
Sense of “Calling”: An Organizing Principle for the Lives and Values of Young Women in University

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined the experience of “life calling” in a sample of female Christian university students who felt a strong sense of calling. Participants were interviewed about the meaning and their experiences of life calling, with thematic analysis revealing the conception of life calling as an organizing and guiding force in these students’ lives, the nature of that calling, the process by which it emerged, and several salient attributes that these individuals had in common. The findings suggest that life calling is a distinct, identifiable phenomenon for some students and may be useful to consider in counselling with these clients.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude qualitative examine l’expérience de « l’appel de vie » dans un échantillon d’étudiantes chrétiennes à l’université qui sentaient un fort sens d’appel. Les participantes ont assisté à une entrevue concernant la signification et leurs expériences de l’appel de vie. Une analyse thématique des entrevues révèle que l’appel de vie est conceptualisé comme une force organisatrice et dirigeante dans la vie de ces étudiantes. L’analyse révèle aussi la nature de l’appel de vie et le procès par lequel il est émergé ainsi que quelques caractéristiques saillantes que ces individuelles ont en commun. Les conclusions suggèrent que l’appel de vie est un phénomène distinct et identifiable pour certaines étudiantes et pourrait être utile à prendre en compte en conseillant ces clientes.

The concept of “life calling” has recently re-emerged as a salient concept in the counselling literature (e.g., Dik & Duffy, 2009a, 2009b; Hall & Chandler, 2005; Steger, 2009). Going beyond historical religious definitions of the concept, this recent scholarship has tended to define the phenomenon in terms of an expression of the essence of oneself in life and work—that is, work that one finds natural, purposeful, and meaningful. With few exceptions, however, the recent work on calling has been largely based on literature and anecdotal evidence from practice. However, as Dik and Duffy (2009a) recently pointed out, systematic empirical research about the phenomenon has only recently been published.

In one of the few systematic studies on the nature of calling, Elliott (1992) interviewed for her doctoral dissertation adults who had experienced a strong sense of calling. From her qualitative analysis, she constructed five salient characteristics about the nature of calling: (a) a sense of doing the work that one is meant to, (b) feeling compelled to engage in that particular work, (c) a level of intensity

not found in other work, (d) a desire to share one's calling with others, and (e) a determination to engage in the work even when not financially necessary. Elliott also found a continuum in the experience of calling, ranging from visionary seizures to subtle hunches.

Consistent with Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, and Schwartz's (1997) findings, Elliott (1992) concluded that life calling is an internal motivation that reflects a generalized form of psychological engagement with the meaning of one's career work. Consequently, although it is possible to experience calling as coming from divine sources, Elliott suggests that religious belief is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for having a calling.

Another exception to the dearth of empirical research is Wrzesniewski et al.'s (1997) exploration of people's self-perceived career orientations in which they identified calling as one of three distinct orientations to work, defining it as a source of fulfillment and belief that one is making the world a better place. The calling orientation was associated with having a more rewarding relationship to one's work, spending more time in the work domain, gaining more enjoyment and satisfaction from work, and having higher life satisfaction than those with other work orientations.

More recently, Duffy and Sedlacek (2007) have examined the links between life calling and career decision-making in a sample of 3,091 first-year students at a public university. Using self-report measures and a very broad definition of calling, they found that experiencing a sense of calling was associated with higher levels of decidedness, comfort, and self-clarity. Moreover, although the effect sizes were relatively small, life calling was significantly predictive of both degree of career decidedness and degree of comfort with one's career choice, even after accounting for variance attributable to other known influences on career decision-making.

Evidently, empirical research on the experience of life calling remains limited, especially as it pertains to university students. This lack of research evidence is unfortunate, given Duffy and Sedlacek's (2007) finding that the concept can be salient even at this early age, as well as recent interest in developing calling-based career counselling interventions with university-aged populations (e.g., Dik & Duffy, 2009b). Indeed, examining calling as it manifests itself prior to the transition to work may be of greater practical use to counsellors than examining calling as it has been understood by adults who are looking back upon their careers.

The present study addresses some of these gaps in the literature by exploring the experience of life calling among female university students who perceive themselves as having a strong sense of their own life calling, and by identifying some of the contexts and circumstances that may be associated with the optimal development of a sense of calling at this age. Two guiding questions were used to frame this qualitative exploration of the phenomenon:

1. How does life calling manifest itself among female university students?
2. What is the experience and meaning of life calling as it is manifested in these women's lives?

METHOD

Participants and Recruitment

Participants consisted of 7 Caucasian women from a Christian university in Western Canada enrolled in several different majors: nursing, kinesiology, environmental studies, education, and criminology. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 25 ($M = 21$). All described themselves as being Christian. Six participants were Canadian and one participant had dual citizenship (Canada/United States). Five participants were in the second year of their programs, one participant was in her third year, and one participant was completing her associate's degree.

After ethics approval, recruitment occurred via invitations distributed across the university: 469 e-mail addresses from students of all majors and levels of study were obtained through the campus career centre. These students were sent an electronic invitation to complete an online survey, with the incentive of a chance to win a \$50 gift certificate for the university bookstore.

From the pool of survey respondents, a criterion sampling strategy was used to invite participants to participate in the study. The criteria were (a) female, (b) undergraduates majoring in a field other than theology/Biblical studies, and (c) scoring above 4.00 on the screening instrument. Fifteen eligible individuals responded positively to the invitation to participate in the study; however, because of scheduling conflicts, only seven interviews took place.

The survey used in the screening phase of the study consisted of demographic questions and Kush and Kim's (2004) *Life Calling Survey* (LCS). The LCS is composed of 24 items, each scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Because the LCS was an instrument developed in-house by the campus career centre, indicators of the validity and reliability of the instrument are still being developed.

Procedures

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview strategy, using guiding questions to focus the conversation, but also allowing participants to lead the conversation in new directions. The questions were adapted from Elliott's (1992) study of calling in older individuals. Interviews took place on campus and were 50 to 90 minutes long. Audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed by the principal investigator, using an interpretive transcription strategy that included removing superfluous utterances (e.g., "um," "er"), converting partial statements into sentences, adding punctuation and quotation marks, and omitting unnecessary pauses.

The analysis was based on Richards' (2005) meaning-based analytic coding approach in which the researcher examines "the meanings of data in context, and creates categories that express new ideas about the data, coding to gather and reflect on all the data related to them" (p. 94). This analytic strategy was used to explore each individual's experiences, meanings, and ideas around life calling. Information from the individual interviews was then synthesized to construct an overall understanding of life calling present across the whole sample. This proc-

ess generated several underlying concepts, as well as a number of specific themes among the participants' experiences of life calling.

Two validation procedures were undertaken. Each participant was sent a preliminary, tentative description of the themes that emerged from her interview, and was asked for feedback on whether the researchers had adequately captured what she had meant, and whether the themes were sufficiently reflective of her own experience. Two participants requested changes be made to correct factual errors (e.g., sequence of classes taken in university), but all agreed with the identified emergent themes.

After all interviews were analyzed, an external auditor reviewed the transcripts and narrative summaries of two interviews, looking for possible themes that may have been missed. The auditor was a practitioner with a Ph.D. in organizational psychology and 15 years of career counselling experience. His approach to counselling incorporates the concept of life calling. This auditor confirmed the originally identified themes. He also found one theme that had been omitted from the narrative summary for a participant. This theme was one that the researchers had identified and included in the list of common themes, but had omitted from that person's narrative summary.

FINDINGS

A wide range of salient themes emerged in two main clusters: underlying concepts and specific thematic categories. The underlying concepts describe more broadly how participants' sense of life calling spans the many areas of their lives, while the specific categories captured themes relating to (a) the nature of life calling, (b) the emergence of life calling, and (c) personal attributes that repeatedly emerged within the sample. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

Underlying Concepts

Participants revealed that their calling encompassed entire areas of life, rather than being limited to a specific occupational direction. This underlying concept was referred to by the researchers as an *ultimate calling*. As Rachael described it:

I think a career can be your job, but a life calling is who you are, becoming what you do ... I don't think someone's life calling is to work as an environmentalist, well maybe it is, but I think you're called to be a person that cares about the environment.

The next underlying concept, the *life calling lens*, emerged through participants' descriptions of how they tended to see their entire world as relating to their life calling. Participants described their daily activities, relationships, and even leisure time as being lived out or viewed through their life calling. For example, Lynn reported, "Because I know where I'm going in the future, that affects all the decisions I make in the meantime, with relationships I make and the places I go and the things I talk about."

The final underlying concept that arose from the interviews was that life calling is *process oriented*, as opposed to manifesting at one specific moment in time. All participants described their callings as having developed over time and increasing in clarity as they pursued their particular areas of interest. This finding is captured by Lynn, who was excited and passionate about someday working as a nurse in Africa.

When asked how she became aware of this calling, Lynn described it as a “process of confirmations.” She spoke of one instance at the age of 15 when a career counsellor told her and her parents that she should consider pursuing the sciences in high school given her strengths in that area. Doing so resulted in Lynn discovering she was interested in studying biology and, in particular, the human body. She then pursued a pre-med degree in hopes of becoming a doctor. Lynn failed to get into medical school and experienced a period of loss of direction and meaning that she described as “scary.” However, through this time of struggle she was able to refine her priorities and find out about other options in the area of healthcare. Lynn has had exposure to nursing and relief work in Africa and reported that as she continues to be involved in her life calling area, the nature of that calling becomes clearer.

Nature of Life Calling

When participants described the nature of their life callings, five different characteristics emerged: (a) altruistic focus, (b) intensity, (c) deep passion for the calling area, (d) facilitating the discovery of calling in others, and (e) the burdens of having a calling. Every participant reported that helping others was a central part of her sense of life calling. This *altruistic focus* varied from participant to participant, and included such things as assisting children through education and parenthood; helping those with medical needs through nursing, physiotherapy, and medicine; and supporting the community through policing. Many participants described themselves as caring and nurturing and wanting to express those aspects of their lives through helping others. Jennifer, for example, stated:

My calling lets me express all my good qualities, you know, my gifts and talents, whether it's working with people or being active, being able to converse with others, and caring about people ... my friends tell me that I am a caring person, and I'm very emotional and empathetic and sympathetic for others, and I can feel what my friends are going through, when they're going through tough times.

Another emergent theme was the *unique intensity* that participants experienced when acting within their life calling area. Many participants reported a heightened degree of ease and focus, being fully immersed in their work, or even a spiritual presence; an intensity that is absent in other parts of their lives. Kim described this sensation:

There's an emotion behind it, and there'd be nights that I was up late talking to kids and up early in the morning praying with their mom and dad about their

kids and I wouldn't be exhausted, I'd be going on two hours of sleep a night but I'd still have energy ... that's how I realized that this is what's feeding me, that this is what I would like to do.

Participants also discussed their calling with great fervour and enthusiasm, expressing a *deep passion* for that area of life. Each participant perceived her life calling as much more than simply something of interest; it was something that had completely captured her. Lynn, feeling called to pursue nursing in Africa, reported being overwhelmingly fascinated by how the human body worked and how all the different parts are put together. Once Heather found criminology (after four years of university where she searched for something that would interest her), her reaction was excitement, and a sense that "it's something that I just—I have to do it! I'm going to go crazy if I can't do it!" Penny summed up the theme of deep passion simply, stating, "It captured me."

Another theme that emerged was a desire to help others discover and refine their own callings. The theme of *facilitating the discovery of calling in others* emerged in two different ways; some participants took initiative to offer guidance to others, while others had been approached by friends or family who were aware of their strong sense of calling. For example, Becky described helping her friends find their own callings:

All my friends know that I'm there to help them find their life calling because I've always kind of been the person who's known what I'm doing most of the time and along with that I'm very organized ... they kind of expect me to know what I'm doing and I plan everything for them, so that's just kind of been my role and they embrace it.

Participants also identified several *burdens of having a life calling*, such as sacrificing social recreation, other interests, and personal relationships to pursue their calling. Participants reported feeling isolated because of their life calling and struggled with the mistaken perceptions of others. For example, Rachael reported that some of her isolation was the result of her relentless pursuit of her life calling and how much time and energy she spent on such things as studying, reading, and simply being at university instead of working or being with friends. Jennifer expressed her ambivalence toward pursuing her calling, revealing her fears of missing out on other aspects of life and the danger of focusing primarily on the area of life related to her calling:

Maybe I'm not going to experience everything, say, if my life is cut short, you know, or something might happen. I'd have to say the thing that I don't like about it is the fear, the not knowing what's going to happen, not knowing for sure, or just thinking that I could fail.

Emergence of Life Calling

Participants described a variety of factors that influenced how calling emerged in their lives, with the *supportive role of others* and *exposure to the life calling area*

being commonly mentioned. *Important supporters* included family members, friends, educators, school counsellors, healthcare professionals, and role models/mentors. Penny, an aspiring marine biologist, recalled an incident where a teacher was so impressed by her performance on a school project on a beach that she was encouraged to think about that area as a career direction:

It was in regards to marine biology and we had gone and done a beach study, and I remember I was actually failing grade two and my teacher said, "Okay we have to spark her interest in something for some sort of project." So we did the beach thing and that was going to be my final project and she was talking to my mom and saying that I needed to get at least a "C" on it, or a high "C" or preferably a "B" for her to even consider passing me and I pulled a 99% on it, and I really enjoyed it, and she approached me and said "You know, you could do this for work some day," and I was like, "You can get paid for doing stuff on the beach?" (hahaha), wow, what a concept. And so from then on it was just something that I had followed.

Every participant named their mother as playing a crucial role in developing their life calling. Participants mostly reported that they experienced close relationships with their mothers, who provided constant support and encouragement either as a "friend" or in more of a parental role. In contrast, one participant (Becky) described the antagonistic role her mother plays in her life, but also how that antagonism motivated her to pursue her life calling:

My mother is the reality in my life and because of my physical injuries, any type of work I do is compromising my health and so she's like, "You know you're probably not going to be able to do physiotherapy for the rest of your life ... you should seriously think about going into something else" and I'm like, "No, my life calling is to be doing this, and I want to be doing this and I'm going to make it work for me because I know that I need to be doing it." So that is kind of opposite motivation for me.

Well before their sense of calling had solidified, most participants experienced personal interests and *exposure to the area of life* that became their calling. Heather recalled becoming fascinated with the world of policing by watching *Cops* and other police television shows. She was absolutely thrilled when a police officer visited her Grade 2 class. Other participants had parents with similar occupations who sparked the interest of their child through discussion. Becky and Penny, however, were first exposed to the area that eventually became their calling in involuntary and unpleasant ways: both required serious medical attention, and this exposure to the world of medicine subsequently developed into a strong sense of life calling.

Shared Personal Attributes

Participants identified several personal attributes that contributed to the development of their life calling: (a) being proactive and tenacious, (b) resiliency, and (c) a sense of identity. The first attribute was described with great intensity, using

words such as “determined,” “tenacious,” “all or nothing,” “a fighter.” The theme of *proactivity/tenacity* was also revealed in the extensive amounts of investigation and involvement in their life calling areas that participants reported. Life calling emerged from diligent pursuit over time and choosing to be involved in activities related to their callings. Jennifer, who aspired to be a police school liaison officer, described ongoing efforts to be involved with children and in police-related activities:

I’m still doing things with the church or in the community and extracurricular activities and part-time work, I think that’s all part of leaning towards what I want to do ... it’s helping me to prepare for what I want to do in the future and what I’m looking forward to, so I think I’m totally working towards that now. I want to do kick boxing and volunteer for the RCMP.

Resiliency became evident in participants’ depictions of their ability to continue to press forward tenaciously even when faced with trials and adversity. Although not everyone faced the same intensity of obstacles, the common element across their stories was the experience of overcoming what lay before them. When Lynn’s parents initially opposed her going to Africa to provide humanitarian aid, their opposition simply motivated her to work harder and to obtain information to show her parents that going to Africa was both safe and an important part of her life journey.

Similarly, Heather described the many obstacles that she overcame in pursuing her calling to be a police officer, including spending four years in university taking general studies in her search for something she felt passionate about, and becoming more and more discouraged. However, Heather also reported having the resiliency to continue to push through and eventually discover the area of criminology, which ignited a passion that she had never felt before.

The other emergent personal attribute was a clearer *sense of identity* associated with pursuing their life calling. Calling was described as contributing to feeling more secure and stable in their knowledge of who they are and the directions in which they were headed. This theme is illustrated by Becky whose life calling was refined by undergoing several painful knee surgeries. She was able to overcome these obstacles and others to the point where she became motivated by opposition. Becky spoke of these experiences of pursuing her life calling as improving her sense of who she is and what she is doing with her life, and wanting to encourage others to do the same.

DISCUSSION

Life calling appears to encompass much more than one’s academic major or area of occupational interest; it appears to be deeply intertwined with one’s worldviews and life values. It is this amalgamation of sense of life calling and worldview that seems to subsequently inform every area of their lives, including their pursuit of educational and occupational goals. It is evident that for some young women in

university, their career paths, the choices they make, and their very identities are informed by a sense of being called to something greater than themselves.

It remains unclear why life calling can have such salience as an organizing principle for the lives of some young women: perhaps people with a strong sense of calling at an early age view their whole life through this lens because they have a strong sense of that calling. Perhaps their adoption of a lens of calling to interpret all aspects of their life is what has allowed them to develop such a strong sense of calling. Perhaps these students' dispositions are prone to becoming absorbed in whatever they do and they have come to interpret such an approach as a "calling." In any case, it is evident that calling pervades every area of these people's lives and, as such, may be beneficial to address when counselling such students.

Nature of Life Calling

Life calling was perceived as both an inward and an outward experience. As participants spoke about their deep passion for their calling and the unique intensity they felt when engaged in that area, it became apparent that, for these women, having a strong sense of life calling involves an expression of the self through one's skills, personhood, and passions. Moreover, in support of Dik and Duffy's (2009a) conceptualization of calling, participants described an outward focus to their calling; they felt called to a career path related to helping others.

The incredible enthusiasm with which participants spoke about their life callings suggests that the phenomenon is something that evokes passion and excitement in the hearts of those who experience it. Consistent with Elliott's (1992) model, most participants described being drawn toward their calling in a way they could not fully explain. These were not necessarily individuals who were passionate in all areas of life, but they did express openness toward becoming immersed and passionate about the particular area of life to which they felt called.

Despite the passion they felt, virtually all the participants also revealed that pursuing a calling comes at a cost. Their pursuit meant putting aside other areas of interest, relationships, and recreation and involved a lot of effort and dedication. The findings also suggest an element of delayed gratification in the experience of life calling, with many of the participants ignoring pursuits outside of their life calling area and working hard in the present to attain greater happiness and fulfillment for the future.

Finally, although knowing and pursuing a calling was perceived as highly desirable, doing so also led to unexpected trials, hurdles, and sacrifices. Thus, findings of this study suggest that the nature of life calling can involve an outward focus, an inexplicable passion, a desire to help others discover their own callings, and a burden that is heavy but also well worth the cost.

Emergence of Life Calling

The findings suggest that life calling tends to emerge gradually and becomes more refined over time. Also, although the experience was not universal, most participants spoke with deep appreciation about individuals who have helped

them along their life calling journey. Whether it was a parent, career counsellor, educator, or friend, the support of others appears to be crucial in the development of life calling. Additionally, exposure to a particular area of interest (particularly during the formative years) seems to be an important factor in facilitating the discovery of a life calling.

These findings are strikingly reminiscent of some of the specific learning experiences identified by Lent, Brown, and Hackett's (1994) social cognitive career theory. This raises intriguing questions about the links between life calling and self-efficacy that need to be addressed in future research. Perhaps life calling is the language that some individuals use to describe their sense of agency for a particular area of life. Alternatively, it is possible that having a strong life calling increases one's sense of efficacy for that area of life.

Although a number of different social supports were identified, most participants singled out the way their mothers had supported them throughout their lives and life callings. In combination with previous research demonstrating the important role that parents, especially mothers, have on career development during the formative years (e.g., Dick & Rallis, 1991; Domene, Shapka, & Keating, 2006; Otto, 2000; Paa & McWhirter, 2000), this finding suggests that mothers who have healthy and supportive relationships with their daughters and who approach career exploration from a calling perspective may play a crucial role in facilitating the successful discovery and pursuit of their life callings in university.

Overall, these women's experiences reveal that there are many different aspects and experiences that can contribute to the development of a strong sense of life calling in university students, including the supportive role of others, exposure to life calling areas, and pursuing one's calling by looking into the past and toward the future. These findings also raise several intriguing directions for future research: What are the links between life calling and self-efficacy? Why do mothers appear to be so important in the development of life calling in female university students? Do mothers also play the same role in the development of life calling for young men?

Shared Personal Attributes

Many participants took the initiative to research their life calling area and involved themselves in many different experiences within their callings through volunteering, summer jobs, and recreational activities. They persisted despite experiencing substantial challenges and obstacles, thus revealing the presence of resiliency in their calling. The tenacious, investigative, and determined nature of all the participants raises questions about whether life calling may emerge most strongly in individuals with personality types similar to the participants in this study.

At minimum, this study suggests that being tenacious, proactive, and resilient is strongly linked with the ability to identify and maintain pursuit of one's calling. Participants were actively involved in the formation of their life callings, rather than experiencing it as something that happened to them. Some enrolled

themselves in relevant classes, others volunteered in their life calling areas, and others researched their areas to identify what tasks were required to continue their pursuit. Although it is possible that some people's callings may emerge suddenly or with minimal effort, everyone in this study made substantial efforts to pursue their life calling over a considerable amount of time. Consistent with Duffy and Sedlacek's (2007) findings about the relationship between sense of calling and self-clarity, participants also reported attaining an increased sense of identity after experiencing success in their life calling areas. Indeed, for the participants in this study, identity was intertwined with their sense of calling.

In summary, this study expanded the existing knowledge base of life calling through a thematic qualitative analysis of interviews with 7 undergraduate women attending a Christian university. The nature of life calling and how it can emerge at this developmental stage was delineated. There were also several common attributes that all the participants seemed to share that appear to be associated with the strong sense of calling they experienced. Given the intriguing patterns of findings that emerged, it is anticipated that additional, larger-scale research on this topic will yield additional results to inform career counselling practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING

Although the participants in the present study did not report receiving guidance from the campus career centre, the findings in this study provide many potential implications for career counsellors and educators in terms of integrating a life calling perspective into their practice. These implications must be understood in terms of the preliminary and exploratory nature of this study, but are nonetheless worthwhile to consider.

In their study of the links between life calling and career decision, Duffy and Sedlacek (2007) encouraged counsellors to be open to incorporating a calling perspective into their work, if the construct is meaningful for clients. Preliminary research has begun to explore the potential benefits of implementing calling-based career development workshops with university undergraduate students. Dik and Steger (2006) examined the effects of including a life calling perspective in university-based career development workshops. Among their findings was an indication that the beneficial effects of self-disclosure by the workshop facilitators were greater for people in the calling-infused workshop than for those in a standard career-development workshop. Other findings within the study suggested that the calling-based workshop, if implemented by facilitators who accept the idea of calling, may be beneficial for students' well-being, at least for participants who were already in a place of searching for meaning. Together, Dik and Steger's research and Duffy and Sedlacek's study suggest that incorporating a life calling perspective, whether systematically through career development workshops or through informal provision of support, may be useful in promoting the career development of university students, particularly those who are searching for a meaningful occupation.

Educating parents, teachers, residence directors and assistants, and other sources of informal support around the contemporary meaning of life calling and its potential use in organizing the lives and values of university students is expected to bring clarity to the concepts at hand. It is hoped that doing so in a counselling setting would result in a broader awareness of the applications of life calling that transcend traditional religious occupations. Doing so may encourage a greater number of individuals to begin examining their life and future from a calling perspective, which the participants universally endorsed as beneficial.

In particular, mothers were found to have a crucial role in facilitating their young adult daughters' life callings in this study. Thus, it may be beneficial for parents who are open to a life calling perspective to be (a) encouraged and reminded of how much of a positive and supportive effect they can have on their children at a young age, and (b) informed about the potential benefits of facilitating the development of a strong sense of life calling in their children. Doing so may allow parents to be recruited as effective partners in the career counselling process, a strategy that has been encouraged elsewhere in the vocational psychology literature (e.g., Domene et al., 2006; Hall, 2003; Middleton & Loughhead, 1993; Palmer & Cochran, 1988).

Additionally, because all 7 participants expressed the desire to share their journey of life calling with others, university guidance services may find it useful to recruit young adults with a strong sense of life calling to assist in implementing calling-based career interventions. These assistants could work with their peers through providing examples, modelling, and feedback within a workshop or individual setting. This strategy may benefit both the assistants and the students who are seeking career guidance. Additionally, support groups could also be formed for those individuals with a strong sense of life calling in order to share and assist one another in dealing with the burdens that come with having a calling.

In terms of individual interventions, counsellors may also find it useful to emphasize the process-oriented nature of life calling development and to educate young adult clients that pursuing one's calling may include identifying one's interests, volunteering, exposing oneself to unknown topic areas, enrolling in post-secondary education, and job shadowing. Also, because every participant spoke about the altruistic focus of her life calling, it may be beneficial for career counsellors to suggest to clients that combining what is deeply personal and socially purposeful may allow them to develop a stronger sense of their own calling and to find a career that will be meaningful to them (in terms of congruence with their values, worldview, and identity).

Clearly, the empirical evidence for life calling-based career guidance activities in university student populations is limited at the present time. However, as additional future research is conducted in this area, the knowledge base of what life calling means in young adulthood, the potential benefits of promoting a life calling perspective in career guidance, and the most effective ways of doing so will become more evident. However, in generating ideas for future research and practice from this study, some limitations must be taken into account.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

With only 7 students in the sample, and the emergence of numerous experiences that were unique to one participant, it appears that saturation was not achieved. Consequently, these findings represent only some of the ways that life calling may develop and be experienced by women in university; this is not an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. Future research conducted with larger groups of young women and of varying backgrounds would expand the understanding of the phenomenon of life calling among this population.

The focus of this study was on the experience of life calling in young women, which may limit the transferability of the findings to male university students. Also, all participants described themselves as both Christian and Caucasian. Although the findings were consistent with a range of theories that are not specifically religious, students with worldviews that are grounded in nonreligious or other faith traditions may have substantially different experiences of life calling. It is also unknown if young women of other racial/ethnic backgrounds would experience life calling in a similar or different manner. Future research on life calling needs to include participants of different worldviews, faith traditions, and racial/ethnic backgrounds to understand the phenomenon more fully.

Additionally, this research was not designed to identify causal or even directional connections between a sense of life calling and the various important influences and contextual experiences that emerged (e.g., the role of mothers and other social supports, being exposed to the life calling area prior to developing a firm sense of one's calling, and the various personal attributes that were identified). Follow-up research using quantitative designs are required to determine whether the attributes and influences that participants described as important are truly causal factors in the development of a strong sense of life calling.

Despite these limitations and the need for further research on the meaning, development, and function of life calling in young adulthood, this study has confirmed that it is possible for young women in university to have a strong sense of calling. This life calling is intertwined with their values and how they define themselves. It appears to be an organizing principle for their lives, in the sense that their educational choices, future goals, and even recreational activities are informed by the paths that they believe they are called to pursue.

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