Vocation: a concept for studying meaningful lives and careers in sport

Running head: Vocation in sport

Dr Noora J. Ronkainen (corresponding author)
School of Sport and Exercise Sciences
Liverpool John Moores University
Byrom Street
Liverpool L3 3AF, United Kingdom
n.j.ronkainen@ljmu.ac.uk

Dr Olli M. Tikkanen
Shanghai Jiao Tong University
Exercise, Health and Technology Center
Shanghai Dongchuan road 800, 200240 Shanghai, China
olli.tikkanen@sjtu.edu.cn

Dr Mark S. Nesti
School of Sport and Exercise Sciences
Liverpool John Moores University
Byrom Street
Liverpool L3 3AF, United Kingdom
m.s.nesti@ljmu.ac.uk
Vocation: a concept for studying meaningful lives and careers in sport

Abstract

In the present paper, we explore the notions of vocation and calling and their implications for sport psychology research and practice. We first discuss conceptual issues and outline existential psychology as one potential framework for understanding vocation in sport. Through a review of growing body of literature on vocation and calling in vocational psychology and reflections on applied sport psychology practice, we identify a number of ways these concepts can be used to advance our understandings of athletic career development, motivation, and mental health in sport. Vocation can also help applied practitioners understand athletes’ strive for authenticity and commitment to sport. In summary, we propose that the concept of vocation can be useful for studying meaningful lives and careers in sport.

Keywords: identity, athletic career, motivation, meaning, existentialism
Running head: VOCATION IN SPORT

Vocation: a concept for studying meaningful lives and careers in sport

Many athletes start developing their athletic careers in their childhood or youth and continue to be involved in competitive sport for a number of years, some as professional athletes, and others as amateur or recreational participants, coaches or volunteers. A number of researchers have sought to describe and understand the sporting life project, most commonly known as an athletic career (see Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009, for a review). Most often the writings on athletic careers are framed within linear models of lifespan development, “as consisting of stages, phases or periods and change is from one to another, rather like going up a ladder with the rungs as invariant stages” (Adams, 2006, p. 261). Consistent with this view, we have a growing body of literature exploring the reasons (e.g., resources, barriers and demands) for why some athletes might be more ‘successful’ than others in transitioning from one stage to another (e.g., Morris, Tod, & Oliver, 2016; Park Lavallee, & Tod, 2013; Pummell, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2008). However, less is known about the subjective career journeys of athletes – that is, what it means for them to inhabit the sporting life-world and how the sport practices connect with their broader sense of life meaning. The stage models (e.g., Stambulova, 1994; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and definitions (e.g., Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007) of an athletic career contain an underpinning assumption that the sporting life project is ultimately animated by the drive or desire to reach an ultimate physical peak of athletic performance (i.e., the “career orientation” described by Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). After reaching that pinnacle of athletic performance, athletes are invariably expected to disengage from competitive sport – a normative assumption which permeates lived culture (Cosh, Crabb, & LeCouteur, 2013) and also research texts on athletic retirement (Ronkainen & Ryba, 2017).

Although career is currently the dominant metaphor for journeys both in sport and in the world of work (especially in highly skilled occupations), several scholars in vocational psychology have
argued for revisiting the old concepts of vocation and calling as they can address some important shortcomings in career theory. The notion of an occupation or a life role as a vocation has been present in Western discourse at least from the 16th century (Dik & Duffy, 2009). Traditionally, it was understood as a religious concept and can be traced to the Protestant reformer Martin Luther, who argued that earthly occupations and not only ministry should be seen as service to God and, therefore, as equally valuable life roles with a spiritual purpose. For Luther, vocation manifested an individual’s relationship with God, but it also involved a moral commitment to treat other people in a just manner (Young, 1984). A key difference between the metaphors of vocation and career is in their implicit assumptions about the underlying motivation to pursue the chosen activity; vocation historically connotates to an activity aimed at serving (God and the society) and experiencing meaningfulness in and through the chosen life role, whereas career is most often understood as a project animated by a desire for personal advancement and progress (Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006).

The fact that career replaced vocation as the leading metaphor in the U.S. in the late 19th century is tied into industrialisation and urbanisation, which led to profound changes in the organisation of work and loosening of communal ties (Savickas, 2000). Cherniss (1995) argued that many traditional vocations have been transformed into careers and jobs, and suggested that this has come about because a moral-religious paradigm was replaced with a scientific-technical one. That is, much of contemporary career discourses focus on self-marketing and career progression, and such changes have resulted in a focus on competence and control, and a diminishment of compassion and moral commitment. In our age, in turn, we have witnessed an increasing prevalence of burnout in occupations that have been traditionally seen as vocations such as teaching and nursing (Cherniss, 1995). Given a large number of studies into burnout also in sport (see Goodger, Gorely, Lavallee, &
Harwood, 2007, for a review), the work of Cherniss could be also highly relevant for understanding this worrying phenomenon and its relation to ideas around vocation and calling.

In addition to reflecting the societal changes in the world of work, the concept of career was also better aligned with modern psychology which was grounded in positivism and individualism. The focus of modern psychology on promoting individual control and autonomy aligns well with the discourse of a career, focused on individual career choice and advancement on the chosen career path (Young, 1984). The academic discourse of athletic careers is largely underpinned by this modernist logic of early career theory in vocational psychology and often focuses on describing normative stages and transitions in an athlete’s developmental pathway (Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

In vocational psychology, however, several scholars have expressed discontent with the modernist career theories and associated metaphors (e.g., career ladders, career pyramids) and suggested that they are insufficient for describing many people’s journeys in the world of work – both in terms of objective trajectories as well as in subjective meanings that people assign to what they do. Although career has become the dominant and broadly accepted word to describe individual journeys in the world of work (and also in “serious leisure”; Stebbins, 1982), it has been noted that the way in which the individual is oriented towards their work/career can vary significantly from the focus on personal advancement (career), simply making a living (job), or fulfilling a deeper sense of purpose and meaning (calling) (Bellah et al., 1985; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). The concepts of vocation and calling have been proposed as a means to complement and extend existing career theory by addressing the neglected subjective meanings and values that people assign to their careers (e.g., Young, 1984; Dik, Duffy, & Eldridge, 2009; Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006). Scholars advocating the study of vocation and calling have pointed out that many people search for a deeper meaning in work (or in a non-paid life...
project) beyond personal advancement and seek to experience and express their overall sense of purpose in life through their work (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006). The notion of vocation addresses questions such as, “Why are you doing what you are doing? Why is it worthwhile for you (and for society)?” (Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006, p. 149).

Given an extensive recent interest in the concepts of vocation and calling in vocational psychology (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dik et al., 2009; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), it is surprising that there is yet no research examining these constructs in sport psychology. After all, athletes frequently talk about their love for their sport; about their hobby becoming a paid profession, or feeling privileged to be able to play sport (rather than work in sport). Whilst there is a growing body of literature on what facilitates success in athletic career development and transitions, few researchers have explored why athletes do what they do and how it connects to their sense of life meaning. Therefore, this article sets out to review the literature on vocation and calling in vocational psychology, explore its potential relevance for sport, and offer recommendations for future empirical research to address this gap in sport psychology. Although we do not suggest that all athletes experience a vocation in sport, and there are some sociological studies to exemplify this (e.g., Roderick, 2006, 2014), we argue that it should be explored as a potentially relevant concept for a number of athletes and others involved in sport. The current paper is inspired by our different experiences as sport researchers, athletes or applied practitioners, and a number of interviews we have conducted with athletes and coaches who have told us about why sport is important and worthwhile for them (e.g., Nesti, 2011; Ronkainen, Ryba, Nesti, 2013; Ronkainen, Tikkanen, Littlewood, & Nesti, 2015). In the following, we proceed to explore conceptual issues in the study of vocations and calling, review the growing body of literature on these concepts, and discuss their implications for psychological studies in sport. We identify some ways in which vocation and calling can complement existing perspectives
on athletes’ careers, and propose directions for future research and applied sport psychology practice.

Conceptualising Vocation and Calling

Although several scholars have noted that a number of contemporary people across cultures describe their occupational life projects with the terms vocation and calling (for an overview, see Dik & Shimizu, 2018), a challenge for academic research lies in finding definitions for these terms that have evolved considerably since their inception. In Western societies, vocation and calling have traditionally involved a connotation of fulfilling a higher (religious) purpose, and some scholars have sought to preserve the historical origins in their definitions (e.g., Dik & Duffy, 2009). However, many modernist definitions tend to adopt a humanistic perspective and understand these terms within ideas of self-actualization, fulfilling a personal passion, or contributing to the society (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). A conceptual overlap has been noted between vocation and calling and the constructs of flow and intrinsic motivation. However, flow is not a necessary component for the experience of calling, and whilst people with a sense of calling are likely to be intrinsically motivated (Dik, Sargent, & Steger, 2008), work can also be pursued for other intrinsic reasons than what are captured by vocation and calling (Dik & Duffy, 2009). Furthermore, some authors distinguish vocation and calling from each other (e.g., Dik & Duffy, 2009), others use them interchangeably, and many studies only refer to one of these terms. Latest studies have increasingly centred on the concept of calling only (e.g., Dik & Shimizu, 2018).

To illustrate the conceptual slippage, in contemporary language the concept of vocation is often used interchangeably with having any job, career or profession; in other cases, it has been described as a guiding life motive derived from within or beyond the self (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006). There is also a debate over whether vocations and callings need to be other-oriented by the very definition, or whether they can simply refer to fulfilling one’s personal
ambition or passion (e.g., Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). What the different definitions of calling seem to agree upon is that it involves a sense of meaning and purpose, whereas prosocial and transcendent dimensions have been included only by some scholars (Dik & Shimizu, 2018). This diversity has been found also in research participants’ accounts who may have self-identified as having a calling regardless of their worldviews (religious or secular) (Steger et al., 2010) and that callings may or may not be connected with a sense of transcendence and having altruistic values (Hunter et al., 2010). The diversity of understandings of the concept among both researchers and participants illustrates that vocation and calling are similar to the term spirituality, which has been defined in various ways depending on socio-historical locations and language practices (e.g., LaCour & Hvidt, 2010).

Since vocation and calling are constructs that are arguably under revision, we agree with Dik and Shimizu (2018) that it might be unwise to propose new definitions unless a clear rationale for doing so emerges. Instead, like in any good quality research, they recommend that researchers explicate which definition has informed their work and provide as much contextual detail of their participants as possible (e.g., religious background, personal life history, etc.). Furthermore, the cultural appropriateness of questionnaires for conducting research in other contexts than in which they were created need to be carefully assessed. Many of the commonly used questionnaires to assess calling (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dik et al., 2012; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997) have been developed in the U.S. where Christian religion is an important part of the cultural landscape and is likely to influence how people understand callings. Recent scales developed in other national cultural contexts including Germany (Hagmaier & Abele, 2012), Australia (Praskova, Creed, & Hood, 2015) and China (Zhang, Herrmann, Hirschi, Wei, & Zhang, 2015) have provided research tools for assessing callings in these different contexts.
In addition to articulating a concept of vocation or calling that informs research, it is also important that studies are grounded in paradigms and theoretical positions that can accommodate ideas surrounding personal and transcendent meaning. Existential psychology is one potential theoretical perspective for understanding vocations and callings because it is centred on a notion of human beings as meaning-seekers that strive to fulfill this meaning through practical engagement with the world through their life projects. In the following, we briefly outline the basic concepts of existential psychology and how they can inform the study of vocations and callings.

**Vocation and Calling from an Existential Psychological Perspective**

Vocation or calling as a life role that provides a deeply personal source of meaning connects with the fundamental assumption in the existential thought that our being is an issue for us (Heidegger, 1962). In other words, the search for meaning is seen as a basic condition of human existence (Frankl, 2010), and therefore we are compelled to throw ourselves into actions and life projects that hold the potential to provide us with a sense of life meaning (Yalom, 1980).

In existential thinking, loss of meaning is considered as one of the main sources of psychological distress (Frankl, 2010; May, 1983). Indeed, it has been observed that many contemporary people who express career-related concerns in counselling are searching for a deeper sense of purpose in their work (Dik et al., 2009). Due to observations that today’s career challenges relate to key existential concerns (e.g., lack of meaning in work, isolation and anxiety), existential psychology has started to gain some attention in vocational psychology (Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006; MacMillan, 2009; Maglio, Butterfield, & Borgen, 2005). The fluid and competitive world of work poses not only the challenge of remaining flexible and marketable and thus securing employability, but also a more fundamental concern of finding personal meaning and continuity in one’s potentially fragmented career trajectory. From an existential view, vocation represents the ability to find meaning and
coherence in what one is doing, one which connects with and contributes to a more profound sense of life meaning.

The concept of vocation is also inextricably linked to the existential psychological concept of authenticity. Existential philosophers (e.g., Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Jaspers and Sartre) wrote extensively about authenticity or actually more often about inauthenticity which they considered to be our dominant mode of being-in-the-world. In the context of a career, inauthenticity would refer to unquestioningly following the norms and ideals of the society ("the they"; Heidegger, 1962) such as, choosing a career which is socially prestigious although not aligned with one’s deeper aspirations. Vocation, on the other hand, can be seen as a calling to an authentic way of existence which is congruent with one’s core beliefs and values (Homan, 1986). The authenticity of an act (or a chosen life project), though, cannot be judged from the outside and can be also fully in line with the ideals of society. Each individual, through self-examination, can assess the relative authenticity of their life choices for themselves (Erickson, 1995). Maglio and colleagues (2005) observed that “career is a project of one's adult productive life in which the struggle for authenticity is most acute” (p. 79), referring to the importance of paid work for most Western adults. Experiencing a sense of vocation in this life project means that it connects with one’s sense of self and experience of purpose in life, thus offering a possibility for experiencing authentic existence.

Drawing from existential ideas, Lips-Wiersma and McMorland (2006) proposed four core themes that can allow for a deeper understanding of the notion of vocation. They suggested that vocation is underpinned by animation (rather than choice) because it conveys the possibility that the guiding principle of vocation may be experienced as something that is derived from outside the self. Second, vocation involves dedication and long-term investment to this life role, involving not only satisfaction but also doubts, sacrifices and sometimes exclusion of other life interests. This connects to the existential psychological perspective that considers “boundary situations” and “negative” experiences
as vital for the search for meaning, personal growth, and our sense of intensity and aliveness (Cooper, 2003). Third, since vocation is intertwined with meaning-making, it involves continual evaluation on the level of congruence between values and actions, and whether a particular life project allows one to “feel at home” and “at one with oneself” (i.e., authentic). Finally, vocation provides coherence, referring to the existential principle that we seek for a sense of purpose and a pattern of meaning that can be sustained through career transitions and moments of uncertainty (Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006). Such broad description of the core existential themes of vocation is inclusive of both secular and religious perspectives, maintaining that meaning, purpose and values can be derived from any worldview that the person grounds their life in.

**Contemporary Vocations and Callings: A Brief Overview**

Although little is known about vocation and calling in sport, the academic interest in these constructs has increased rapidly in vocational psychology and management in the last decade. Between 2007 and 2013, Dik and Duffy (2013) identified approximately 40 studies on calling in career development and vocational psychology. In March 2018, Google Scholar reported 557 citations to their earlier paper outlining the definitions of vocation and calling at work and future research directions (Dik & Duffy, 2009), which indicates that the interest in the topic continues to grow rapidly. This interest has been fueled by findings indicating that people who experience living their calling in work report positive general well-being and satisfaction in life and work (Peterson, Park, Hall, & Seligman, 2009; Steger, Pickering, Shin, & Dik, 2010), are often the most committed and engaged employees (Duffy & Dik, 2013; Duffy, Dik, & Steger, 2011), and experience higher levels of meaning in work (Hirschi, 2012). It has been noted that vocations and callings may also involve a sense of duty and sacrifices in other areas of life (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Zhang, Dik, Wei, & Zhang, 2015) and could have a negative influence on employability due to career inflexibility (Lysova, Jansen, Khapova, Plomp, & Tims, 2018).
Most of the early empirical studies were conducted in the U.S. and many of them had college students as their participants. For example, Duffy and Sedlacek (2010) examined the prevalence of calling with over 5,000 college students and found that more than 40% of participants responded that “having a calling” to a particular occupation was mostly or totally true for them with no significant difference across gender or different ethnicities. Hunter et al. (2010) reported that 295 out of 435 undergraduate students responded that calling was relevant for them in relation to their career development. For college students, calling has correlated positively with a number of variables including vocational self-clarity, career decidedness and satisfaction with one’s career choice (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007), career decision-making self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation (Dik et al., 2008), and positive affect and existential well-being (Steger et al., 2010). Such findings have encouraged career counsellors to focus on helping students to explore and clarify their potential callings, and consequently help them pursue those life paths.

In the recent years, researchers have broadened the exploration calling and vocation to various national and cultural groups and occupations and its relevance has been documented in European countries (Coulson, 2010; Hagmaier & Abele, 2012; Hirschi, 2012), China (Zhang et al., 2015a, b), South Korea (Park, Sohn, & Ha, 2015), and India (Douglass, Duffy, & Autin, 2016). Furthermore, research has indicated that having a sense of vocation or calling is personally relevant for people in very diverse occupations including, for example, administrative assistants (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), zookeepers (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009), musicians (Dobrow, 2013; Coulson, 2010) and counselling students (Hall, Burkholder, & Sterner, 2014). Furthermore, parenting and other non-career focused roles have also been described as callings. Therefore, Dik and Duffy (2009) emphasised that we should not limit the study of vocation to paid work but to any salient life role that the individual might be highly invested in.
To sum up, empirical studies with diverse research participants have indicated that vocation and calling can be important for understanding a number of career-related issues including job satisfaction, engagement, well-being and meaningful work. However, no previous study has explored these constructs in sport despite the clear potential benefits it could provide for understanding athletes’ career experiences and behaviour. Moreover, studying the issue in sport would moreover contribute to broader understanding of callings and vocations in early specialisation careers (others including music and the performing arts). Lastly, sport involves a large number of highly committed amateurs (athletes, coaches and officials) and would, therefore, provide an ideal context for studying the underresearched dimension of callings and vocations in amateur careers (but see Dobrow, 2013).

Could Sport be a Vocation?

While no studies in sport psychology have focused on concepts of vocation and calling, the closest example of such research comes from Wainwright and Turner’s (2004, 2006; Turner & Wainwright 2003) sociological research on professional ballet. They argued that their participants invariably understood dancing as a vocation rather than a job or occupation. As they observed, although it is true that ballet has many occupational features, our data unequivocally demonstrates that classical ballet is a vocation, ‘a calling’, within which ballet dancers are typically astonished that they are paid to do something that is characteristically described as a ‘joy’ (Wainwright & Turner, 2004, p. 312).

In their participants’ accounts, injuries were often interpreted as tests of one’s vocation, and suffering could be even seen as contributing to artistic capital (Wainwright & Turner 2004, 2006). Similarly, Roderick (2006, 2014) argued that soccer, at least initially, is often understood by players as a vocation and an avenue for self-fulfilment. However, he also demonstrated how some players, through experiences of job loss and unfair treatment in professional clubs, started to dis-identify from
their profession and to approach it more like a job without buying into the cultural values of the organisation (Roderick, 2014).

Unfortunately, there are no psychological studies in sport to explore the concept of vocation. Therefore, in the following, we will explore the applied experiences of the third author (MN) to provide an account of how we might understand vocation in sport. These reflections are based on the experience of working as a first-team sport psychologist for three professional soccer clubs in the UK. The following account is subjective in nature and not a part of a structured research programme; instead, these observations have been produced in long-term immersion into applied work in professional sport. Studying elite athletes is notoriously difficult due to limits in access and time (Balague, 1999); therefore, professional reports may complement research studies and involve better rapport, several encounters with participants and a broader understanding of the work environment (the club culture). In the following section, the third author (MN) will be referred to as “I”.

Professional Reflections: Encountering Vocation in Applied Work with Athletes

I have found the idea of sport as a vocation to be immensely helpful in my work as an applied sport psychologist. Especially with professional athletes, it is common to hear them using words normally associated with the types of occupations often described in terms of vocation. Like teachers, medical doctors, and those called to the religious life, many of the players I have worked with talk about the need to accept the sacrifices, hardships, and suffering that accompany doing something they love. In my view, such a description should not be interpreted as positive thinking and attempt to manage the encountered difficulties. Instead, this type of view connects closely to accounts in existential psychology that describes how anxiety, loneliness, and suffering are often experienced during tasks that the individual is passionately committed to (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017).

During the confidential one-to-one sport psychology sessions with over 200 professional players I have often heard them describing how they do not expect success, achievement, and performance
to occur easily, or without difficult moments. They sometimes refer to “falling out of love” with soccer, at least with respect to the culture that surrounds the game. Whilst it is well known that the incredible extrinsic rewards of fame, money, and status are available to players in this sport, it is less well accepted or discussed that in order to remain at this standard, intrinsic motivation must remain strong. Based on my applied work I have argued that being intrinsically motivated is essential to top-level performance (Nesti, 2010); however, being a professional athlete also means delivering in less than optimal conditions and psychological states. Whilst Ravizza (2002) suggested that exceptionally talented athletes experience more episodes of flow than others, he also argued that most of the time, elite athletes are not in flow. That is, sports often present challenges that may exceed the athlete’s skills and abilities. Instead, in times of challenges, they still strive to do their best, because it is personally important, and is something many of them consider to be their own special calling. In this way, the lived experience of playing sport could be said to be like the experiences of others in challenging occupations who strive to do their best in demanding circumstances.

In the sport literature, there are recent examples where athletes are discussed in terms of how the abrasive culture of professional sport can undermine intrinsic motivation and love of the activity (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Roderick, 2014). For example, Roderick (2014) wrote about alienation and instrumental attitudes that some professional athletes adopt towards their work. Although it is undoubtedly the case that many professional athletes view their sport careers in these terms, in my applied work I have worked with many players, especially from outside the UK, for whom their involvement has sounded more like a vocation. And like with other vocations, these professional players have conveyed that they have a calling and what they are doing is deeply personal and important to their self-fulfilment. However, this does not mean that they have not faced demanding challenges, and hardships, alongside moments of deep satisfaction and joy. In my view, having a vocation does not protect the person from experiencing many struggles, but it does help to
understand why something is so personally important to someone that often they will dedicate their
lives to this task.

Working one-to-one over several seasons with professional players, much of what is discussed
has been centred around the importance of knowing who you are and understanding what can be done
to be that person, on and off the field of play. I have listened to players describing how important it
is to them that they can make sense of the, often, very extreme challenges experienced in professional
sport. In facing these moments, players talk about wanting to perform their best because of a personal
commitment to their sport. On occasions, this has been expressed as, “being prepared to give
everything I have to be my best because this is who I am, and what I do!” However, in my view, this
should not be taken to mean that their only identity is that of a professional soccer player. As we have
argued elsewhere (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011), identity is not a quantitative concept; it is possible for
individuals to have several identities they are fully committed to. We would not find it strange to
describe a medical doctor as someone fully committed to her role as a mother, wife, daughter, and
physician. Why then do we accept ideas that the identity of professional and elite athletes can only
be defined in relation to their sport role? It seems to me that when my clients are talking about their
identity in this way, they are telling me about their vocation.

Applied sport psychologists should take great care to recognise that for many athletes at elite and
professional levels their sport experience can be described simultaneously as a job, career, and a
vocation. Over the course of an individual’s involvement in sport, they are likely to view their
experience differently depending on a number of factors, such as the frequency of competitive
success, proximity to retirement, and level of competence. It is conceivable that these will affect how
the athlete sees themselves and the degree which they feel alienated by their job, frustrated by their
career, or in love with their vocation, for example. In my applied encounters with elite professional
soccer players (Nesti, 2010), I have noticed how the relationship with their sport often fluctuates over
time and in relation to external events and internal perceptions. In future, it would be helpful to see more applied sport psychologists recognise that an athlete’s identity is not a fixed entity and that what may feel like a calling at one moment in time, can very quickly appear more like a boring and tiresome job on another occasion. In taking the concept of vocation seriously, sport psychologists will be able to move beyond simplistic binary arguments that designate elite and professional sport especially as either, “just a job”, or as a beautiful love. Instead, we may see sport psychologists adopt a different perspective when they work to support athletes, allowing them to tell their own stories on their own terms. In relation to jobs, careers and vocation, we might find that for some athletes much of the time these lived words do not fit into neat, tidy and positivist constructs that can be viewed as completely separate from each other, but rather, that they are more often experienced as being fluid, interrelated and subject to individual interpretation. Although not referring to vocation, Martens (1979) reminded the relatively new profession of sport psychology that its focus at all times should be on the “person first and the athlete second” (p. 97). Following this call could mean that we will take greater care to approach the athlete as someone who has often chosen to play sport out of love for the activity and a sense of calling and that this does not protect them from a great many personal challenges, especially at higher levels and in professional sport.

In summary, the concepts of vocation and calling have many implications for the work of coaches, applied sport psychologists, and career counsellors working with athletes, although two stand out as most important. First, it is essential to understand that for those players who feel it is their calling, there will be a greater acceptance that they must deliver their best even in difficult circumstances. Second, it is more likely that these types of players will constantly attempt to become more authentic, that is, to think for themselves, become more like themselves, and pursue the best path for them to grow and develop. Many times they will be prepared to do this within the less supportive culture and during personally demanding moments. However, coaches could help by providing a supportive and
professional environment, one that creates the optimal conditions for intrinsic motivation to develop in players and enables them to build upon their sense of calling.

Setting a Research Agenda

In this paper, we have provided an overview of the concepts of vocation and calling and how they have been used and studied in vocational psychology. Given the complexity of the concepts of vocation and callings and their newness in sport, it would be first important for researchers to pay attention to theorising and careful conceptualisation of these terms. This is a much-needed development in sport psychology where some (e.g., Smith, 2010) have observed that the field, as a relatively new academic discipline, has been sometimes too keen to engage in research at the expense of sound theorising and conceptual analysis. Vocation and calling have a long history in psychology, and there is a vast body of work that sport psychologists can draw upon to design and implement their own studies in a sporting context. Future researchers should become familiar with the findings of this research and build carefully on this whilst recognising the unique features of sport. This is something that has not always happened in sport psychology in its rush to provide the practically useful sometimes at the expense of the theoretically rich and methodologically sound (Nesti, 2004).

As the reviewed literature has indicated, vocation and calling could extend our understandings of many issues that have been at heart of sport psychology research agenda, including athletes’ career development and transitions, motivation, and mental health and well-being. Furthermore, the investigations should not be limited to athletes, since the literature on vocations and callings allows for proposing that these constructs could be even more relevant for those in helping and supporting roles including coaching, sport psychology services, and various volunteer tasks in sport clubs. Since retention of volunteer workforce including coaches and officials is one of the pressing
questions in non-elite sports, vocation and calling could be important avenues for better understanding the commitment that some individuals develop to these roles.

The concepts of vocation and calling extend the ways in which how athletic careers are conceptualised and researched. Sport psychology research could explore existential meaning and values (i.e., the core themes of vocation and calling) in relation to athletes’ career decision-making, adaptability, career commitment, motivation, and career identity. Sport psychology research on athletic careers has recently focused increasingly on dual career construction (the combination of sport and school/work; e.g., Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015), and the concepts of vocation and calling could provide additional insight into how student-athletes negotiate commitments and sustain motivation in these two domains. Research with college students have linked the perception of calling with vocational self-clarity and confidence in career decisions (Duffy & Dik, 2013), but little is known about how vocation and calling may play out with individuals who are invested in pursuing two careers simultaneously. With their clear links to career and organisational commitment (Duffy et al., 2011), these concepts would be also highly relevant for studies focused on talent development environments and organisational culture in sport.

Another important direction for sport psychology research is the potential link between vocation/calling and mental health in athletes. It has been noted the elite sport involves additional mental health risk factors including stressful lifestyle, high training loads and tough competition, and there are growing concerns about mental health problems in sport including depression, overtraining, eating disorders, and identity crisis (Schinke, Stambulova, Si, & Moore, 2017). The literature in vocational psychology, on the other hand, has indicated that people with a calling are more likely to experience general well-being, satisfaction in work and life, and meaning in life as a whole (Peterson et al., 2009; Steger et al., 2010). Therefore, vocation and calling could be explored in relation to various mental health issues in sport as a potential protective factor, thereby
responding to International Society of Sport Psychology’s recent call to further develop lines of research into athletes’ well- and ill-being and their sources (Schinke et al., 2017).

To start exploring vocations and callings in sport, various methodological options are available. At the nascent stages, researchers could benefit from the scales developed in vocational psychology (Dik et al., 2012; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997) and use them to get an indication the relevance of vocation and calling for various actors in sport (e.g., athletes, coaches, sport psychologists and volunteers) in different cultural contexts. Yet, gaining a deeper understanding of vocations and callings in sport requires that researcher-led career models would be replaced more often by research that commences from the perspective of the athlete. Greater application of methods such as those used in phenomenology, narrative, and/or ethnography would help researchers capture more fully the lived experience of athletes, and the struggles and joys that they experience in their sport life projects. Longitudinal studies are also needed to go beyond the limitations of the static “one shot in time” methods that have tended to dominate sport psychology research into athletic careers. Research carried out over a season or a number of years could help reveal what types of changes take place in terms of vocation, career and job in sport, and more important, help us to understand why and how these occur.

From an applied perspective, awareness of vocations and callings may be important for coaches and sport psychologists for developing a trusting relationship with the athlete. As stressed by Balague (1999), if the sport psychology consultant (or the coach) does not understand the meaning and value that athletes assign to sport, the relationship is unlikely to work and it can have detrimental effects on the athlete’s sport commitment and experience. The highly individualistic and outcome-oriented sport culture may be experienced to be in conflict with other-oriented and/or spiritual values (e.g., Ronkainen et al., 2015), and athletes who are seeking to experience a vocation in sport may need to explore and solve these tensions before they can fully commit to their sport.
and the work with coaches and sport psychologists. Although it was not the focus of the current paper, it should be also noted that some athletes draw upon their religious and spiritual beliefs in bringing meaning to their experiences in sport (Mosley, Frierson, Cheng, & Aoyagi, 2015; Nesti, 2011). For a truly holistic approach to take place, it is important for sport psychology practitioners and coaches to create spaces where athletes feel that they can express deeper aspects of their identity and values and why they want to pursue their careers in sport.

Conclusions

This paper has introduced the concepts of vocation and calling as new ways to conceptualise and study careers in sport as an alternative to the traditional view of athletic careers framed within the linear models of lifespan development. Given the growth of research into vocation and calling in vocational psychology and the findings surrounding their importance for understanding career experiences and behaviour, it is timely that sport psychologists start to explore vocations and callings with athletes, coaches, and others involved in the sport life-world. Developing an understanding of whether and how sports people approach sport as a vocation and how this may shape their careers and lives would add dimensionality to our theorising and provide a new element to career counselling and applied work with athletes.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by a grant to NR from Alfred Kordelin foundation (grant number 15143). The authors would like to thank two anynomous reviewers for insightful comments on the manuscript.
References


