Calling, Vocational Identity, and Psychological Well-Being: A test of alternate models in international immersion learning returnees

Lynette H. Bikos, PhD, Melissa J. Gowen, M.S., & Heather Rodney, M.S.
Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, WA

The Case for Calling in the Returnee

Returnees from international immersion learning programs experience positive and negative global learning and psycho-social spiritual outcomes. With regard to vocational identity, some returnees experience strengthened career and educational goals while others report disruptions (Bikos et al., 2014). Included among the emergent (qualitative) themes from returnees whose career plans are changing are: (a) the desire for work that provides meaning and purpose, (b) the desire to contribute to the well-being of society, and (c) the sense of being summoned by an external source. These themes are consistent with Dik and Duffy’s (2009) definition of calling.

Calling is hypothesized to contribute to a variety of variables related to human flourishing (Ryff & Singer, 1998). While the positive effects have been documented (e.g., Duffy, Manuel, Borges, & Bott, 2011; Hersch & Hermann, 2012), some have suggested that calling has a dark side. For example, in multiple studies, Duffy et al. (2012 a,b) have reported less positive outcomes for employed adults who perceived a call, but were not able to live it.

Translating these findings to the context of young adult returnees, we hypothesized that students searching for a call would have stronger vocational identity and, in turn, psychological well-being if they perceived the presence of a calling. Consequently, we tested competing models of the effect of presence of calling (mediating vs. moderating) on the relations between search for calling, vocational identity, and psychological well-being among returnees from international immersion learning experiences.

Participants (N = 74)

Participants included a national sample who had participated in an international immersion learning experience in the past two years. Recruitment occurred at national Lessons from Abroad conferences and in the magazine, Re-Entry from Abroad. The Qualtrics-housed survey was attempted by 106 participants; 74 data sets met the completion criteria (i.e., no more than 24% missing for multiple imputed data). The majority of participants were female (92%) and enrolled in undergraduate programs (84%). Mean age was 22 (SD = 2.68). Average trip length was 96 days (SD = 88.84).

Constructs/Measures

Psychological Well-Being (PWB)
- Mental Health Inventory (Stewart & Ware, 1998)
  10 items, PWB subscale; items rated 1 (always) to 6 (never)
- α = .93

Search for and Presence of Calling (Search, Presence)
- Calling and Vocational Questionnaire (CVQ; Dik, Elderbridge, Slieter, & Duffy, 2012)
  24 items: Search: 12 items; Presence: 12 items; items rated ‘not true of me’ to 4 (absolutely true of me)
- Search α = .90; Presence α = .74

Vocational Identity (VocId)
- My Vocational Situation (Holland, Daiger, & Power, 1980)
  18 items, Vocational Identity subscale, items rated 0 (true) to 1 (false)
- KR 20 = .89

A serial multiple mediation model (Hayes, 2013, PROCESS Model 6) examined the degree to which presence of calling and vocational identity mediated the search for a calling on psychological well-being. Results (Figure 1, Table 1) show two significant indirect effects: search for calling on psychological well-being through presence of calling and vocational identity (β = .26, CI95 = .10 to .52), and search for calling on psychological well-being through vocational identity (β = .44, CI95 = .39 to .52). The total indirect effect (β = .54, CI95 = .38 to .68), direct effect (β = .34, CI95 = .21 to .49), and the total effect (β = .03, CI95 = -.27 to .21) were non-significant.

The specific indirect effect of search for calling, through presence of a calling, on psychological well-being was significant and positive. Search for a calling led to presence of a calling, which predicted higher vocational identity, and finally greater psychological well-being. However, when searching did not pass through presence of a calling, vocational identity was negative. This specific indirect effect was ultimately a significant negative effect on psychological well-being, with searching for a calling predicting lower psychological well-being. This result led us to question whether or not presence of calling should be conceptualized as a moderator.

The moderated mediation (Hayes, 2013, PROCESS Model 8) was examined using the piecewise approach recommended by Hayes. In the first step, results suggested a statistically significant indirect effect (β = -.2096, CI95 = -.3895 to -.0811) from search for calling to psychological well-being through vocational identity.

In the second step, we assessed for the conditional effects on the path from search for calling to vocational identity through the moderator, presence of calling. The search x presence interaction was statistically significant (β = -.0380, p = .003).

Additional exploratory steps evaluated the potential moderating effect of presence on b (VocId to PWB) and c’ (Search to PWB) paths. Based on nonsignificant results, we did not include them in the final, integrated, model.

The integrated moderation model reflected the results found in the piecewise approach that preceded it. Vocational identity mediated the relation between search for calling and psychological well-being. However, the indirect path from search to vocational identity was moderated by presence of calling. Those searching for a calling had the lowest levels of vocational identity (and, in turn, lower psychological well-being). Presence of a calling moderated the search to vocational identity relationship such that the relation between search and vocational identity was stronger when presence was high (and weakest when presence was low).