



The experience of career change driven by a sense of calling: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study used a qualitative methodology to examine how a sense of calling is related to the career change process. Interviews were conducted with eight career changers who perceived their career transition as a way to fulfill a calling. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), eight super-ordinate themes were elicited that described the various elements of the change process: activity prior to the career change, activity during the pre-transition period, activity during the process of discerning a calling, definition of calling, challenges of pursuing a calling-infused career, ways of dealing with challenges, impact of a calling-infused career change, and unique aspects of a calling-infused career change. Generally, participants were satisfied with their calling-infused career transitions and reported greater levels of well-being at work and in their lives as a whole. In-depth self-exploration and making meaning from past experiences were described as primary ways to discern a calling. Interviewees defined calling as a source of fulfillment, a way to serve the greater good at work, a spiritual conviction that one is doing what one is meant to do, and as an important part of one's identity. As unique characteristics of career changes motivated by a sense of calling, participants indicated that their transitions were prompted by altruistic motives and the pursuit of intrinsic rewards. Interviewees also reported feeling blessed to live out their calling and viewed pursuing a calling as an ongoing process.

1. Introduction

Career development is a lifelong and ongoing process. In today's world of work, change is the norm; careers that unfold over decades within a single occupation or organization are the exception rather than the rule. A recent study revealed, for example, that the Americans hold an average of nearly 12 jobs between the ages of 18 and 48 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Super (1990) defined "career" as a series of positions occupied by a person across one's life span. He postulated that an individual becomes mature as she or he goes through diverse life changes, and develops a self-concept by accomplishing key developmental tasks at various stages across the life span. As experiences become elaborated with an increased awareness of the world of work, a more sophisticated vocational self-concept is formed (Zunker, 1994). In this perspective, career change is regarded as a personal growth process of finding a better job that more satisfactorily permits one to express a maturing vocational self-concept.

In one of the few examples of a theoretical model of career change, O'Connor and Wolfe (1987) proposed that adult career transitions typically follow five stages: stability (pre-transition), rising discontent, crisis, redirection and adaptation, and re-

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stabilizing. By conceptualizing a career transition as the process of coping with changes in the self and the environment, they suggested that the transition should be regarded as natural and inevitable, rather than a detour. Even so, changing one's job is a challenging and often an unwanted life experience, particularly given that such transitions are often tied to periods of unemployment and job insecurity. Also common in such transitions is a move to a less desirable and satisfying opportunity than one's previous position (Wanberg, 1995). Relatively little is known about the factors that predict positive outcomes associated with a career transition. Furthermore, previous studies on career change have mostly examined intent to leave a job or one's organization, and empirical research collecting actual data of career change behavior is sparse (Blau, 2000; Blau, 2007; Rhodes & Doering, 1983).

1.1. Factors leading to career change

Carless and Arnup (2011) defined a career change as a transition from one work position to another in a different field that is largely unrelated to previous work skills or responsibilities. Previous attempts to identify factors that may prompt a career change have included reduced job satisfaction, burnout, and job insecurity (Blau, 2000; Burke & Richardsen, 1993; De Lange, Taris, Kompier, Houtman, & Bongers, 2004; Grandey, Fisk, & Steiner, 2005; Kinnunen, Mauno, Natti, & Happonen, 1999; Kinnunen, Mauno, Natti, & Happonen, 2000; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Mauno & Kinnunen, 1999; Rhodes & Doering, 1983). Furthermore, research examining personality traits related to career change has found that voluntary turnover is negatively linked to emotional stability and conscientiousness (Barrick & Mount, 1996; Judge, 1992).

Likewise, conventional wisdom holds that career change usually happens in negative contexts when personal traits and environmental work conditions do not fit well. However, an alternative approach has recently emerged highlighting factors that make career change a beneficial life experience. Williams and Forgasz (2009) found that intrinsic and altruistic motives were more important than extrinsic rewards such as pay or work conditions among students who initiated a career change to pursue teaching. These results indicate that a desire to fulfill important personal values is a crucial factor for voluntary career change, and that one's personal meaning-making system needs to be considered in understanding how career changes can foster career growth. In summary, previous studies have predominately focused on involuntary turnover caused by negative factors such as job dissatisfaction, work stress, burn out, negative evaluation at work, and layoffs (Blau, 2000; Burke & Richardsen, 1993; Shaw, Delery, Jenkins, & Gupta, 1998; Tayfur & Arslan, 2013). Relatively little is known about career changers who decide to voluntarily change their jobs and what psychological resources lead to experiencing this career transition as a meaningful turning point during one's career path. As labor market instability has increased, career change has become an increasingly normative event that can happen to anyone at any time for a wide range of internal and external reasons. Therefore, an important next step for research is to investigate career changers who are satisfied with their new career path, to examine how they approached their career change decisions, and to identify the factors that helped to facilitate the transition process.

1.2. Calling and career change

Discerning a sense of calling may be one of the antecedents leading to positive career transitions. Researchers have argued that a sense of calling is inseparably intertwined with one's identity (Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010), and that individuals may develop the feeling of being drawn into a certain area in which they have engaged in various activities and satisfied particular interests (Schwartz, 2004). Approaching one's career as a calling involves a sense that one is driven to pursue a particular career path by a transcendent summons, motivated by a sense of purpose with a pro-social orientation (Dik & Duffy, 2009).

Over the past decade, a rapidly increasing amount of research in vocational psychology, organizational behavior, and management has shown that approaching one's career as a calling is positively linked with career and well-being outcomes (Duffy & Dik, 2013). For example, a sense of calling predicts higher levels of career maturity, intrinsic work motivation, work hope, career decision self-efficacy, and academic satisfaction among college students (e.g., Dik, Sargent, & Steger, 2008; Duffy, Allan, & Dik, 2011; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Steger, Pickering, Shin, & Dik, 2010). Studies with adult workers have found that those with a sense of calling exhibit increased job satisfaction, greater levels of occupational identification, higher career commitment, and a stronger sense of that their work is meaningful (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Davidson & Caddell, 1994; Duffy, Dik, & Steger, 2011; Duffy, Foley et al., 2012; Peterson, Park, Hall, & Seligman, 2009; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). Furthermore, fulfilling one's calling strengthens relationships both inside and outside work (Cardador & Caza, 2012) and promotes a sense of social connection by helping workers feel that they are contributing to society in a positive way (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). The benefits of approaching work as a calling have been examined with diverse occupations including administrative assistants, zookeepers, academics, and psychologists, among many others (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Duffy, Foley et al., 2012; Oates, Hall, & Anderson, 2005; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). The role of a sense of calling in career development has also been investigated internationally (e.g., Domene, 2012; Douglass, Duffy, & Autin, 2016; Praskova, Creed, & Hood, 2015; Rothmann & Hamukang'andu, 2013; Shim & Yoo, 2012; Zhang, Dik, Wei, & Zhang, 2015), yielding results that are largely consistent with those found in the earlier studies described above.

The links between the presence of a calling and both career-related and general well-being have been consistent, yet there is also more to the story. Specifically, evidence suggests that the benefits of a calling are most pronounced among individuals who feel they are living their calling through their current occupations compared to those who only perceive a sense of calling (e.g., Duffy, Bott, Allan, Torrey, & Dik, 2012). Whereas perceiving a calling refers to the degree of which an individual feels called to a certain career, living a calling refers to the degree to which an individual is actually engaging in work that aligns with her or his calling (Duffy & Autin, 2013). Living a calling and perceiving a calling are empirically distinct constructs, and living a calling is more closely

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