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Making the Call: Vocation as a Mechanism for Good Work

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Abstract

This study examines the career aspirations of young people facing initial job decisions. I explore the concept of vocation, and contrast it to the theologically-tinged concept of calling. Through interviews with 10 high-achieving young people, I examine the factors that shape career aspirations, and show how a sense of vocation may clarify these aspirations and contribute to ethical work. I develop the hypothesis that a sense of vocation – seen as an aspect of identity – creates engagement in work, contributes to the development of excellence, and encourages commitment to ethical behavior.

Within the Good Work project, the ability to develop calling and commit to a particular mission has been identified as a key factor associated with Good Work (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon, 2001, p. 3). There is a concern that education systems that emphasize absorbing testable material may preclude the formation of this kind of individual sense of purpose, and to counteract this parents have been encouraged to focus on instilling purpose in their children (Damon, 2008; Weissbourd, 2009). To better understand the interplay of the demands of competition and purpose, I chose to examine the experience of high-achieving young people as they make their initial job choices. I focussed my study on the idea of having a vocation, to explore whether this concept could be meaningful for this group.

This study is informed by a body of research that has established the beneficial effects of having a sense of purpose in work. Within psychology literature, such studies predominantly use the label ‘calling’. I start, therefore, with a summary of calling research, before coming to a conclusion concerning the limitations of this label.

Making work meaningful: the benefits of having a calling

Research into the effects of perceiving work as a calling has established that this attitude is beneficial to an individual, in that it endows life with meaning. After surveying a vast array of studies, Dik and Duffy conclude that a sense of meaning in work and life “promotes...psychological health and well-being” (2009, p. 425). A correlation between a sense of calling and viewing life as meaningful has been found in studies with populations as varied as medical students (Duffy, Manuel, Borges and Bott, 2011), zookeepers (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009), and college students (Duffy and Sedlacek, 2007, 2010). Surveys have found strong evidence that individuals *want* their

work to be meaningful, and helpful to others (Coats, 2009, p. 31). Given the variation as to whether individuals feel a sense of calling, a key question is what allows the transition from the *desire* to find work meaningful, to actually finding it meaningful and perceiving work as one's calling.

Blustein et al (2011) argued that the concept of a vocation is not relevant to people who are limited in their occupational choices, but research indicates that a sense of calling does not rest on external factors that are determined. In a longitudinal study of musicians, Dobrow (2007) found that ability did not correlate with higher levels of calling and Wrzesniewski et al (1997) found similar levels of sense of calling among 200 respondents in a range of occupations and income levels. Nevertheless, there appear to be external and internal factors in having a calling that are malleable, including higher level of education (Davidson and Caddell, 1994), level of information about careers (Hall & Chandler, 2005) and reflection on career choices (Andreas, 2011b).

Calling and vocation: two concepts

Given that having a calling is not restricted to certain fields, and that there is wide evidence of its beneficial effects, there is reason to seek how the concept could be more widely used. A starting point would be to better understand what a calling entails. In empirical work, the term is rarely fully conceptualized (e.g. Davidson and Caddell, 1994; Wrzesniewski et al, 1997). In an effort to ascertain the content of the concept, Hunter, Dik and Banning (2010) surveyed 435 college students' perceptions of what it means to have a "calling" and identified three areas of connotation: guiding force, meaning and well-being, and altruism. This range of elements is also seen in the three "types of calling" identified by Andreas's (2011a) cluster analysis of responses from 407 German

undergraduate students: “negative career self-centered”, “pro-social religious”, and “positive varied work orientation”. In an effort to produce a single definition, Dik and Duffy (2009) surveyed a large range of studies that used the concept and produced this synthesis:

A calling is a transcendent summons, experienced as originating beyond the self, to approach a particular life role in a way that is oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose and meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values as primary sources of motivation. (p. 427)

In this same article they also produce a definition of the concept of vocation. They conclude that the only difference between the concepts is the first line of the definition – the external source (p. 428). Part of the purpose of this study is to explore the implications of this difference. There have been studies that have tried to ascertain whether the notion of a calling is pertinent for young people. Hunter, Dik and Banning (2010) found that a calling was viewed as a helpful concept in the career decision-making process for 68% of respondents. Only 3.4% of their respondents, however, identified as atheist or agnostic, and all of the relevant qualitative studies they cite interviewed Christians. Yet Andreas (2011a) found that a sense of calling derives more from self-exploration than external summons, implying that the concept could play a part for atheists. Although the two terms are conceptually and etymologically close (‘vocare’ = to call), vocation places less emphasis on the notion of an external source, and so may be preferable for use in a secular society.

Let me take a moment to make a distinction. The term vocation has two sets of connotations. The first sense is that which has been used thus far, and is denoted by vocation in “the elevated sense of a life’s calling” (Cochran, 1990, p. 2). The other is that

which lends to terms such as ‘vocational psychology’, and is closer in denotation to ‘occupation’. A suitably secular definition of vocation that draws somewhat on both of these sets of connotations is “work that a person perceives as his purpose in life” (Hall & Chandler, 2005, p. 160). I consider this to be the best definition of the term, and indeed the combined spiritual and occupational meanings are what give the concept useful resonance. This discussion highlights, however, that the concept may not resonate equally with all groups. An aim of this paper is to assess the relevance of the term in non-religious contexts. First, I turn to the reason that this effort is worthwhile: how the concept may play a role in Good Work.

How does a vocation encourage Good Work?

As described by Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon (2001), Good Work entails work that is Excellent, Engaged, and Ethical (The 3 E’s). “Interests” play an important role in motivating certain kinds of work behavior (Savickas 1999). My underlying hypothesis is that particularly strong interests – conceived of as a vocation – create engagement in work, contribute to the development of excellence, and encourage commitment to ethical behavior. The mechanisms for the first two of these are quite straightforward: repeated studies have shown that perceiving work as a vocation is related to a number of positive work outcomes (Wrzesniewski et al, 1997; Duffy, Manuel, Borges and Bott, 2011) and in particular “career commitment” (Duffy, Dik and Steger, 2010), which would be expected to lead to engagement and excellence.

The question of how a vocation can encourage ethical work is more complex. The “other-orientated” element to the concept offers a partial explanation for a connection

between vocation and ethical career choices¹. I would like to argue, however, that the connection runs deeper. Fischman, Solomon, Greenspan and Gardner (2004) describe six factors as “the route to Good Work”. Among these are “long-standing beliefs and value system” (p. 169), and a vocation may support such systems. Recent lines of work connecting career choice to identity formation (e.g. Hartung and Subich, 2011; Stringer, Kerpelman and Skorikov, 2011) offer ways to examine this supposition. Holland’s (1973) view that that “the choice of vocation is an expression of personality” (p. 6) has been developed in more recent work that uses a constructivist approach to complicate the notion of “choice” (Young and Valach, 2004). Their view that individuals retroactively make meaning – or create projects – from separate, goal-directed actions (Young and Valach, 2004, p. 502) prompts the hypothesis that the meaning and projects will be more coherent if these actions have been shaped prospectively by a sense of vocation. A stronger attachment to career choices may discourage compromising oneself (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon, 2001) and encourage stronger commitment to ones “role” (Gardner 2011). It is worth noting that this view is supported by the constructivist line in contemporary ethics, that an individual’s identity is constituted by and is the source of her rational actions (Korsgaard, 1996; 2009). As part of a person’s identity, a vocation serves as a source of constant motivation for other-oriented action, creating a commitment to Good Work.

This study

¹ To avoid being overly prescriptive, ethical behavior in work denotes not a particular choice of occupation, or specific choices in work, but a commitment to place the requirements of one’s role before personal interests (c.f. Gardner, 2011). This includes but may not be limited to a commitment to other-oriented work.

This study is motivated by a concern that, in competitive environments, individuals have little time to develop a sense a purpose for their work. Much energy is committed to winning the race to top schools and universities, but, as is now being observed, for many it is a ‘race to nowhere’: Vicki Abeles’ 2010 documentary *Race to Nowhere* argues that secondary school students are driven too hard to achieve results and compete for college places have no time to develop as whole individuals with their own goals and purposes. If understood correctly, vocation carries within it the idea of work that is meaningful, purposeful, and ethical. It can serve as a frame to place at the end of the race, to represent the idea that every individual should be working towards a role, or position, or goal that has meaning for them. I investigate how the understanding of vocation – rather than looking at general abstract ideas about career aspirations – on the grounds that particular words and ideas can sometimes reframe existing issues (Lakoff, 2004). The idea of vocation can serve as a useful tool in encouraging young people towards Good Work – but only if it is perceived as a pertinent concept.

The aim of the study is thus to assess how young people from a secular society view the concept of vocation, and to what extent it maps onto their work values (i.e. anything an individual might value in her job, including satisfaction, salary, social contribution etc.). To pursue this inquiry, I addressed a number of sub-questions:

1. What are high achievers’ priorities for their careers? Do work values correlate with the 3 Es of Good Work?
2. How do these values form?
3. Do young people expect to find a vocation? How does the presence of a vocation affect their work aspirations?

Method

Participants

Ten Harvard-based graduate students, aged between 20 and 26, were interviewed. 7 of the interviewees had been recipients of selective scholarships to attend Harvard. All interviewees had attended university in Britain.

There are certain constants amongst the group:

- i. All interviewees had been through the same education system, and process of selecting academic subjects of study
- ii. As their entry to Harvard demonstrates a certain level of self-advocacy and ambition, the interviewees could all be expected to have given some consideration to their work values
- iii. All interviewees are in a position to exercise choice in their initial career decisions

Appendix A gives a summary of the participants in terms of their background and demographic composition (names have been changed). While there is considerable homogeneity in the group, all interviewees differ in some way from each other, and thus offer a range of ways in which individual traits interplay with the concept in question.

Procedure

A survey was first distributed to a list of 20 British students studying at Harvard, with a view of securing sample of both those who did, and did not, feel they had a vocation (results in Appendix B). The survey sought basic responses on the concept of

vocation, including whether respondents felt they had a vocation, according to the definition of Dik and Duffy (2009). There were only 11 responses to the survey. I determined that all interviewees should be within one or two years of entering the general job market, and therefore PhD students were not selected. Three additional interviewees were therefore canvassed who had not responded to the survey.

All interviews took place in October and November 2011. Interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone, and handwritten notes were taken during and immediately after the sessions. The interview protocol is included in Appendix C. Interviews lasted around half an hour, and interviewees generally spoke at length in response to single questions. Where answers diverged from the protocol, clarifying questions were added. There was much variation in levels of hesitancy. All had a lot to say, but few had much clarity; to different degrees, most had a number of conflicting aspirations for their careers. In my analysis, I have focussed on these conflicts as well as on their firm views.

The interview notes were scanned for overlapping themes and contrasts, and an initial set of codes was drawn up. All interviews were then transcribed, and sections were marked with codes. Codes were added to the set and interviews were recoded. The final list of codes is in Appendix D. Summary tables were drawn up of basic distributions of responses (Appendix D).

Results

Survey results

There were two key findings from the limited responses to the survey (detailed in Appendix B). Firstly, there was no consensus as to whether everyone may have a vocation; and secondly, there was general agreement that a vocation makes a person

happier in his career. These findings underline the importance of understanding what it means to have a vocation.

Summary of findings from interviews:

1. All respondents wanted their work to be an end in itself (engaging), rather than a means (provide financial support), but around half expected they would have to make a “trade-off” to ensure the latter. Descriptions of work considered worthy of pride largely correlated with the 3 Es of Good Work.
2. Specific vocations were most influenced by particular work experiences or parental careers, while more general work-related values were shaped by university peers, and parents.
3. There was skepticism towards the notion of having a vocation, but those who had a sense of vocation were more settled, and also more willing to express their commitment to society without deferring to irony.

Additionally:

Interviewees were conscious that work could constitute their identity both in terms of what it represented to others, and through formative experience as a worker.

In detailing the findings, I will point up the commonalities in how the interviewees viewed work, as well as the ways in which in some cases having a sense of vocation strengthened commitment to work values.

The concept of vocation

With regards my third question, interviewees did not all share a common understanding of the term 'vocation'. Three readily identified it with a calling. A typical answer was as follows:

I'd take it to mean, er, do I think I have some kind of calling, er, that's probably quite a common way to put it...some kind of something in life to be accomplished by me, that I am suited for, or I am destined for... [Anthony]

The idea of being "destined for" something was viewed with skepticism, and occasional disdain. Half actively asserted that they did not think there was such a thing as a vocation, in the sense of a calling:

I think there isn't such thing as a vocation that we discover, I think it's a bit of a construct [Nina]

I mean, it might be useful for all sorts of reasons to think that you have a vocation, but I don't think it necessarily corresponds to anything in reality.

Obviously if you're of a religious inclination, it takes on a more meaningful thing because then it's not so absurd to think that you're destined for something [Anthony]

There was, however, clear understanding of the concept of vocation separate from a destined role. Three interviewees did not speak of a calling, but described a vocation as work that was in some way meaningful or was directed towards a particular purpose. Two described it in terms of religious connotations, but were not that familiar with the term. One held an idiosyncratic view that vocations are personal interests rather than professional ones. One interviewee did not feel the word carried connotations of meaningfulness and described a vocation more as a domain or area of work. He referred to the 1930s where, "I think vocation would have been thought of as synonymous with

career”, reflecting the ‘occupation’ sense of the term. Other interviewees’ understanding of the concept were inflected by this alternative meaning, probably reflecting the fact that, even more so in the UK, “vocational” is used in contrast to “academic” training and qualifications.

Beyond these differences in primary understanding, for all interviewees the concept had a constellation of associations. These included the view that a vocation held a sense of purpose; that it gave a person meaning; that it was a desire for altruistic work; and that it was specific to a person. Most interviewees were firm on this last point. For example Alex had the view that, “not everybody has a vocation but many people do”, while Cara said, “any job can be a vocation, if you think of a plumber, or teacher, or doctor, but I don't think any job can be a vocation for that [i.e. a particular] person”. The most prevalent view was that a vocation was work that was done for more than money, as expressed in the following:

I think a vocation is as opposed to being a means to an end it really aligns with what you actually want to do. You're not doing it to get something out of the other end, you're doing it because you really enjoy it, because it genuinely interests you, and because you genuinely want to change things within that field or use it to change things [Miles]

It's more than just a nine to five job to you, it means something [Cara]

These examples highlight the interviewees’ recurring emphasis that a vocation entails *meaningful* work. For many, it also had specific connotations of being something “worthy” or “altruistic”. Throughout interviews, contrasts with banking were very common. All but one interviewee made reference to some kind of

corporate work as negative examples to contrast with the kind of work they would most want.

Within individual descriptions there was co-occurrence of the view that a vocation is something one chooses, or something one is endowed with. Nina contrasted the “compulsion” of artists with those who “set up NGOs or pioneer a cause”:

It's not quite the same as having a vocation that's sort of predetermined – that you discover – but it's similar in the sense that it gives your life a sort of meaning that lots of people don't find in their jobs that they see as a means to an end

Here a “compulsion” is viewed as being more self-created, as opposed to a calling that is endowed from an outside source. (This distinction is explored in the discussion). A further recurring notion was that a vocation faces two ways – that it is both an organizing idea for an individual and a symbol for others. Julia described vocation as “a sense of purpose in your professional life”, and also as “some part of your identity...that leaps out, like [a] professional role”. Later, I’ll illustrate how this relationship between work and identity could be a cause of anxiety, but ultimately provides the strength of the idea of a vocation.

To summarize, a key connotation of a vocation was that it described work that was an end in itself, rather than a means. All interviewees who voiced skepticism about the concept as a metaphysical construct nevertheless said that it is a useful one, or could be for those who ‘believed’ in it.

Work values

All interviewees, regardless of whether they identified as already having a sense of vocation, hoped that their future work would be meaningful rather than simply a means to earn money. More than one interviewee distinguished between two approaches to work, as in this comment:

I think perhaps people live two different lives, either you work so that you can live the rest of your life, or you work, or have a job, career that is your life, to some extent. And certainly at this point, I feel like I don't want to settle for just working because I have to so I can live another life [Jack]

This quote expresses the hope that a person's work would be something he readily endorses.

Interviewees mostly gave similar responses when questioned about what they would be proud of in a job. Factors most commonly mentioned were: interesting, intellectually stimulating, and a mean to have "an effect". With regard to the 3 Es of Good Work, interviewees placed most emphasis on Engagement, but showed consistent concern for Excellence and Ethics too. With regard to Excellence, intellectual challenge was valued, and a number spoke of wanting "to be expert at something". Valuing of Ethics was generally expressed as a desire for work to be effective in a positive way. A sense of ethical responsibility was occasionally expressed flippantly: one interviewee, after listing various other criteria, said that it would have to be "...ultimately at least not morally reprehensible".

Although the half who had less of a sense of vocation did not have concrete work values, their aspirations nevertheless mapped onto the core features of what it would be to have a vocation: that is, they wanted their work to be meaningful, and most believed it should have an element of altruism ('other-oriented').

Sources of vocation

Looking at how career aspirations emerge sheds some light on what it means to have a vocation. It became clear that work values were shaped by long-term influences. Prominent amongst these background features was parental influence. Seven interviewees spontaneously mentioned a parent in relation to a goal, interest or value they held, and four of these were upfront about the extent to which their parents' careers had shaped their own ideals.

Relative to the influence of parents, reference to peers was less common, but still significant. Four interviewees referred to the particular atmosphere of their undergraduate institution (in all cases, an Oxford college) as having influenced their career goals; in all cases, this influence steered them away from corporate work. Three found this influence formative, but for one it was a source of internal conflict; he expressed some discomfort that "there is a kind of [pause] latent kind of underlying pressure of you don't want to look like a sell-out". The cumulative effect of diverging environments appeared to produce conflicting work values. Overall, with regards to question (3) there was no single experience that created a sense of vocation; rather, one formed when several background experiences were aligned.

In relation to research indicating the malleable external factors that influence vocation (page 4), all those in the half who had less sense of vocation voiced concern about lacking knowledge of career options. A number made observations along the lines that "there's a very narrow range of options [in the] view from university" [Anthony]. He described the benefit of experiencing the working world as meeting people who are "doing something that just hasn't occurred to you as a possible career".

For over half the interviewees, like Anthony, some form of work experience had had a big impact on their career goals. Repeatedly a certain experience – combined with the influence of undergraduate peers – had turned interviewees away from “traditional” (corporate) professions, and two had actively turned down high-paying jobs. Adam said that, after experiencing a different type of work, “no pay package” could have got to him to work in banking, whereas “knowing every morning that I get up, I do something good, or at least try and achieve something good, is a bit more of a motivational force”. Adam was typical of those with some sense of vocation in that several experiences had aligned to create a sense of purpose, which had ultimately become explicit for him. Here we see a vocation as the motivation a person chooses to follow.

Difficulties in following a vocation

Even those who were less clear as to their career goals firmly wanted their work to be an end in itself, rather than a means. This finding formed part of an answer to question (1): money was not a priority for this group, regardless of whether they had a sense of vocation. The variation in their clarity of career goals did, however, impact the extent to which interviewees felt committed to their ideals. When asked whether they expected the things they currently felt were important (which I designate as work values) to remain so, almost all were confident that they would. Nevertheless, all but one mentioned the possibility of future change with the coming of children and many seemed keen to appear realistic about the probability of changing priorities:

...in ten, fifteen years, if I've got a family and kids and a house and a mortgage, and blah blah blah, then I imagine salary's going to figure quite a

lot more highly, and then you might have to trade that off against, you know,
your ideals about what you do, or who you work for or whatever... [Anthony]

Future commitment to a family was viewed as a major challenge to the ideal of doing fulfilling work. Some took the view that this challenge would come sooner rather than later:

...when I get out there, and I really do have to support myself completely
then I think money will be a bigger issue, and that's where I may have to take
a route into business as opposed to just charity or philanthropy [Miles]

It is notable, however, that at least two had already turned down high-paying jobs, and they were clear as to why:

I gave up a law job, which would have offered me material security, and
probably very good employment prospects, ...one of the reasons I did this was
because I thought maybe it's a little too early to be making that trade off if
you like, saying okay I'm going to give up vocational ideas and I'm going to
go straight for the security. [Ned]

The conflict about salary was enlightened by responses to a question about responsibility. Interviewees were divided about to whom they felt responsible. The majority described their main sense of responsibility to themselves; this sentiment was couched either in terms of an assertion of independence, or as a counter to trying to please others. Over half described a responsibility to parents, though there was a marked split as to how this was viewed. Five interviewees spoke of wanting to be able to care for their parents should they need it, and for four this comment conveyed a sense of 'paying them back' for investment in education. These responses were typically made in a tongue-in-cheek way, or with hesitancy about appearing over-chivalrous:

My mum did put a lot of effort into my education, so I do feel responsible for looking after her and my sister as well, I mean they can look after themselves but... [Miles]

In contrast to this view, two spoke of feeling responsibility to live up to their parents' aspirations:

I guess underlying that is a sense of um, pleasing my parents I guess, and validating myself in their eyes, and the things they value [Nina]

In some cases these aspirations had clearly been internalized, and fed into a particular vocation. For others, this responsibility was a further source of confusion.

Only three responded to the question by describing responsibility to society, though many had raised social commitment spontaneously prior to the question. Those interviewees who had no concrete sense of vocation spoke of this commitment, however, in wry tones, or with much qualification. One, for example, after haltingly describing how he would like to be "making the world a better place", said, "but that makes me sound like some kind of loony hippy." Those who had a more concrete sense of vocation were able to speak sincerely of wanting to be effective:

I do think we have some kind of responsibility to help society and help community, to serve it in some way [Miles]

I suppose the things that are important would be ... the deep - the sense you're building towards something, you're contributing [Julia]

While these interviewees felt confident in describing how their future work would contribute, others felt they still had a more general responsibility: to make a good career choice.

The burden of choice

A key difference that emerged in relation to a sense of vocation was in the levels of anxiety expressed during the course of the interview. Consistent with previous research, those who felt a strong sense of vocation (Julia; Miles) most readily expressed their aspirations. Notably, those who had the least clear sense of vocation described feeling the need for a “trade-off” as imminent, not as something for the future. They felt great conflict about the fact that a line of work could not fulfil all ones hopes:

We all want everything... we want to save the world, and...meet interesting people at the same time. I don't think that's very realistic. So that's one aspect of it. That's the trade off. [Nina]

The hardest thing I suppose – it's not quite answering your question – is to let go of the kind of 'have your cake and eat it' mentality, to be able to do one of those [pause] positive impact, worthy, purposeful jobs, and at the same time live the glamorous lifestyle, you know, cocktail bars, receptions, whatever the glitz and glamour of the private sector seems to be. [Jack]

Others showed more general anxiety about the difficulty of finding work that would be fulfilling.

The phrase I use is um, ambitious without ambition. ... I think that's a sort of angst that lots of people our age have. Particularly...in a world in which these positions about vocation just aren't set in stone any more. I mean we don't set off on a career ladder which we don't choose and head in one direction.

[Adam]

That's the hard thing, is like, putting it into - translating that kind of intention into something concrete [Sam]

The singularity of the times was a common theme. All shared the view that careers are now less fixed.

Nowadays, it's very easy to change jobs and people do, much more than they did in the past [Ned]

The model is changing - a career now is no longer a job for life, it's more a set of positions, united by a common thread [Anthony]

Most interviewees spoke about the implications of this change. They felt that there was more possibility for choice, but that this opportunity came with new challenges, including the difficulty of finding out about what kinds of jobs existed. Although they saw a career as more fluid, most felt that a first job was important in establishing the kind of path one could create. They saw this in terms of practical factors, and also in terms of how initial jobs shaped future personal development.

Creating a self through work

The majority of interviews showed awareness that career choices have implications for a person's identity. Apart from one interviewee who held that profession and identity are now less linked, because careers are more in flux, most expressed the sense that a self-created career would be more of a reflection of self. A number were conscious that a person is often perceived in terms of his work:

I would want a career [rather than a job], something that kind of, you know, defined me [Alex]

It's difficult to imagine not being at least a little bit defined by what you do.

[Jack]

I was worried that if I took this law job, I would be 'a lawyer' to everyone else, and I really didn't like that [Ned]

I'd want [a job that I was proud of] to reflect things about me [Cara]

About half the interviewees were conscious of this situation, but one, Alex, observed that this attitude was limited to certain social strata. He noted that for people from his hometown, 'what do you do?' would never be an introductory question. He also felt, however, that a person's "trade" could be "a really intrinsic part of their identity".

Some drew a relationship between job and identity in terms of status. In general, interviewees with clearer goals were less likely to describe pride-worthy jobs with reference to status. Miles, who seemed to have the strongest sense of vocation, made no mention at all of his sense of self in relation to work aspirations. Of the rest, even those who valued status felt that they could only be proud of their job if it were something *they* felt was important. Some acknowledged, however, that their values were open to change, and observed that doing a particular job affects a person's developing sense of self. This observation points to a different aspect of the relationship between career decisions and identity. Some of the comments on this topic offer potential insight into the importance of early commitment to Good Work:

...in the process of choosing a job, you affect what sort of person you'll be in twenty years because that job and the environment it comes with and the people it comes with and the experiences it will provide will affect your belief system, and your normative system and your value system [Nina]

...this is an old canard I picked up a little while ago, when it was fashionable amongst my friends to say, 'Oh just go into banking for five years, make shit loads of money, and then do what you really love', and I think I realized quite

early on that that's not really possible because when you do things for a sustained period of time and work with a group of people for a sustained period of time that becomes part of who you are, whether you like it or not...

[Anthony]

And finally:

...that's why I probably can't see myself doing anything else, because I think so many jobs actually force you to be irresponsible and force you to do things that, or to normalize things that are actually deeply irresponsible - ways of believing, being, acting. [pause] And blind you to how irresponsible they are

[Julia]

In short, I found considerable sentiment that initial choices about jobs and careers can have lasting effects.

Discussion

The differences in attitude associated with whether or not interviewees had a sense of vocation have important implications. The finding that a sense of vocation, even in the loose form of interests, made some unwilling to take a job solely on the basis of salary is suggestive in relation to the research base showing that meaningful work is better for psychological health than is high-paid work (see page 3). Furthermore, the fact that those with a sense of vocation were more willing to express their commitment to "other-orientated" work without deferring to irony implies that making one's aspirations of service concrete is an important step to seeing them through.

An aspiration to make a social contribution can result in conflict if it does not itself attenuate a desire for highly remunerative, or high-status work. This conflict is heightened by the feeling that work is an expression of identity: individuals want a job that is viewed in a certain way by others, as well as one which aligns with the values they have already internalized. A sense of vocation can help to ease this conflict. For some interviewees, a vocation encapsulated the things that were most important to them in a job. Making an active choice helped them care less about those things that are excluded.

At the most basic level, interviewees described a vocation as work that was an end in itself. This is important, because previous research suggests that compromised work is more likely when work is seen as a means rather than an end in itself. Furthermore, the finding that work and identity are tightly linked suggests the mechanism for how people become Good Workers. The interviewees wanted careers that would be expressions of their identity. Viewing work as an extension of self helps to align the missions of work domains with the wider concerns of the individual, rather than with more narrow motives.

A finding not highlighted in previous research is the extent to which individuals were conscious that their work would be a *formative* aspect of their identity. They expected their career to shape who they would become. In line with this prediction, there was evident interrelationship between background experience and work aspirations: there was often a clear link between interviewees' expressed views and their family, work and educational backgrounds. The undergraduate experience appeared to have had a big impact on most individuals. All of the participants were influenced by their learning in their subject area, but around half also talked specifically about how their peers fostered expectations about certain types of work. It is also notable that almost all interviewees

described wanting their work to be intellectually challenging; even the aspiring doctors described their work in terms of the art of using medical knowledge effectively. These findings have significant implications for education: work values *can* be ingrained prior to entering work

Two further findings highlight why it is important that good values are established early. These findings are first, the view that a spell in any job altered a person's work values, and second, that some interviewees *were* open to the prospect of 'temporarily' taking a high-paying but 'purposeless' job. This second stance was found on a wider scale by Fischman, Solomon, Greenspan and Gardner (2004). Many of the young people they interviewed said they might compromise their principles *just until* they 'made it' and were in a position where they would no longer need to do so (pp. 144-45). The will to reject work that compromises one's values may be fragile, but a sense of vocation appeared to reduce the view that a 'trade-off' is necessary.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the concept of vocation maps onto a key work value, that a job should be meaningful for the individual. Furthermore, as one interviewee described, a sense of vocation can offer a young person a means to a fully stable identity:

I think not only is it making me feel that there's a sort of pattern ahead, a sort of direction, purpose and something I genuinely care about and find incredibly interesting, but also it sort of shapes what's gone before as well
[Julia]

In carrying a sense of pattern and purpose, vocation is a powerful concept. The finding that interviewees were generally skeptical of the notion of a calling indicates that the distinction between a 'calling' and a 'vocation' is important. I emphasize this point not

only because the latter has secular as well as spiritual connotations, but also because, as Dik and Duffy (2009) identified, ‘vocation’ need not connote an external source. The advantage of this is clearly articulated here:

I think compulsion, feeling compulsion to do something and feeling a calling are very, are two different things. Um, yeah, so I think that fits quite neatly, a compulsion comes from within, a calling comes from outside. I don't like the idea of a calling [Adam]

The group wanted to feel that they were defining their own career goals. Even those who felt anxiety about career choices saw them as *individual decisions* to be made. A particularly undecided interviewee said, when speaking of the lures of different jobs, “I think, until you let go of that, or *make the call* as to what’s really important, you’re going to be a bit stuck”. The emphasis is mine, to capture the importance of choosing a vocation over waiting to find a calling. Though etymologically a vocation carries the idea of calling, its use as a term for non-professional work has given it a different constellation of associations, and so it does not seem to bear the same “messianic” connotations, or raise the objection of “who’s doing the calling?” Instead, the notion of finding a vocation emphasizes that each person has to make her own call, and commit herself to taking responsibility for her work.

Limitations

These interviews were carried out as conversations, and a desire to allow responses to develop meant that interviewees sometimes addressed different issues. Although there were certain questions that every interviewee was asked (namely the final

three in the protocol), there were some subjects (such as the influence of undergraduate peers) about which opinions were only voiced sporadically.

The interviewees' views are to an extent only an index of their positions as non-professional graduate students; one might expect a different picture to emerge at a Business school². While this study provides a counter to the common view that the corporate world tops the career ladder, it cannot controvert it on a wide scale. A more substantial limitation is that, although over half of the interviewees are on full scholarships at Harvard, all but one attended private secondary schools and can be assumed to come from comfortable family backgrounds. Their views are largely shaped by their backgrounds, with their own family resources probably a contributing factor to their de-prioritizing of money. Furthermore, as noted, their focus on work as an expression of self is probably limited to a fortunate section of young people. Nevertheless, given their expansive views of what entailed a career, and previous research that indicates work-meaning perception is not a factor of career level (eg. Wrzesniewski et al, 1997), there seems no necessary limit on the applicability of the concept of vocation.

² There is an interesting caveat to the view that one would expect Business students to have different views: an article entitled 'How will you measure your life?' has topped the 'most read' list for the Harvard Business Review's website since its publication in August 2010. The author, Clayton M. Christensen, places great emphasis on the importance of having 'a purpose'. (<http://hbr.org/2010/07/how-will-you-measure-your-life/ar/1>). The article also serves to highlight again the need to establish a secular understanding of what it means to have a purpose: Christensen describes how, as a devout Christian, his purpose derived from prayer. The Harvard Business School has since launched a major 'Passion and Purpose' initiative.

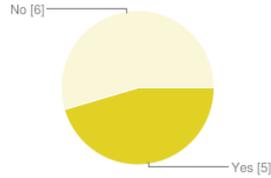
Appendix A: Participants

Name	Age (at interview)	Been in work	Schooling	Nationality	Gender
Nina	25	No	Private	Greek	Female
Miles	24	Relevant side work	Private	British-Indian	Male
Adam	24	2 years, relevant	Private	White-British	Male
Ned	23	1 year, not relevant	Private	White-British	Male
Julia	22	1 year, not relevant	Private	White-British	Female
Cara	20	No	Private	White-British	Female
Sam	23	1 year, not relevant	Private	White-British	Male
Alex	24	2 years, semi relevant	State	White-British	Male
Jack	22	No	Private	White-British	Male
Anthony	26	1 year, relevant	Private	White-British	Male

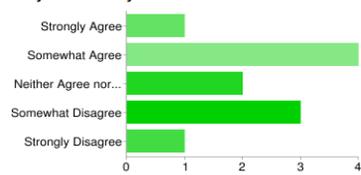
Appendix B: Survey results

Respondents were aged between 22 and 27; there were 4 PhD students, 4 Master and 3 Special students

Do you feel you have a vocation?

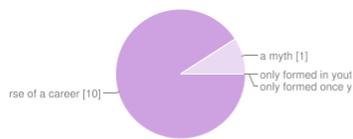


Everyone has or may find a vocation



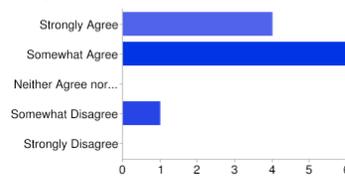
Response	Count	Percentage
Strongly Agree	1	9%
Somewhat Agree	4	36%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	2	18%
Somewhat Disagree	3	27%
Strongly Disagree	1	9%

A vocation is



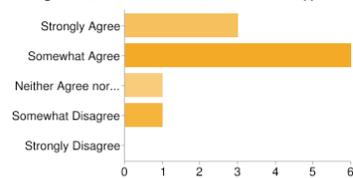
Response	Count	Percentage
only formed in youth	0	0%
only formed once you have embarked on a career	0	0%
may change over the course of a career	10	91%
a myth	1	9%

Feeling like I have a vocation would/will make initial career decisions easier



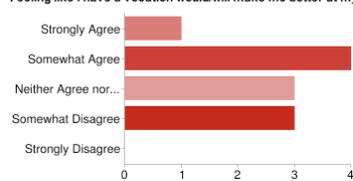
Response	Count	Percentage
Strongly Agree	4	36%
Somewhat Agree	6	55%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	0	0%
Somewhat Disagree	1	9%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%

Feeling like I have a vocation would/will make me happier in my career



Response	Count	Percentage
Strongly Agree	3	27%
Somewhat Agree	6	55%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	1	9%
Somewhat Disagree	1	9%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%

Feeling like I have a vocation would/will make me better at my future job



Response	Count	Percentage
Strongly Agree	1	9%
Somewhat Agree	4	36%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	3	27%
Somewhat Disagree	3	27%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

I'll be asking some open-ended questions, so please ask if you'd like more clarification. There are no right questions, and no hidden agenda. I'm not expecting your answers to correspond in any particular way.

1. Firstly, did you have any particular responses to the survey?

If I ask about having a vocation, what does that mean to you?

1. Do you feel you have a vocation?

YES Can you pinpoint when you first felt this?

1. Was it a clear moment of recognition?

1. Did a particular person serve as an example of the role or career you'd like to have?

1. [If not,] can you think of a person who is a role model for you in their work life?

1. Do you expect your vocation to change?

NO When you think about initial career decisions, what kind of considerations do you have?

1. Can you think of a person who is a role model for you in their work life?

1. [If yes,] for what reasons do you not view their career as a vocation for you?

Do you think there is a difference between having a job, and a career?

1.

2. How would you like to describe your work?

3.

4. What do you think about the term 'work-life'?

Imagine you are at a party in a few years time and someone asks you what you do – how important would it be to you to be proud of the answer?

1. What would make you proud of it?

What things are important to you now? Will they still be important to you as you get older?³

When you think about career decisions, do you any responsibility to anything or anyone?

³ Adapted from a question in Damon (2008), p. 186

Appendix D: Codes

VOCATION

= MEANING

= PURPOSE

= INTEREST

= NOT MEANS

(ALL ABOVE = GW/ENGAGEMENT)

= RELIGIOUS

= TECHNICAL WORK

= USEFUL CONCEPT

VOCATION/CALLING

DIFFERENT

SAME

HAVE VOCATION

YES

NO

ATTITUDE

OUR TIMES

REALISTIC

ANXIOUS

MONEY – NOT EVERYTHING

MONEY – EVIL

MONEY – IMPORTANT

BANKING (COMPARISON)

CAREER/JOB

PROGRESS

MEANS

DESIRED WORK

= IN LINE WITH VALUES

= SOCIAL CONTRIBUTION

= INTELLECTUAL

= NOT MEANS

= REMUNERATION

= INTERESTING

(THINGS THAT ARE) IMPORTANT

CHANGE

SAME

CHANGE WITH CHILDREN

(PART OF) IDENTITY

PRIDE

- IN STATUS
- IN RELATIONSHIP
- ENJOYMENT
- INTERESTING
- EXCELLENCE?

RESPONSIBLE TO

- SELF
- PARENTS – PLEASING
- PARENTS – CARE FOR
- SOCIETY
- FUTURE CHILDREN

MAKING CHOICES

- GRADUAL
- PROCEDURAL
- CHANCE
- BY NARROWING SUBJECTS
- EXPERIENCE
- PARENT INFLUENCE
- MAKING SELF

MENTOR

- VARIOUS
- PARENT
- FAMOUS PERSON
- COWORKER
- LIMIT TO INFLUENCE

Summary Table: factors contributing to sense of vocation

Name	Vocation as concept	Have vocation?	Work experience	Peers	Parents	Attitude to money	Work as identity
Nina	Meaning; purpose	A little	-	-	Influential	Attracts	Constitutive
Miles	Meaning	Yes	Influential	-	-	Not yet of importance	-
Adam	Profession	(Almost)	Influential	Influential	A little influential	Not yet of importance	Constitutive
Ned	Interests; not means	Not really	A little	Influential	Influential	Not yet of importance	Constitutive
Julia	Meaning	Yes	-	-	Influential	Uninteresting	Constitutive
Cara	Profession	A little	Quite influential	-	Influential	Of consideration	Representative
Sam	Unfamiliar; religious	No	-	Influential	Influential	Repels	Representative
Alex	Calling;	A little	Influential	-	-	Not yet of	Representative

	religious					importance	
Jack	Calling; purpose	Would like to	-	Influential	Influential	Attracts	Representative
Anthony	Calling; purpose	Direction	Influential	-	-	Not yet of importance	Constitutive

Summary table: work values

Name	Important things	Engagement (Enjoyment and interest)	Status	Social commitment	Intellectual	Means job	Feel conflict
Nina	Remain	Important	Quite important	Important	Important	-	Yes
Miles	Shift with children	Important	-	Important	Important	No	No
Adam	Remain; shift with children	Important	Quite important	Important	Important	No	A little
Ned	Shift with children	Important	A little important	-	Important	Not yet	A little
Julia	Remain; shift with children	Important	-	Important	Important	No	No
Cara	Remain; shift with children	Important	Quite important	-	-	-	A little
Sam	May change	Important	Important	Influential	Important	No	A little
Alex	Remain; shift with children	Important	Important	-	Quite important	Maybe	Not really
Jack	May change; shift with children	Important	Important	Important	Quite important	Maybe	Yes
Anthony	Will change; shift with children	Most Important	Influential	Quite important	Important	Not yet	Not really

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