Career Mentoring In Higher Education: Students'perceptions And Experiences

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Abstract: Nowadays, the process of building the career of emerging adults is embedded in the need for meaningful paths, connection, creativity and autonomy. Thus, the support services universities offer for students should incorporate subjective aspects of individual experiences such as targeting relevant goals, building meaningful learning experiences, promoting personal resources of adaptability. One of the most effective mechanism for positively influencing students' career paths is mentoring, by helping them to successfully face the academic and life challenges and to build meaningful careers. The current study aims to investigate perceptions and experiences of seven undergraduate students, in order to understand the mentoring role in the development of a calling orientation in their career trajectory. Data was collected through one-to-one semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis was conducted. The findings revealed a mentoring approach that includes a career construction theory and calling-infused elements has positive effects on self-reflection, self-knowledge, proactive experiences and behaviours that maintain and strengthens the perception of the presence of calling. In other words, the support of a mentor facilitates the activation of personal resources and values the self-directed career oriented towards individualized results in the context of an uncertain and dynamic work environment.
Keywords: calling, mentoring, higher-education, qualitative design, thematic analysis.

1 *Theoretical framework*

1.1. Introduction

The contemporary career is characterized by an emphasis on the individual experience, on self-reflection, global connection, relationships, but also unpredictability, the need for immediacy, emotion, creativity and innovation. Thus, the counselling services, coaching or career mentoring should incorporate subjective aspects of individual experiences such as targeting relevant goals, building meaningful experiences, promoting resources of intentionality and adaptability (Hartung, 2011). In this process, universities should focus on providing important information for encouraging and supporting students to identify and express their motivations, interests, skills, deep values that lead them to build the meaning of their own career (Maree, 2014). Mentoring can provide important support in academic and career trajectory. There are many studies showing the positive impact of mentoring in higher education in students integration in social groups, academic performance, finding meaningful career experiences etc. (Barnett, 2011; Eby and Dolan, 2015; Braun & Zolfagharian, 2016). Moreover, seeing the mentor as a role model, help the student perceive the higher education institution as being more inclusive and promoting academic connectedness (Castellanos et al., 2016). The mentor-mentee relationship has also an important impact on reducing dropout rates among students through increasing self-efficacy, improving self-awareness and building meaningful opportunities (Baier et al., 2016).

A series of research on career attitudes and passion have highlighted the importance of others, especially family, colleagues and mentors in developing a meaningful career (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng and DuBois, 2008; Ragins et al. 2000). Therefore, the social environment can influence the attitude of individuals towards work and can help them live their calling (Cardador, Dane, Pratt, 2011; Guo et al. 2014; Harzer and Ruch, 2012). Reliable information sources as well as experienced people can play an important role in the development of calling by providing a role and attitude model (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000).

1.2. Mentoring and calling

An important field of study is the influence of mentoring on the development of calling defined as a multi-dimensional construct describing cognitive, emotional, motivational, spiritual, and vocational identity-related aspects. (Dalla Rossa, Vianello & Barbieri, 2017). The scientific literature suggests that mentoring experience has a positive influence on the discovery of meaning in work (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010) and may support the development of spirituality in relation to one's profession (Buzzanell, 2009; Reave, 2005; Weinberg & Locander, 2014). Career mentoring fulfils multiple functions, including the development of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and vocational identity (Eby et al., 2010). Other authors suggest other areas of impact of mentoring as: emotional and psychological support, setting goals and career decision-making strategies, academic support, identifying and providing opportunities (networking), activating internal resources to meet career challenges (Crisp, 2009; Haggard and Turban, 2012). Among the desirable characteristics of the mentor listed by scholars are: the ability to provide constructive feedback, openness, availability, proactivity, compassion, ability to inspire, passion for one's profession (mentoring as a central part of one's personal calling), trust, mutual respect, the ability to share knowledge. Regarding the mechanisms that explain the mentor's influence, it seems that the mentor's trust, emotional security and unconditional acceptance are aspects that contribute significantly to greater career and professional satisfaction, career commitment and involvement, positive attitude and motivation (Ragins et al., 2000; Payne, Huffmann 2005; Chao 1997; Eby et al., 2008). It also appears that mentoring relationships with a strong informal component are more effective in influencing a student's attitude toward work compared to a formal mentorship relation (Ragins et al., 2000; Kram 1985). In addition, the extent in which an individual views their mentor as a role model may explain the association between the mentor's and protégé's calling and work orientation. Basically, these elements of the mentoring relationship are responsible for a large part of the effect of mentoring in the development of a calling orientation.

So far, there are relatively few studies that have investigated the role of other people in the development of calling and they have provided various results (Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas 2012; Dobrow,

2006, 2013). For example, Dobrow (2006) concluded that the involvement of parents in the development of calling in the field of arts had a positive effect on the students' calling. In another study, which investigated the relationship between calling and students' receptivity to negative recommendations given by a mentor, the researchers pointed out that the presence of calling reduces the effect of discouraging recommendations (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012). In other words, students with a strong calling orientation are more determined to follow their calling, despite the recommendations of their teachers or mentors to choose a different vocational path. This result was replicated in a cross-sectional study involving a sample of students from entrepreneurial faculties. At the same time, Rosa, Vianello, and Anselmi (2019) found out that the social support provided by friends, family or a counsellor can help students develop effective career development strategies.

The most extensive study investigating the social effects on the development of students' calling was conducted by Dalla Rossa, Vianello and Barbieri in 2017 on a sample of 5886 students. The study lasted over three years, investigated three different moments and aimed to analyse the effects of mentoring on calling. The results were conclusive, showing that the students who benefited from mentoring demonstrated a stronger calling orientation compared to the students without a mentor, in each of the three moments investigated. At the same time, the presence of the mentor had a stronger effect for the students who were already proactive in the development of their calling. Regarding the characteristics of the mentor, the conclusions argued that a mentor with a lived calling in their profession positively predicts the students' calling, while the presence of a mentor interested in financial gain and career advancement can inhibit students in building meaning in profession. Therefore, a mentor's calling orientation is associated with an increase in students' identification with their chosen field and passion for it.

Taken together, these results suggest that calling is not just an individual phenomenon, but one with strong social influences. In our study we are going to address the issue of calling development through the mentoring process, emphasising a social-constructivist perspective, a career construction theory approach (Savickas, 2005, 2014). More specifically, these socio-constructivist approaches explain career

development as an individual and social process, with personal meanings, past and present experiences and future goals, all of which are integrated into life themes that evolve throughout one's existence. Thus, the significant relations of therapeutic relationship, coaching or mentoring contributes to students' career construction (Guichard, 2010). Moreover, calling is deeply related to self, well-being and a number of other positive factors in the career effects, such as adaptability, the ability to explore career opportunities, self-efficacy, etc. (Rosa, Vianello and Galliani, 2017). Therefore, the positive attitude towards one's own career, the meaning and values involved, are all theoretically related to the calling. Thus, we expect the subjective perspective on the development of calling in the mentoring process will reveal valuable conclusions already studied in quantitative designs.

1.3. The aim of the study and research questions

In this study we used a deductive qualitative approach, trying to understand the role of mentoring in the development of calling among undergraduate students, emphasizing their personal perspective and experience. The underlying framework of our mentoring program was the career construction theory, incorporating career adaptability techniques and enhancing calling components to increase students' commitment to the career building process and to facilitate change. The career mentoring program was implemented as a pilot one for the students from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University through the University Counselling Centre "Student Expert".

Building on previous research on calling, we generated a series of questions to explore the experience of the participants in the mentoring process. More specifically, the research questions focused on the way in which the mentoring process and mentor-mentee relationship influenced the development of the calling. The research questions were:

• What is the role of mentoring in the development of the calling of emerging adults in Babeş-Bolyai University?

• What are the characteristics of the mentor that facilitate living calling and career development, as seen by Babeş-Bolyai University students?

• To what extent does the perception of career as a calling contribute to professional development?

2 Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were seven emerging adults (four males and three females), age 20 and 21, undergraduate students at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (Psychology major), at Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca. The seven participants were chosen from those who participated in at least 25 hours of mentoring meetings during an academic year and who showed an interest in self-knowledge and building their own career according their own values, interests, significant goals. During the meetings, the mentor used career facilitation techniques derived from career construction theory (Savickas, 2011), and calling discovery techniques. The data was collected individually, and participation was voluntary.

2.2. Procedure and instruments

In order to accomplish the aim of the study, we conducted individual in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted by one researcher, following an interview guide. The interview guide had 12 main questions and was developed based on the central objective and research questions, including the following dimensions:

➢ the meaning of the vocation for each participant;

➢ the role of mentoring in the development of the participant's vocation;

➢ the participant's perspective on the mentor's impact on career development.

Second, the interviews were transcribed and coded by the authors of this paper. The in-depth analysis was based on the model developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and carried out by one author of the study, together with a researcher unfamiliar with the data and the topic.

At the beginning of the interview, participants were informed about the purpose of this study, the confidentiality of the data and gave their informed consent. Each interview was audio recorded, then later transcribed in verbatim format.

3 Data analysis and findings

In order to accomplish our study objective, the thematic analysis model developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used. With a deductive approach, and a thematic analysis, we were able to report participants' experiences, meanings and realities (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The data collected and the verbatim transcript were repeatedly read, including an active reading that involves a search for meanings and patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In the next step, initial codes were extracted, representing "the most basic segment or element of data or information that can be evaluated in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63, apud. Braun and Clarke, 2006). The next step was to search and identify the main topics. We extracted the topics following the existing information in the literature, but we partially kept the inductive nature of the process, considering the specificity of the data. The codes were thus analysed and similarities and differences between the codes were established.

Thus began the search for major themes and sub-themes, some initial codes becoming major themes or sub-themes, while some were eliminated or incorporated into themes and / or sub-themes:

I. *Calling - congruence between self and experience* (sub-themes: Intrinsic meaning and significance, Contribution, Self-matching).

II. *Mentoring-catalyst in the development of calling* (sub-themes: Self-reflection, Exploration, Self-efficacy and motivation, Concern and Curiosity for opportunities to live calling).

III. *Mentoring relationship - the basis of calling development* (sub-themes: empathic communication and openness, mutual respect, modelling).

Furthermore, we are going to present, define and exemplify the above-mentioned themes and subthemes, through relevant extracts from the data set:

I. Major theme: Calling - congruence between self and experience

This theme represents the participants' belief that calling is a balance between aspects of vocational identity and the characteristics of professional experiences. In other words, the calling involves knowing one's own values, interests, motivations, goals, etc. and identifying those areas that allow their manifestation in the context of work, in a way that provides meaning and personal significance, but also social contribution. This topic also captures the different conceptualizations of calling (Burdenson and Thomson, 2018). Within this major theme, we identified three major sub-themes: Intrinsic meaning and significance, Contribution, Self-matching, to differentiate the nuances of the calling experienced by the participants.

Sub-theme 1.1 Intrinsic meaning and significance
This sub-theme emphasizes the participants' need to identify a deep meaning and motivation for the chosen field of study, which means a strong connection with their own self.

> "*I believe that having a career that is a calling means doing a type of work that gives me meaning, that serves a purpose I set myself and is in line with my values.*" (Participant 3)
> "*.... I discovered that in the process of calling you need an intrinsic motivation for that field and perseverance in the face of obstacles and uncertainty ... and to have perseverance it must make sense what you do ....*" (Participant 5)

Sub-theme 1.2- Contribution
This sub-theme emphasizes the importance of a prosocial impact of personal career, the positive effects that participants expect their professional activity will have on the community.

> "*However, for me to become better is not a major goal in itself, but a way in which I could better help a wide range of people from different backgrounds. Thus, a calling would motivate me both to learn theoretically and to persevere despite the obstacles I*

will encounter in practice and to learn how to manage them ... in order to contribute to something important." (Participant 3)

Sub-theme 1.3 Self-matching

This sub-theme highlights the relation between vocational identity and professional experiences, so that a calling attitude implies a dynamic balance between internal factors and the work environment.

"The calling is something that gives me the opportunity to manifest my values, motivations and personal interests. Only in this way can authenticity be obtained - by transposing one's self into the context of work." (Participant 6)

"... I would say that you come to feel you are made for something or you have a calling if you can be authentic, to express yourself in what you work, in your career" (Participant 1)

II. Major theme - Mentoring - catalyst in the development of calling

This theme reflects the fact that the mentoring process is a factor that contributes to the discovery of ones' calling by facilitating self-knowledge, reflection, self-exploration and external opportunities, but also by identifying relevant personal motivations. All these mechanisms are closely related to the calling attitude that leads to a high level of searching for meaningful professional experiences.

Sub-theme 2.1 Self-reflection and self-knowledge

This sub-theme describes the processes of self-knowledge, facilitating the development of identity and reflection on personal dimensions of calling sources connected to external factors.

"I think that mentoring was for me as a catalyst in the process of calling development. Thus, it had a regulatory role, helping me to deeply explore career opportunities, respectively, to build a vocational identity. Personally, I perceived the mentoring period as a period in which I managed to create a connection between my value system and career choices." (Participant 2)

"Through mentoring, I adopted a more integrative career vision. I can say that we have taken into account both interests, skills, motivation and values, as well as aspects related to the external environment, such as the labour market." (Participant 3)

Sub-theme 2.2.-Exploration

This sub-theme captures the potential of mentoring to facilitate the career exploration in order to gain a more accurate picture of living the calling.

> "*First of all, exploring the mentoring process allowed me to have many professional experiences. Moreover, I have learned to invest my resources in as diverse career opportunities as possible, thus increasing my degree of adaptability in my career.*" (Participant 2)

> "*The fact that I was able to explore different practical activities helped me the most. My mentor gave me the chance to get involved and see exactly what it was all about, so I ran into different situations and even difficulties ... but they all made me better understand how to do what I want.*" (Participant 7)

Sub-theme 2.3 Self-efficacy and motivation

This sub-theme illustrates the relevance of mentoring in motivating participants to develop their own careers. An important mechanism in motivation is career process self-efficacy (managing career opportunities and difficulties).

> "*The mentoring process helped me increase my motivation to find a career, respectively to build a vocational identity. Also, the mentoring process affected my career adaptability, making me more open to various opportunities.*" (Participant 7)

> "*Knowing, in particular, about the steps to follow in the process of building a career has made me confident that I can build one according to my needs, abilities and aspirations.*" (Participant 3)

> "*... I feel more confident that I will succeed, because now I understand better what it means.*" (Participant 4)

Sub-theme 2.4 Concern and curiosity for opportunities to manifest calling

Sub-theme 4 reflects a major effect of conceptualizing career as a calling in the mentoring process, increasing the level of concern and curiosity in the direction of actions where the calling can be experienced.

> "*.... I have learned to convert failures into learning experiences and to keep alive my curiosity about the type of career that best fits my values and allows me to do what I feel as a calling ....*" (Participant 3)

"I can say that during all this time I have learned to look for opportunities and not be afraid of them ... that is, somehow mentoring helped me to ask more questions about how to live my values and motivations in the activities in my career ..." (Participant 2)

III. Major theme- Mentoring relationship - the basis of calling development

This topic is an essential dimension of mentoring, with high relevance for calling development. In all the interviews conducted, the importance of the mentoring relationship was obvious with rich descriptions of the characteristics that define an effective mentor-mentee bond. The answers can be grouped into three major sub-themes: empathic communication and openness; mutual respect; modelling.

Sub-theme 3.1- Empathic communication and openness
This sub-theme reflects the importance that participants attach to the mentor's ability to build an authentic, empathetic relationship based on professional honesty, in which the mentee feels psychologically safe in order to effectively address the challenges.

"The mentor's empathy for the difficulties and challenges I had to face played an important role in the whole process. Moreover, the mentor's willingness to help and guide us, as well as his constant encouragement, mattered enormously in developing a career direction." (Participant 3)

"...the mentoring process was characterized by an authentic and constant communication, which contributed to the development of a mutual trust between me and the mentor. As a result of this foundation of trust, I was able to integrate failures much more easily, turning them into learning opportunities that led to the consolidation of my career." (Participant 7)

Sub-theme 3.2 Mutual respect
This sub-theme describes the need of the participants to feel understood and to feel unconditionally accepted by the mentor, to respect their options, etc. On the other hand, respect implies the

mentor's ability to earn the respect of those mentored, by being a role model and having a calling orientation.

> *".... well.... there should be openness between the two parties, so that both the mentor and the mentee feel accepted, respected and can express themselves freely from the formal constraints. I think this is a prerequisite for a learning and training process that can really work."* (Participant 4)

Sub-theme 3.3 Modelling

This sub-theme describes the importance of the mentor's perception as a role-model, similarity to the model, their perception as being successful in the field, passion for the field, being the main factors in building the relationship etc.

> *"For me, the quality of the interpersonal relationship with the mentor is the aspect that leads to the increase of the effect it has in relation to the development of the career and, implicitly, of the calling. That is - the more authentic and real the connection, the more strongly perceived the role of the mentor model."* (Participant 4)
>
> *"I perceived the mentor as a model because he is in a similar way to me, I can resonate with him, as well as because I consider that he has many achievements for which I admire him (he managed to take advantage of the opportunities offered to him and worked constantly to his own personal and professional development, which I consider an example worth following)."* (Participant 5)

4 Discussions and conclusions

The thematic analysis was used in this study to identify participants' narratives about the development of calling and the role of mentoring in this process. Given the nature of the theme, one deeply subjective- personal meaning of professional experience, a qualitative analysis was most appropriate method to understand the participants' perception and experiences (Blustein, Saliha Kozan & Connors-Kellgren, 2013).

The participants' answers revealed the perception of a calling relating to the mentoring process and mentoring relationship. More specific, the mentoring program facilitated the development of career

decisions self-efficacy and gave them a sense of control over their own vocational path. All of these are essential for building a sustainable career meaning and integrating it into the wider meaning of life (Savickas et al., 2009; Hartung, 2013).

According to the main themes, the presence of calling implies self-knowledge and discovery of personal interests, values, motivations, which is a dynamic process and strongly influenced by the presence of a mentor, coach or counsellor. In fact, preparation for career choices is a skill that requires a process of self-reflection directed towards relevant goals, which usually occurs in a career intervention (Leontiev, Rasskazova, Fam & Ovchinnikova, 2016).

As previously mentioned, we included in the intervention, and then in the mentoring process, those students who previously showed interest in the relevance of the idea of personal calling. Thus, the process was focused on reflection on vocational identity and on some exercises useful for discovering meaning, values, motivations, interests, strengths and experiences that give them positive emotions and a sense of fulfilment and contribution. Participants were also encouraged to experience different volunteering opportunities, with the mentor also involving them in several activities relevant to different fields of applied psychology. These were discussed and analysed, emphasizing the connecting elements of personal attributes with experience, but also on how to address the challenges.

Our study shows that a mentoring approach including a career construction theory and calling development approach contributes to self-reflection, self-knowledge, exploration and equipping with adaptability skills, future vocational planning and proactive experiences and behaviours that maintain and strengthen the perception of the presence of calling. In other words, the support of a mentor facilitates the activation of personal resources and values the self-directed career oriented towards individualized results in the context of an uncertain and dynamic work environment (Briscoe, Henagan, Burton and Murphy, 2012).

The main objective of this research was to understand the role of mentoring in the development of calling among emerging adults, from their personal perspective. Thus, we aimed to identify the deep and subjective mechanisms underlying the mentoring process and the way relationship influenced calling development. As a result of the thematic

analysis, three major themes resulted: I. *Calling- congruence between self and experience* (sub-themes: Meaning and intrinsic significance, Contribution, Self-matching); II. *Mentoring-catalyst in the development of calling* (Self-reflection, Exploration, Self-efficacy and motivation, Concern and curiosity for opportunities to manifest calling) and III. *Mentoring relationship* - the basis of calling development (empathic communication and openness, mutual respect, modelling).

Qualitative research is often a way to contribute, by stimulating reflection, to the development of social, educational, organizational interventions and changes (Ditrano and Silverstein, 2006; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005; Kidd and Kral, 2005; Morrow, 2007). The practical implications of this nuanced understanding of career development as a calling and the contribution of mentoring in this process may be especially relevant for specialists in the field of education, mental health, organizational development. Beliefs about calling, the impact of a mentoring relationship in relation to it influence interventions in the field. Thus, a nuanced approach to assessment, which explores how the problem presented is influenced by the personal characteristics of individuals, the interconnected and fluid nature of development and the multiple overlapping contexts, allows the mentor or counsellor to contextualize the problem to the specific characteristics of the individual's life. . Consequently, it is recommended that practitioners expand their assessment and strategies by including questions that address the development of the calling. Such an intervention could be useful to help the student discover and clarify their personal values and beliefs about the career. An important recommendation is for higher-education institutions to improve students' skills in order to reduce dropout and increase employability by implementing career development strategies in the curriculum and also by helping them identify meaningful development opportunities (Weng and McElroy, 2010).

It is possible that the aspects we investigated might require more in-depth detail. Future studies could further these topics and investigate more specific nuances that shed light on this, especially due to the implications they may have in practice (more specific dimensions of individual life – such as religiosity – mentoring relationship, should be included). Moreover, the meaning in career, as perceived by young

people, could represent an aspect worthy of research in relation to the meaning of life.

Mentoring in higher education can be an effective strategy to increase academic and career engagement and to boost motivation for developing meaningful vocational trajectories.

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