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Alex T. Crist
Baylor University

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Vocational Development of Introverted College Students

Alex T. Crist, MA
Baylor University

Abstract

While vocation is an increasingly popular research topic, research has not addressed how one's personality shapes his or her vocational development. Therefore, the purpose of the research is to explore the vocational development of introverted college students. Using a two-part qualitative study, 101 participants provided online essays and nine participants participated in face-to-face interviews to understand the influences and process of introverts seeking to discover their vocation. Results suggested various external and internal influences of vocational development, as well as the perceived relationship between vocation and introversion. Based on the results of the study, the Vocational Development Model for Introverts was created to explain the process introverted college students undergo to discern their calling. Implications for university faculty and staff members are discussed to inform and advise introverts in their vocational development.

Introduction

Resilient, committed, and reserved: Abraham Lincoln stands out as one of the most revered U.S. Presidents in history. As the “embodiment of virtue during the Culture of Character,” Lincoln spoke with quiet sincerity rather than gregarious gusto (Cain, 2012, p. 42). Lincoln was a master listener and “had always been a slow, deliberate thinker, examining an issue from all sides” (Koehn, 2013, para. 17). Lincoln was an introvert.

At some point between growing up as a boy in Indiana and reciting the Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln discovered his vocation. With purpose and duty, Lincoln would eventually emancipate slaves throughout the country as the 16th President of the United States. Like Lincoln, college students are at the critical moment between childhood and adulthood, seeking purpose and meaning in their lives. And like Lincoln, roughly half of these students are introverts (Cain, 2012).

How do introverted students begin to discover their vocation, finding purpose and meaning for their lives, as Lincoln once did? Literature often cites both internal and external influences as meaningful in students’ vocational development; however, no research exists to describe how the internally-oriented, introverted students discover their callings. Do they discern their vocation relying on their internal thoughts and emotions, or do they rely on other people and experiences to help them find purpose in the world? The current study examines how introverted college students in their final semester discern their vocational aspirations. Through electronic essay responses and face-to-face interviews, various influences on vocation emerged, establishing a model for introverted students’ vocational development.

Literature Review

Vocation

Discovering one’s calling is the “most profound motivation in human experience” (Guinness, 1998, p. 7). However, the concept of a calling, or a vocation, is often culturally ambiguous. Though the popular understanding of vocation is often synonymous with the term career, the current body of literature conceptualizes one’s vocation as more than a career (Dawson, 2005; Neafsey, 2006; Schuurman, 2004). The sense of purpose and meaning in one’s work are key components of the understanding of vocation (Hirschi, 2011). Therefore, a vocation does

not need to be an extravagant endeavor. Ordinary people doing ordinary yet meaningful things describe the essence of vocation (Garber, 2014; Veith, 2002).

Palmer (2010) described a vocational development process: “Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am” (pp. 4-5). With this idea, the key to developing a vocation lies in first discovering the source of the call, and in response, making personal meaning of it. From a secular perspective, the call originates from the true self of one’s personality and one’s conscience, while from a Christian perspective, God is the caller that enlightens the individual of his or her vocation (Neafsey, 2006).

As many individuals ponder how to make sense of this calling, understanding the contributing factors is essential. Hirschi (2002) captured the importance of the internal and external factors in the understanding of vocation:

All of the definitions seem to agree that a sense of calling entails a sense of purpose and meaning in work. However, they disagree over whether a calling stems from an external summons or can also come from within the individual as a result of intense self-reflection. (p. 5)

Certain personality dimensions may influence the process of utilizing external stimuli or internal reflection to understand one’s vocation. The current study aims to examine the impact of introversion on the process of understanding one’s vocation.

Introversion

The personality dimension of extraversion-introversion relates to one’s source of energy and orientation to the world (Kroeger & Thuesen, 1988). While extraverts are externally-oriented and gain energy from others, introverts are internally-orientated and gain energy from within (Morris, 1979). Introversion has been a longstanding area of interest in personality psychology, dating back to the early work of C. G. Jung and Hans Eysenck (Cain, 2012; Ewen, 1998).

There are several differences between introverts and extraverts. Whereas extraverts prefer having many social interactions and high levels of life satisfaction, introverts tend to be introspective and careful

decision-makers (Ewen, 1998). Henjum (1982) stated, “the introvert’s self-sufficient, hard-working attitude and introspective, analytical styles equips her/him very well for the demands on rigorous, abstract activities” (p. 41). In the abstract activity of vocational development, discovering how introverted students experience the process of understanding their vocations, as well as the influences of those vocations, is the primary goal of the current research project.

Methodology

Participants

Data collection occurred at a faith-based, liberal arts institution in the Midwest. The institution is residential and enrolls approximately 2,000 students each year. A total of 151 students enrolled in their final semester completed an online essay response as a component of a required capstone course. From the population of students who completed the essays, 101 participants (67%) self-identified as introverts and their responses were used in the study. Ages ranged from 20 to 24 years old, with an average age of 21.6. From this sample, nine individuals also participated in a semi-structured face-to-face interview with the researcher.

Procedure and Analysis

Phase I: Online essays. Participants completed an online qualitative survey as a part of the Vocation in College Project, an ongoing research initiative exploring vocational formation in the college experience (Moser & Fankhauser, 2015). Participants were presented with definitions of introversion and extraversion, and were asked to self-identify as an introvert or not based on the given definition. Next, the survey asked participants to respond to two essay prompts: “How do you define/understand the word vocation?” and “What has shaped/influenced this understanding of vocation?”.

Phase II: Interviews. From the population who self-identified as introverts and indicated a willingness to participate in an interview, 35 participants were contacted via email and asked to complete the Introversion Scale (McCroskey, 1997). Nine participants responded and scored as “moderately” or “highly” introverted, and were contacted to set up an interview. During the interview, participants responded to a series of questions related to their personality and vocational development.

Using a systematic grounded theory design, the researcher used an open coding process to code the interview transcripts. The data from the interviews provided the foundation for a theory, as the researcher had

the ability to probe and further explore the participants' answers when needed. The researcher chose the open code of external confirmation while discerning a vocation to investigate via axial coding. Next, the researcher selectively coded online responses to discover and understand the specific elements and influences related to the chosen open code. As a result, the Vocational Development Model for Introverts was established by examining the process of vocational discernment in the interview data and its specific influences in the online responses. By drawing upon multiple sources, the data better informed and established a credible theory between vocation and introversion through the process of triangulation.

Results

Aligned with the current literature of vocational development, the participants in the study described both external and internal sources as significant influences on their vocation. These external and internal sources followed a pattern among many of the interview participants, establishing the Vocational Development Model for Introverts.

External Influences

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External influences on vocational development were classified as influences removed from the participant's internal thought process. Three themes emerged as external sources: coursework, university faculty and staff interactions, and family relationships.

The opportunity to read, learn, and reflect upon new material was the most common influence of vocation among the participants, with 40% of essays mentioning it. These participants commented on various aspects of the curriculum and the application of it. When asked about how his coursework has shaped his vocation, an interview participant stated, "Truly the liberal arts experience . . . By taking general education courses in topics that I really would have never had an interest in . . . So knowing that our vocation is holistic has been liberating to me." Specific courses were mentioned by 24% of total participants, including a first-year orientation course and a specific senior capstone course within their major department. Participants described how these courses, as well as others not specifically mentioned, provided a guided space for them to reflect and learn more about their vocation.

Beyond the academic coursework, 16% of participants described how their interactions and relationships with university faculty members contributed to the understanding of their vocation. Conversations

with professors, specifically apart from the course curriculum, helped develop a sense of vocational understanding in some participants. While discussing his professors' influence on his vocation during an interview, one participant stated, "They've shaped my understanding of vocation in the sense that they've allowed me to explore who I am and they've challenged me to think differently on a lot of different topics."

Another participant echoed this idea, describing his interactions with two of his most influential professors:

It is very evident from speaking with them that their teaching here . . . is much more to them than a job that they punch in and out . . . They know that this is where God wants them, and that He has them here to benefit those around them.

University faculty and staff members informed their students' vocational development by advising, challenging, and inspiring them throughout their duration in college.

Like interactions with professors, one participant shared how her parents significantly and positively developed her vocation: "My parents often encourage and deepen my idea of what my vocation is. They desire for me to know God's will for my life, and will encourage me in finding that." Many other participants echoed this sentiment, with 21% of participants citing direct parental influence on their sense of calling. Alternatively, 12% of participants described how their parents had an indirect influence on their vocation. One participant explained, "Although I am unable to recall a time where [my parents] specifically talked about vocation, their approach to work and other responsibilities has had a strong influence on me."

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Internal Influences

Internal influences were categorized as the components of vocational development that occur within the thought process of the participant. Three major themes for internal influences emerged: faith, observation of others, and personal reflection.

Different elements of Christian faith were mentioned as influences on vocational understanding for 19% of participants. The act of pursuing a deeper faith was noted as influencing one's vocation, as a participant wrote, "My personal relationship with God has heavily shaped my understanding of [my vocation] . . . As I understand more and more what is important to God, I gain a clearer understanding of what it

means to obey him and do the next thing I know.” When asked what the most significant influence on her vocation was, one participant stated, “My study of Scripture. Especially . . . in realizing how much that affects how I live each of my days.” These participants described how the internalization of faith inspired and led them to understand the world around them.

One participant noted that “it usually requires observance of other people’s lives to understand the concept of vocation.” This participant was not alone in her thinking—as observation of others as a tool for vocational discernment emerged as a major theme in the data, with 16% of participants mentioning it. As participants described their observation of their professors’ and parents’ vocation, participants also noted many other influential figures in their lives serving as models for vocational development. Friends, mentors, siblings, and pastors were all mentioned as observed individuals, and as one participant noted, the most significant influence of his vocational development is the “observation of adults who I trust and respect.”

The act of reflecting upon an experience to understand one’s vocation was mentioned by 15% of participants. Participants described general reflections they had on their lives and how those reflections related to their vocations. A participant explained, “I sometimes think about when I’m 85 and I’m looking back on my life, what do I want to say I accomplished . . . My corner of the world, I want it to change.” These personal reflections helped participants discern their current and future vocations.

Vocational Development Model for Introverts

In an interview, one participant detailed her vocational journey, combining different sources of influence in her description:

It’s really helpful to get that outside input and encouragement and support. And then later, taking it in and thinking about it, because I have a hard time processing stuff right as it happens. When I can step away for a day or two and come back to it and think about what we said, and then look at, like, more specifically how that applies to me and my understanding of the world that I might not have been able to articulate during our conversation, or things that have happened since our conversation, is really influential.

This process of pairing internal sources with external sources to understand their vocation matched seven of the nine interview participants' experiences. The Vocational Development Model for Introverts (see Figure 1) outlines this process of understanding a vocational call using four distinct phases.

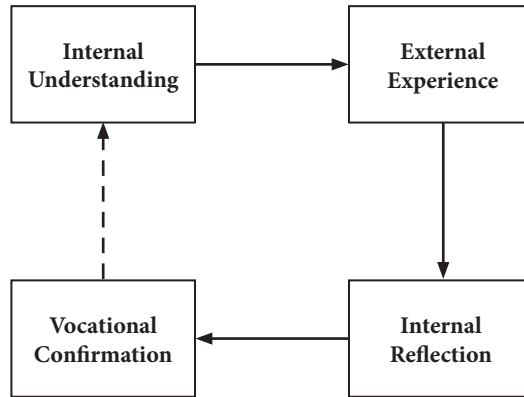


Figure 1. The Vocational Development Model for Introverts.

Phase 1: Internal understanding. To begin their vocational development, the participants described the internal assumptions and thoughts they had prior to their pursuits of understanding their vocations. These assumptions, as noted above, often included the observation of other adults in their vocations. The internal observation provided a framework for understanding what a vocation is, to find their own. Additional aspects of the participants' faiths and family upbringings contribute to this initial foundation of their vocational understanding.

Phase 2: External experience. As a participant noted, "I believe that one cannot know what vocation is until they experience it in some form," the seven interview participants described specific and unique events that led to their vocational understandings following their initial understandings. Most prevalent were the conversations and interactions with friends, family, and university faculty and staff members, as well as discoveries from participants' coursework. One participant described her senior capstone course as an experience that gave her the language to describe previous thoughts about her vocation: "The reason I think I liked them was because they agreed with what I was feeling and thinking already, but hadn't had the words to express or hadn't been affirmed by anything else." These external influences, as previously outlined, provided the participants with experiences to learn more about their

vocations from sources outside of themselves.

Phase 3: Internal reflection. Following the experience, the participants described the process of returning to their internal thought processes to reflect on the experience, making sense of how such thought processes relate to their initial understanding of their vocation. The participants mentioned how this additional reflection helped them better understand the experience. Participants described this internal reflection as the most important component of the process, leading to better discernments of their vocations.

Phase 4: Vocational Confirmation. After the internal-external-internal process, the participants described a sense of confirming or rejecting the newfound sense of vocation. This vocational confirmation combines the internal and external sources into a decision about how to move forward in pursuit of their vocations. One participant described the multiple-source understanding by concluding, “My understanding of vocation cannot be pointed back to a single incident or individual, but rather a combination of people, incidents and personal understanding.”

Participants described the vocational confirmation as the final stage—no participants discussed its implications. However, after an individual confirms or rejects his or her new sense of calling, he or she has a new understanding, which leads to new experiences and reflection. Therefore, the model depicts a dotted line between Vocational Confirmation and Internal Understanding, suggesting the circular nature of the process.

Discussion

Influences of Vocation Development

The interview participants described the benefits and challenges of the relationship between vocational development and their level of introversion. The most common difficulty, as described by participants, was the consequences of relying on self-reflection instead of seeking help from others. Palmer (2010) noted the importance of blending internal and external influences while discerning one’s vocation, with the individual and the individual’s community sharing a collaborative relationship. The internal processing and reflection are key components of an introvert’s vocational development, but they cannot be the sole stimuli. Palmer explained, “Doing inner work together is a vital counterpoint to doing it alone. Left to our own devices, we may delude ourselves in ways that others can help us correct” (p. 92). The process of vocational development needs to be an interwoven sequence of internal and external events, specifically for introverts whom may prefer to solely

embrace their inner world.

The online responses in the study described how the varying internal and external sources in respondents' lives influenced their vocational development. The time spent observing and reflecting created space for the participants to make meaning of the external influences in their lives. As Neafsey (2006) wrote, the combination of these internal and external sources creates an "authentic vocational discernment" (p. 1). By combining the two types of influences, introverted college students can authentically understand their callings in the world.

Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning

As Ewen (1998) described, introverts tend to have a natural disposition for introspection, thinking carefully before making important decisions. While making the important decision about finding meaning and purpose in their lives, the participants' responses suggested the necessity of introspection and reflection. Another theory outlining the importance of reflection in student development is Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning. The results of the study resemble Kolb's (1984) Theory of Experiential Learning; however, the participants' described experiences did not adequately follow the process of Kolb's model. Therefore, the Vocational Development Model for Introverts was created to account for the participants' vocational discernment. Perhaps vocational development is a form of experiential learning, due to the shared process of these two concepts.

A New Model for Vocational Development

Literature on vocation widely discusses the integration of external and internal sources of influences. However, there is no model for vocational development that accounts for these varying and interwoven influences. The creation of the Vocational Development Model for Introverts established a model to explain the process of students understanding their vocations. The results from interview participants outlined the foundational process of their development, with seven participants describing a similar internal-external-internal pattern. The results from the online essays provided a fullness to the model, explaining the major themes of influence that interact with students' vocational development.

Implications

The Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE) consists of 220 member institutions, both religious and secular, who are

increasingly interested in the vocational development of their students. Professionals working directly with students in their vocational or career discernment could benefit from understanding how students' personalities influence their pursuit of purpose. Because reflecting after experiences was beneficial to introverts' vocational development, practitioners should offer students opportunities for guided reflection. For example, a career development office could provide a program in the fall semester for students who completed a summer internship experience, in which a professional staff member guides the group through reflective activities to make connections about the work experience and students' emerging sense of vocation.

Practitioners will need to promote these efforts and make them easily accessible, specifically for introverted students. Participants in the study noted that they waited until someone approached them before discussing their vocation, therefore, these efforts should be proactive. Academic educators can also incorporate literature on vocation into curriculum, creating a holistic university culture of support for students' pursuits of meaning and purpose.

Limitations

Both key terms in the study, vocation and introversion, are ambiguous in nature. While the current research operated under specific definitions of these two variables and made corrective actions to remove data with obvious misunderstandings, the participants may have answered the questions under varying assumptions. Additionally, without performing a comparative study between introverted and extraverted students, the results cannot appropriately be generalized to extraverted students. Finally, the methodology reflected a pseudo-grounded theory design, due to extraneous constraints on data collection.

Conclusion

As Buechner (1973) famously wrote, vocation is "the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (p. 95). The introverted college students taking part in the current study balanced their inner and outer worlds to discover their callings. While some influences on their vocation occurred within their own personal thoughts and reflections, participants also cited higher education professionals and parents as influencers of their vocational development. To better support introverted students in their pursuits of purpose, professionals

can use the Vocational Development Model for Introverts and continue to research the unique processes and needs of this population. Students, both introverted and extraverted, should graduate from college with a full understanding of their deepest gladness, the places in the world with the deepest hunger, and the intersection of the two.

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