significance in people's lives in multiple ways, and the concept of 'calling' is increasingly used to explore this. My intention in this paper is to provide an overview of contemporary use of the term in career studies and related literatures, as well as in popular culture, and discuss its value in career development practice. I pay particular attention to the way literature understands processes of perceiving and acting on callings, the integration of work with other forms of life purpose and the impact of wider contextual factors on all aspects of calling. I will suggest further ways that career development work can draw on calling as a salient concept to maximise its potential with individuals and groups. I go on to propose a series of ways to draw upon calling in career development practice for different client groups, and a framework for evaluating their potential.

As an Associate Professor in the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Warwick, I work on our masters programmes in career development practice and have a strong interest in this area. With my colleague Dr Phil McCash I have developed a module called 'Career, Vocation and Calling' in a MA programme on Career Development and Coaching Studies which I now lead, so my presentation is drawing on the relevant literatures we use on this module combined with insights from teaching and practising in this field. I have learned a great

deal from our students' responses to the material, for example. The paper also draws on an ongoing doctoral 'action research' study on work as calling for mid-Career Christian women. I am a Christian who offers pastoral care, spiritual accompaniment and prayer guiding in voluntary community based ministries, hence my interest in aligning theological and career studies perspectives.

Calling can be considered to be both an ancient and modern concept. It is ancient in that it draws on classical considerations of what it means to be human, expressed in the sacred texts in world religions. It is modern in that it has been reimagined as aligned to the subjective turn and today's arguably secular age (Taylor, 2009). Nonetheless, it has strong religious connotations and owing to the religious legacies which underpin contemporary society, these inform popular understandings. Whilst the following literature review is focused on the career studies literature rather than theological understandings of calling, I am exploring throughout whether removing that theological framing weakens or changes its explanatory power and practical value.

#### Literature review

Focusing on the career studies literature, we see a gradual increase in research articles featuring calling, from Dobrow's 2004 Academy of Management paper, to the recent theoretical model of 'Work as Calling' proposed by Duffy, Dik, Douglass, England and Velez (2018) and beyond to work exploring ongoing calling processes in particular fields or amongst particular populations (e.g. Schabram and Maitlis, 2017). In their 2018 article, Duffy et al assert that over 200 articles on the topic have been published in the last ten years. Popular interest in the concept has also grown with self-help resources around career choice exploiting the concept (Dik and Duffy 2012; Robinson, 2010). Duffy and Dik argued in 2013 that calling was 'a construct that may be folded into larger career theories or interventions' rather than a new theory. By 2018, with other scholars they are presenting an overall theoretical model to guide research and practice, reproduced as figure 1.

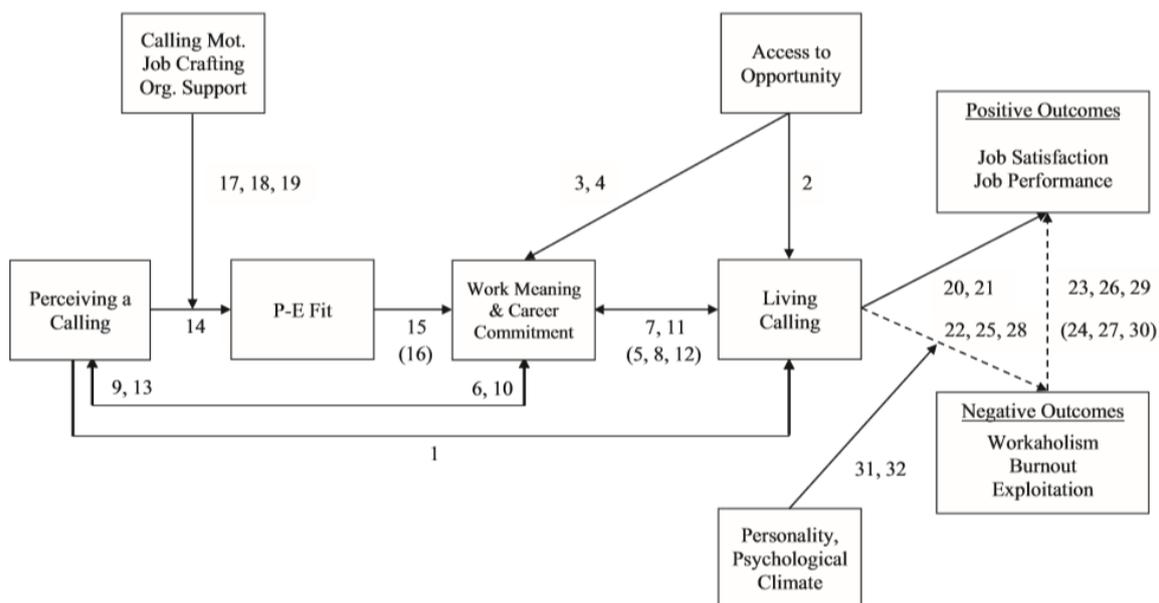


Figure 1. Theoretical model. Note dashed lines indicate proposed negative associations for select individuals. Paths in parentheses are mediation propositions.

Fig 1: Duffy et al, 2018: 424

In this literature, various contrasting definitions of calling are offered. An early definition offered by (Wrzesniewski, Dekas and Rosso (2009) sees calling as “a meaningful beckoning towards activities that are morally, socially and personally significant”. Alongside this, Elangovan, Pinder and McLean (2009) focus on “an action orientation, a sense of clarity and purpose and personal mission, a pro-social intention”. The common ground here is social significance of the activity to which one is called and personal meaning attached to this through individual sense making. A point of contrast is a differing emphasis on the direction of travel. The beckoning in the first definition implies an external source of a call that is indicating to the called on the direction they should follow. The second places the emphasis rather on the action taken by the called one in a particular direction. More recently the intrapersonal focus is emphasised as Bloom, Colbert and Nielsen define calling as the “Intimate connection between self and work” (2021: )

Both Dobrow (2004) and Hall and Chandler, writing in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* the following year (2005) refer back to the Chicago School of Sociology and its contribution in distinguishing between the objective and subjective elements of career. Calling is associated with the subjective, how the individual is constructing meaning from their working life and it is argued that calling has particular contemporary salience due to changes in working patterns which place greater emphasis on self-construction of career paths in context where increased flexibility and unpredictability of career paths spanning organisations. Such change in some areas of the job market has led to the emergence of theories such as the protean (Hall, 1996) and boundaryless (Arthur, 1994) career, which have been dominant within the organisation studies field. However, these concepts of changing psychological contracts between workers and employers have been long critiqued as only relevant to those working in well paid professional roles, revealing a preoccupation within organisation studies with managerial and elite forms of career. This alignment of calling with a focus on elite careers continues through to popular examples of the concept in self-help books of the kind that might be found in airport departure lounges (Isay, 2017; Steib, 2018).

Reviewing this literature enables the identification of several inconsistencies and nuances which are identified below in turn by looking at the views of the source of calling, the relative focus on perceiving versus living a calling, the role of context and structure in this, the prevalence and how it can be assessed and the way it can contribute to career development practice.

### **Section 1: Defining career as calling**

A classic distinction proposed 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 commonly held by career development practitioners who prefer a more expansive definition relevant to all people, but it is in line with the folk theory many use to consider their working lives.

Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rosin and Schwartz (1997) operationalised this tripartite schema and found 'calling', 'career' and 'job' as the dominant perspective on work to be equally distributed within the study population, with higher levels of job and life satisfaction reported

by those identifying a calling. This early work was pivotal in the growing focus on calling as an idealised outcome for career development work. However, the inbuilt assumption that only a proportion of the working population will find this concept salient does inadvertently limit the scope of that work.

By contrast the research teams which include Duffy, who has also written with Blustein on the more expansive and inclusive ‘working lives’ movement, have developed broader definitions that do not exclude but provide the basis for multivariate lines of enquiry. In a summary paper on career studies consideration of calling published in 2013 Duffy and Dik identify six primary domains as a way to organise their findings: calling prevalence, links to career maturity, work outcomes, domain satisfaction, wellbeing and the distinction between perceiving and living a calling. They note that approximately 50% of the population of working adults in the United States identify as having a calling but still see the concept as having wider relevance.

Whether all or only a few have calling, ‘work’ does remain the primary frame here. The virtue of a call is presented as helping us to work well, rather than any intrinsic benefit of experiencing call itself. A rationale for the research is the positive outcomes that can be associated with living a call, in terms of job and life satisfaction and job performance. The literature is focusing on calling in relation to work and the career choices made in relation to paid employment. As they propose their theoretical framework, Duffy et al (2018) note and lay aside the role of calling in other life domains. Indeed, much of the focus is on an initial choice of type of work, rather than to smaller decisions nested within that, such as with which employer to do such work, or how to prioritise competing tasks within a workload.

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)

If these are the outcomes sought for career development work, then it follows that helping people find ways to identify and live out calling is important. Hall and Chandler (2005) would see this as an important part of ‘psychological success’ or subjective career, and therefore is good for self-esteem, wellbeing and satisfaction.

## Section 2: Calling source

These contrasting conceptualisations reveal an interesting approach to the origin of the call. Bunderson and Thompson (2009) and Hall and Chandler (2005) recognise and address religious origins of the notion before seeking to secularise it. Both the Lutheran focus on work as a divine offering and Weber's protestant work ethic (1904) linking callings with the development of Western society and associated drive for individual pursuit of success are noted. Calling in this sense remains external, coming from a source outside the person, and is associated with sacrifice and duty.

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.

	<b>Religious view</b>	<b>Secular view</b>
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)

Bunderson and Thompson repeat this distinction referring to neo-classical and modern views of calling, perhaps motivated by a desire to present calling as appropriate and relevant to practice in contemporary secularised contexts. What this humanistic, self-focused orientation

loses then is a sense of calling as part of how someone makes sense of their contribution to collective responsibilities and other-oriented motivations. Arguably this repeats the mistakes made in defining career solely in relation to the self.

Acknowledging that Bunderson and Thompson's work finds neo-classical definitions more congruent for their zoo-keeping research participants, Duffy and Dik (2013) then 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. They identify three key features as:

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

They therefore distinguish calling from other career studies constructs and posit that calling may be reported along a spectrum, creating a more nuanced continuum of calling rather than a binary called/not called.

Duffy and Dik (2013) summarise the wider literature 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. (Duffy & Dik, 2013: 429)*

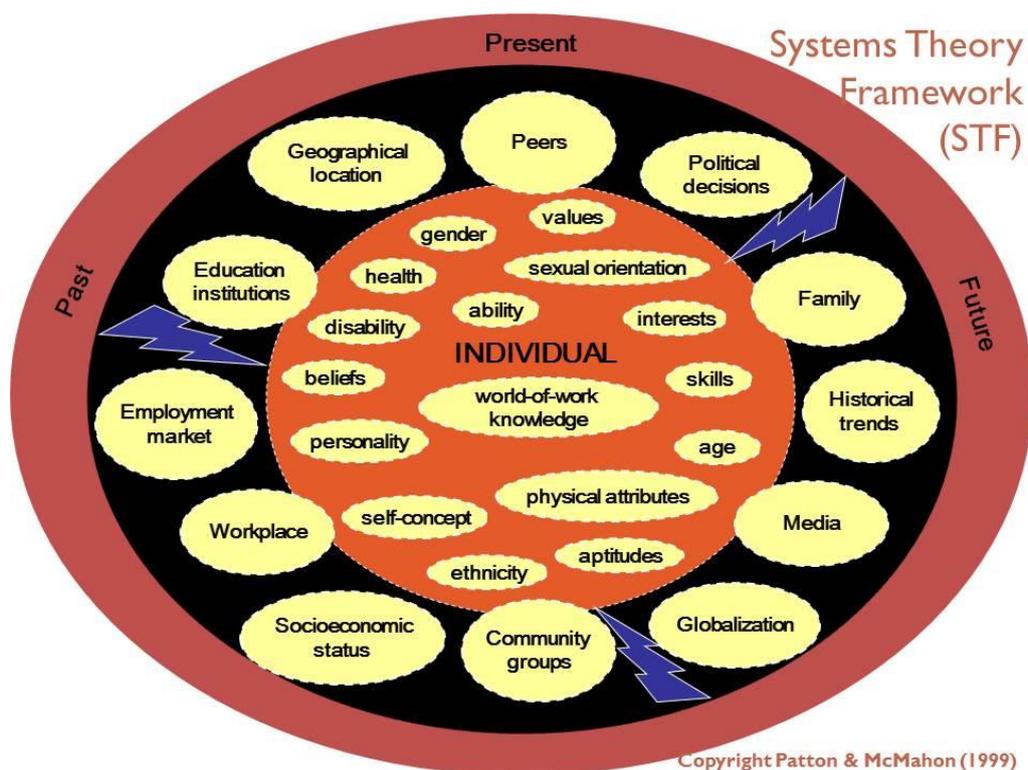
They go on to leave room for those for whom a calling is experienced as divine by arguing that this is not the main issue at stake here:

*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.

However, there are multiple reasons for rejecting this sacred/secular divide, including a theological argument. In a post-Christian secular age such binary distinctions are problematic and not integrative or respectful of whole systems. The systems theory framework (STF) of Patton and McMahon (1999), whilst not explicitly mentioning calling, does allow us a way of doing this. For example we could see how beliefs as well as other individual influences recursively and mutually interact with family and community, with globalisation and labour markets.

Fig 1: The Systems Theory Framework of Career Development (Patton and McMahon, 1999)



### Section 3: Perceiving and living a calling

Returning to that primary emphasis on working well, the benefits of calling are specifically in living it out rather than simply perceiving it. In line with the fudge about calling source, little

attention is paid here to how callings are actually perceived and determined. The ‘called one’s’ own view of the source of calling will then determine how they go about perceiving their calling, following the distinctions identified in table 1. The model presented in the 2018 Duffy et al article does consider the role of learning from experiences in context as an aspect of this but focuses more on the relationship between perceiving and living a calling, positioning the latter as the desired outcome guiding their work. A perceived calling is accepted uncritically as perceived accurately with scant attention to how this might come about.

A perceived calling that is not being lived out is presented as a ‘problem’ to be addressed through career development work. It is living a calling that is required in order to leverage the associated benefits. A perceived and unlived calling is seen as a recipe for regret and dissatisfaction. How this mismatch can be addressed is one potential focus for practice.

Duffy et al’s theoretical model places more emphasis on propositions which explore the relationship between calling perception and enactment, focusing in particular on the theoretical paradigm of person- environment fit (broadened to include social fit and recognising the dynamic and recursive nature of the interrelationships, in line with the systems theory framework), motivation to pursue the calling and organisational support. Here the concept of job crafting as micro-means to enhance person-environment fit by changing the relational, behavioural and cognitive engagements in work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) are introduced, as discussed further in the practice section below.

Prior to publication of their complete theory in 2018, Duffy et al laid out a framework for the development of a scale, a validated quantitative instrument that enables aspects of calling to be measured in individuals and then compared to a previous population study. In 2012 a validating study for two scales was published. The scales were the Basic Calling Scale (BCS) which looks at presence of a calling and the longer Calling and Vocation Questionnaire (CVQ) which includes three sub scales assessing the calling components of external summons, pro social motivation and meaning/purpose, integrating these into a total score. The shorter BCS designed to be integrated with studies measuring other aspects of career, allowing for comparisons and triangulation with other theories. The CVQ is more fine-grained and suited to more focused studies, perhaps looking at how calling is experienced in different contexts and by different populations.

Contextual limitations based on structural factors is one of the main barriers identified to living out a perceived calling. Opportunities to live out a calling can be inaccessible for a variety of reasons connected to variable levels of choice, horizons for action experiences of oppression and discrimination and accumulated social advantage. Indeed, research has shown that higher levels of education and income correlates positively with living out a calling.

The literature does not however identify the potential impact of context on the perceived call. A significant overlooked pitfall 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. In contrast with career development work which sees the individual’s potential to move within social structures, this idea could be used to justify and perpetuate oppressive and restrictive circumstances.

Largely, in common with its orientation towards elite and privileged forms of work associated across the career studies field, 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 can be hard to present as relevant. Moreover, there are structural inequalities in accessing positions that might be associated with a calling and significant barriers to accessing some roles. The calling literature does acknowledge this, but goes no further in grappling with such limitations, as this extract from a summary of vocation shows in a rather deadpan way:

*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).*

More constructivist ideas of career development provide a preferable basis for applying calling across wider populations. If everyone is constructing meaning in their lives through the interplay of components of their individual and social systems, then beliefs and values will interact with any ‘external summons’. Similarly, theological perspectives on calling see everyone as called despite social context. Because theologically callings come in a wider variety of shapes and sizes than to specific fields of work, can be general or specific and are associated with activities leading to martyrdom as much as with particular forms of career

success, it is easier to see why phenomena like ‘dirty work’ (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010) can still be a calling.

#### **Section 4: The dark side**

However, a strength of this literature is its identification of what is referred to as the ‘dark side’ of calling. Focusing on call at the exclusion of other aspects of career self-management leads to risks 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 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.

*“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 a better place and feel more motivated to remain in their specific jobs **even if they were no longer paid.**” (my emphasis) (Wrzesniewski, Dekas and Rosso 2009: 324).*

There is a flipside to all the positives outlined above. Whilst career commitment is viewed positively and in a virtuous cycle with living a calling and can indeed influence perception “individuals who grow a sense of commitment in their career will over time view that career as more of a calling” (Duffy et al, 2018: 428), a prevalence can lead to tunnel vision. Any of these downsides, in particular workaholism and burnout, are shown to lead to decreasing levels of both satisfaction and performance, and therefore run contrary to both the individual and their employer. Avoidance of organisational exploitation is also a factor for everyone working with calling to consider. These negative factors are moderated further by both individual and contextual factors. With regards to individual personality, both perfectionism and low self-esteem are proposed as speculative influences on negative outcomes of calling. Of relevance for those considering career development in organisational contexts is Duffy et al’s proposition about psychological climate – some unhealthy climates being linked to an increased likelihood of these negative outcomes.

### **Summary: Two strands in the literature**

The literature reviewed here focuses on the career studies field and its interest in calling, where two strands emerge. The first reflects a dominant paradigm aligned with vocational psychology, where theoretical models are proposed with generalised explanatory power. Calling is good, is associated with (certain types of) work and aligns with positive aspects of career management. Alternative approaches have also been developed with a more constructivist and transdisciplinary basis. Schabram and Maitlis (2017) are more interested in ongoing experiences of negotiating calling in work and the challenges of callings strongly linked with identity. Sturges, Clinton, Conway and Budjanovcanin (2019) use sensemaking as a way of understanding the calling process as linked to identity formation and operating recursively across systems with the levels of familiarity with contexts emerging strongly as relevant to the dynamic process of perceiving a calling. These variety of conceptualisations might be expected in a dynamic and emerging field of study. Alongside this, theological literature calling tends to focus on ongoing discernment and spiritual formation considering all life stages, domains and contexts (Dewar, 1999; Hughes, 1987; Cahalan and Miller-McLemore, 2017 Placher, 2005; Schuurmann, 2004)

### **Working with calling in practice**

Our attention now turns to the relevance of these concepts in practice. We can read into the emergent academic literature that scholarly interest has arisen mainly because individuals find it salient and bring it to career development work as part of their own personal theories-in-use of career. This includes career development practitioners themselves and their clients.

That said, my sense research and theory building reviewed here is somewhat divorced from practice, and it remains for the practitioner to develop creative ways to build this in. Indeed, Duffy et al are up front about their main intension being to stimulate further empirical study, particularly to shine light on latent structural influenced.

I have been really struck by the enthusiasm with which students engage with the material and propose it in their practice. In some ways, this is quite nuanced and might not involve use of calling as a direct concept at all. Hall and Chandler (2005) identify ‘meta-competencies’ of identity awareness and adaptability which are required for people to work with calling as a

construct, so we may simply focus our work on these, allowing people space to narrate their self-concept and reflect on how they are coping with changing circumstances.

Going further, it is significant simply to put calling on the table for career coaching, being 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 working 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. However I do notice that students comfort levels with that vary – some might feel that secular context of many statutory services places a boundary around this. Despite the best efforts of the literature reviewed earlier to secularise the concept; to argue that calling source does not matter and contemporary interpretations are not religious, many students report the term having strong associations with organised religion. Some students argue they prefer to use the terms purpose and meaning in their working contexts.

In the UK where religious adherence is highest amongst minoritized communities, this intersects with other debates within practice about the cross-cultural relevance of the underpinning theories for our work. It has been argued that careers work is overly focused on individualised models of decision making and needs specific adaptations to be used with clients in contexts where communal decision making is the norm. If white western guidance prioritises autonomy and rationality, engaging with a diverse client base requires us to unpick that.

If calling then becomes a focus for career coaching, the practitioner needs some ways to explore how the client sees this, unpacking how they see it in terms of the balance between individual purpose and pro-social orientation and internal and external origins.

Of course the two scales that have been developed by Duffy and Dik could potentially be deployed here and used as a device within career counselling practice to place calling on a continuum. Here, a counsellor might ask a client to complete a scale and use their score compared to the population sample as well as their reflections on the process as material through which they can mutually determine appropriate decisions and actions for the client to take.

Alternatively In line with the constructivist approach enshrined in the Systems Theory Framework, rather than a practitioner objectifying the client by using their expertise and the scale to diagnose and direct, a preferred use would be in constructivist ways such as using the salient concepts with clients to support their learning. (McMahon and Patton 2012). For example, a card sort or imaginative activity could use the scale items to generate discussion. Similar creative approaches can be to explore values and goals through imaginative activities or to tap into dreams and goals to support perception of call.

As noted earlier there is not much attention given in the literature to how calling can be perceived. Returning to table 1, Hall and Chandler make suggestions for some processes that might be useful, and a career development practitioner could work with these to support reflection, meditation and relational activities which allow for discernment. Rather than dismissing the source of the call as unimportant, this means working closely with the client to understand how they see the source and means of the call. This might involve working with dreams and visions not yet easy to articulate, enabling clients to focus on slowly growing internal feelings.

Finally, job crafting 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. In my experience both our students and my clients respond quite well to this idea. Whilst Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) and Duffy and Dik, 2015 report positive outcomes from job crafting, there is potential for it to be seen as a naive attempt to address structural disadvantage.

## Conclusions

I have reviewed the career studies literature on calling and interwoven this with my analysis informed by practice in the classroom and moving in and out of Christian contexts. I have shown the scope for practitioners to use calling related concepts in their practice and make

suggestions for how this can be adapted to different contexts, thereby maximising the potential of guidance.

However, some inconsistencies remain in the career studies literature which I believe need to be addressed for its wider use. In particular, the assumption that calling is aligned to a matching model of initial and one time career decision making needs to be challenged. A matching focus places a huge importance on making good initial career decisions and a more iterative and developmental contextual approach is needed to support clients throughout their working lives. I propose that the profession continues to work critically with the notion of calling, considering in particular how it plays out across populations and integrating theological and career studies perspectives to shine a further light on its potential relevance and value.

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