Calling on Trial: Anticipated Calling Among Law School Students

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Introduction

Human beings spend a large proportion of their time working. What one does for work will end up having a huge influence throughout their life. Given that this is the case, sociologists and psychologists have conducted research on the ways in which individuals attach meaning to their work. Within this stream of research, scholars have studied the experience of work as a deeply meaningful combination of using one’s passions and talents to help others-work as a calling. This research has typically been concerned with callings as work one is currently engaged in. A noteworthy paper by Kira Schabram and Sally Maitlis studied various calling “paths” taken by animal shelter workers throughout their careers. They studied calling paths of workers in animal shelters, but only once they were in the shelter, not the paths taken to that first job in a shelter. The work I am engaged in seeks to extend this study of calling paths to before a line of work has even begun. I decided to study law school students and students preparing to be teachers. The law school half of data collection is finished and I’m currently analysing these data. I am writing a manuscript for submission to present at the 2019 Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management based on these law school data. The deadline for submission to this conference is 15 January, 2019 and I plan to meet this deadline with a manuscript on anticipated calling among law students. After all data (including the educator half) are collected and analyzed, I will be writing a paper that will be submitted for publication in the Journal of Vocational Behavior.

Methodology

With the help of a BYU law faculty member, I had recruitment emails distributed to the law school student body inviting students to complete a survey I designed. I also invited final year law students to meet with me for a qualitative research interview. The survey I created measures, among other things, the extent to which students feel a sense of calling toward law and the extent to which they have expectations of their work being meaningful and purpose filled. I received survey responses from 99 law students. These quantitative data will be analyzed once I complete the qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts I have collected.

I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 10 BYU law school students. Each of these students were in their final year of law school, giving them a rich amount of experience to draw from during the interviews. The interviews were approximately 20-30 minutes each and involved questions about how students became interested in law, started law school, and how their idea of themselves as lawyers has been refined during this process. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed word for word. After transcribing all of the interviews, I started to code the data for interesting themes, especially paying attention to how calling may manifest and be developed when it is anticipated rather than current. The method of qualitative content analysis I am using involves coding the data in one transcript at a time. When a transcript is completely coded, I then consider the themes that have emerged as a whole and consider how they relate to each other. This method will be carried out for each transcript, after which all 10 transcripts with their emergent themes and relationships will be considered together to create an
overarching group of themes and relations for the sample from which to construct theory and discover new research directions. I am still in the middle of this data analysis.

As mentioned, I will be collecting data among students preparing to be teachers. I created a survey that measures the same things as the law school survey but designed for students anticipating a career in teaching. I am in contact about my project with BYU’s Educator Preparation Program. They have agreed to send my survey to all the students at BYU whose majors are designed to prepare them to be educators. I will be following up with them at the beginning of January 2019 to survey data collection and will also begin conducting interviews with senior pre-educator students. After collecting interview and survey data from the educator population, I will analyze the results using the same methods described for the law school data.

**Results & Discussion**

As mentioned, the analysis of collected data is ongoing, and further data collection will begin in January. However, even with the incomplete collection and analysis that has been done, there are some initial results worth mentioning. The data I have collected and begun analyzing paint a picture of dynamic career anticipation in which experiences shape the work people pursue and the meaning that individuals attach to that work before starting it. Law students typically ended up in law school with a desire to pursue the law as an abstract idea, attracted to more general concepts like advocacy, public service, etc. During the course of their legal education, this abstract idea is refined and made more concrete as the student hones in on a specific role in the law instead of just being called to law as an idea. Therefore, education is an essential part of the calling path refinement that students take and its role needs to be further studied. Calling has normally been studied as a subjective personal experience, but the themes that came up time and time again among these law students suggest that other people and institutions are instrumental in guiding individuals along a calling path. Other people have played a major role in the path to law that these students have taken. Calling paths are co-created and shared with other people, more than just chosen and taken alone. Although personality and other internal factors are essential and more typically studied, external factors can’t be discounted in understanding how people pursue a calling and assign meaning to their work. Likewise, the law school itself and institutional factors also play a role in the calling path individuals take. For example, the curving and ranking system in the law school was repeatedly brought up by law students I met with, and the ranking system has even been implicated as affecting what careers a law student will pursue. Also, it seems from several interviews that qualifying for more lucrative jobs can cause students to be enticed to take different paths than they were originally on, suggesting that anticipated rewards is an essential part of finding or leaving an anticipated calling. External factors can either weaken or strengthen the sense of calling one feels to a given work while anticipating it.

**Conclusion**

I have more data to collect and analyze. However, it is clear that studying anticipated calling paths will be a fruitful avenue of research. Calling paths are co-created more than individually taken and are influenced by external, not just internal, factors. I hope to continue forward with this and related studies, learning more about the paths students take to the various careers they feel called to. Ideally, this work will provide insights for career counselors and universities as they prepare individuals to arrive at their anticipated work through healthy and enriching paths that make organizations and the work done in them more meaningful.

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