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Reciprocal relation between authenticity and calling among Chinese university students: A latent change score approach

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ABSTRACT

It is common to hear that following one's "true self" is an important means to find a calling, yet research has not directly examined this possibility. In this study, we investigate the change pattern between authenticity and calling. Specifically, we conducted a three-wave longitudinal study with 459 Chinese university students over one year and examined the reciprocal dynamic relation between authenticity (i.e., authentic living, self-alienation, and accepting external influence) and calling. Results of a bivariate latent change score model examining within-individual changes over time showed that increases in authentic living were positively correlated with increases in calling, while increases in self-alienation and accepting external influence negatively correlated with increases in calling. We also found that higher levels of authentic living significantly predicted an increase in calling over time. However, higher levels of calling predicted a decrease in authentic living. Our findings contribute to the literature on calling by suggesting a dynamic change pattern of authenticity and calling among Chinese university students.

1. Introduction

The notion that one's career can be approached as a calling has drawn substantial scholarly attention in recent years within vocational psychology and allied fields (Brown & Lent, 2016). Popular conceptualizations of calling often convey a sense that one's career is closely tied to a broader sense of purpose and meaning in life, and may be used to help others or advance the greater good (e.g., Dik & Shimizu, *in press*). Research on calling also reflects the broader interest within contemporary career development research on value-driven and self-managed approaches to one's career (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Zhang, Hirschi, Herrmann, Wei, & Zhang, 2015). Evidence suggests that one's perception of a calling is associated with positive career-related outcomes, subjective career success, and greater well-being (see Duffy & Dik, 2013, for a review). More recently, with longitudinal designs, research has also focused on identifying factors that affect the perception of a calling, and how callings emerge and develop (e.g., Bott & Duffy, 2015; Dobrow, 2013; Duffy, Douglass, Autin, & Allan, 2014; Hirschi & Herrmann, 2013; Praskova, Hood, & Creed, 2014; Zhang, Hirschi, Herrmann, Wei, & Zhang, 2017).

However, the existing research is still limited on the question of how a sense of calling develops. First, despite the recent progress

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in understanding the mechanisms through which calling links to criterion variables, researchers have paid little attention to the role that self-perception may play as people develop a sense of calling. In particular, little is known regarding how perceptions of calling are related to people's sense of authenticity. However, a link between authenticity and calling seems highly plausible, given that several scholars have pointed to the benefits of “following the true self” for the development of a calling (e.g., Elangovan, Pinder, & McLean, 2010; Weiss, Skelley, Haughey, & Hall, 2003). Hall and Chandler (2005) also noted that a calling is shaped by “knowing why” investments, involving clearly understanding the self and achieving an identity. Yet these are essentially theoretical assumptions; researchers have not systematically examined the effect of authenticity on calling. Furthermore, calling may also contribute to changes in authenticity because calling is presumed to refine one's perception of self (Elangovan et al., 2010; Hall & Chandler, 2005). This possibility also requires, but has not yet been subject to, empirical examination. In this study, we adopted a latent change score (LCS) approach with longitudinal data collected over three time points in an attempt to empirically investigate the potentially reciprocal effects between calling and authenticity to address this limitation.

Second, despite signs of increasing internationalization within the calling literature (e.g., Kim, Praskova, & Lee, 2016; Zhang, Dik, Wei, & Zhang, 2015), much more research is needed that investigates the development of a calling in different cultural contexts. To address this issue, the present study specifically focuses on how the change pattern between authenticity and calling unfolds over time in a Chinese university student sample. China has witnessed dramatic economic and cultural change in recent decades, resulting in corresponding changes in many people's career development (Wong & Slater, 2002; Zhou, Leung, & Li, 2012). One of the most notable changes is that people are increasingly taking a more self-directed approach to developing their careers (Wong & Slater, 2002; Yi, Ribbens, & Morgan, 2010). However, many people in China still express interdependent and communal career decision-making strategies to a greater extent than has been observed in Western samples (e.g., Willner, Gati, & Guan, 2015). This complex relation of self-direction and social dependency in career development might have important implications for how Chinese students and employees approach their careers as a calling. A first indication of this stems from a cross-sectional study which found that a self-directed career attitude positively relates to higher levels of a calling among Chinese employees (Zhang, Hirschi, et al., 2015). In this study, we extend this line of research and argue that authenticity, as a factor closely related to self-direction and independence, could be a significant promoter of developing a calling in Chinese university students.

In doing so, our study makes several contributions. First, we add to the very limited research on calling antecedents by shedding light on how the development of a calling among university students is related to changes in authenticity. Second, by testing the effect of perceiving a calling on changes in authenticity, this study examines the possibility that a sense of calling can lead to changes in self-perceptions. In fact, using a LCS model, we are able to simultaneously probe the effect of authenticity on changes in calling as well as the reverse effects. Finally, considering that researchers advocate conducting more research on calling in non-Western countries (Duffy & Dik, 2013), this study also contributes to an understanding of how callings develop in a Chinese context.

1.1. The conceptualization of calling and authenticity

Scholars have proposed several definitions of calling. Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas (2011) defined calling unidimensionally, as a consuming and meaningful passion people experience toward a domain. Other definitions are multidimensional, typically including some combination of four dimensions. The first dimension refers to the perception of a transcendent summons or guiding force, which can be external (e.g., needs of society or country, family expectations, a higher power, destiny) or internal (e.g., inner passion or drive, strong interests; e.g., Dik & Duffy, 2009; Elangovan et al., 2010; Hagmaier & Abele, 2012). The second emphasizes the alignment of one's calling with a broader sense of meaning and purpose in life (e.g., Dik & Duffy, 2009; Hagmaier & Abele, 2012; Praskova, Creed, & Hood, 2014). The third dimension refers to altruistic or prosocial motivation, suggesting that individuals with a calling have an intention or tendency of using their work to help others or serve a greater good (e.g., Dik & Duffy, 2009; Hagmaier & Abele, 2012; Praskova, Creed, & Hood, 2014). Finally, the fourth dimension refers to active engagement or increased effort, and is sometimes framed as an outcome of calling and other times as a defining characteristic (e.g., Elangovan et al., 2010; Praskova, Creed, & Hood, 2014).

These dimensions have been found in research across diverse cultural contexts (e.g., Kim et al., 2016). Directly relevant for our investigation, in a qualitative study among Chinese university students, Zhang, Dik, et al. (2015) found these four dimensions when defining calling (i.e., guiding force, meaning and purpose, altruism and active tendency). However, Zhang, Dik, et al. (2015) also noted several differences in the typical sources of calling in a Chinese context compared to notions of a calling from a Western context, for instance a greater emphasis on a sense of duty and collective expectations. Considering these differences, Zhang, Herrmann, Hirschi, Wei, and Zhang (2015) developed a Chinese Calling Scale to measure calling in Chinese university students and empirically verified three dimensions: Guiding force, meaning and purpose, and altruism, that we also apply in this study.

Regarding authenticity, different theoretical frameworks correspond to different definitions of the construct. For instance, Kernis and Goldman (2006) conceptualized authenticity as a four-dimensional construct, consisting of the following: awareness of one's self-relevant feelings and cognitions, unbiased processing of self-evaluative information, behavioral consistency, and openness and honesty in relationships. In the present study, we adopt the tripartite definition proposed by Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, and Joseph (2008), which draws from person-centered theory. Specifically, authenticity is conceptualized as consisting of three facets: (1) *Self-alienation*, a negatively poled factor of authenticity referring to an individual's feeling of not knowing oneself, or feeling out of touch with one's true self. Self-alienation captures the incongruence between conscious awareness and actual experience; (2) *authentic living*, referring to whether an individual can behave and live in a way that expresses or honors the true self. Authentic living is considered a positive component of authenticity that further captures the congruence between conscious awareness and behavior; and (3) *accepting external influence*, referring to the extent to which an individual is influenced by other people or believes that one has

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