

# The Path of Vocation: Women's Career Transitions in Middle Adulthood



Correspondence regarding this dissertation article should be sent to Kim. M. Voyle, Ph.D. at:  
kim@voyle.com or 9608 Las Cruces, Ventura, CA 93004 or 805-647-6244

## THE PATH OF VOCATION

### **Dear Participants:**

After a greater length of time than I anticipated, I have completed my dissertation and received my Ph.D. The information which you provided in response to the survey questions provided valuable insight into the Path of Vocation. It was especially gratifying to have the survey findings concur with the earlier interview findings.

Thank you for the time you gave to complete the survey and for all the encouraging words, insights, and suggestions you included in your responses. If you would like to see the complete survey results, please review the information on our website:

<http://www.voyle.com/vocation>.

You may also contact me at the email address, home address, or phone number provided below.

With deep appreciation,  
**Kim Voyle, Ph.D.**

9608 Las Cruces  
Ventura, CA 93004  
email:kim@voyle.com  
805-647-6244

### **The Path of Vocation: Women's Career Transitions in Middle Adulthood Kim M. Voyle, Ph.D.**

#### Introduction

The initial purpose of this study was to explore the phenomena of career transition and occupational change of women in middle adulthood. One of the benefits of conducting qualitative research is the opportunity to listen, again and again, to the participants' reported experience. Constant comparative analysis both takes one deeper and deeper into the phenomena of interest while at the same time returning to the overarching research question. It was this iterative process and asking questions of myself and the data which exposed and challenged my assumptions thus enabling me to finally hear what the participants were describing to me. This process allowed me to discern that vocation is not merely a religious word for career or occupation but rather it includes that which is normally overlooked by career development theorists and researchers.

That which is normally overlooked by career development theorists and researchers, who focus primarily on the intrapersonal aspects of career development and may include the interpersonal and/or environmental aspects of career development, is the transcendent aspect of the unfolding of career, or perhaps better articulated as vocation, over the life span.

Identifying this gap, as well as the gap in research on women's career transitions, modified my thinking and ever so slightly shifted the initial purpose of the study.

Before progressing too far into this study, it is necessary to define what is meant by the terms transcendence and transpersonal. Transcendence is that which transcends the ego-centric, illusory self and leads to a realization of the authentic self (Finley, 1987; Malony, 1990; Orr, 1980). With the participants included in this study, it is important to understand transcendence not as the theological definition of the transcendence of God but rather the depths beyond one's limited, ego-centric self. Transpersonal is the term used to describe the transcendent experience as located within and beyond the intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of humanity. Transpersonal psychology, then, is the inquiry into the essential nature of being (Walsh & Vaughan, 1980).

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**Overview of the Problem:** The idea that as humans we continue to develop during adulthood has only recently been acknowledged by theorists and researchers. Additionally, much of the early research on adult development was conducted with men, and women's adult development was largely ignored. Carol Gilligan notes: "...I began to notice the recurrent problems in interpreting women's development and to connect these problems to the repeated exclusion of women from the critical theory-building studies of psychological research. The disparity between women's experience and the representation of human development, noted throughout the psychological literature, has generally been seen to signify a problem in women's development. Instead, the failure of women to fit existing models of human growth may point to a problem in representation, a limitation in the conception of human condition, an omission of certain truths about life" (Gilligan, 1982, pp.1-2).

Additionally, women's career patterns have changed in the last generation. The relatively new field of theory and research related to women's career development typically focuses on adolescent or young adult career choice and decision-making. The research which considers adult career issues typically has been male-dominated. The limited amount of research exploring adult women's career development has largely focused on women's multiple roles, work-family conflict, career barriers, sexual harassment and discrimination, and societal beliefs which limit women's occupational options.

Development of models to describe the career transition process has been limited (Abrego & Brammer, 1992; Perosa & Perosa, 1983, 1987, 1997; Rhodes & Doering, 1983, 1993) and there are currently no comprehensive models of career transition. These models lack comprehensiveness because their foci is on the intrapersonal and sometimes the interpersonal (the individual relating to organizations and culture through people in their environment), and do not consider the impact of the transpersonal dimension on adult career development. One of the possible reasons that the transpersonal aspect of career development over the life span has been neglected in most theories to date is that it is difficult to discover this information when employing research designs with highly structured questionnaires. A comprehensive model would not only include both intrapersonal and interpersonal factors in the career transition process, which includes considers cognitive, affective, and environmental factors, but must also include a consideration of the transcendent as part of the essential nature of humanity.

*The Path of Vocation* explores the process of career transition and occupational change for women in middle adulthood. Middle adulthood, for the purposes of this study is defined by an age range from thirty-five-years old to fifty-five years old. Further this study explores the meaning of this experience as described by the participants. Lastly, this study attempt to identify the causal conditions and motivations for career transitions and occupational change. This study specifically

***“we are called to return to that moment in which we are truly ourselves by removing obstacles to that awakening”***

focuses on the career transition process for women who voluntarily withdrew from a secular occupation to become ordained ministers.

### Results of the Survey

There was a high response rate to the survey (N=315, 66.9%). The sample was separated into two groups for analytical purposes: those who had worked in a paid, secular occupation prior to ordination (N=236) and those who had been employed in non-paid work or lay ministry in the church (N=79). Analysis was conducted on the total sample (N=315) and the sample of 236.

Section 1: Prior Career: Respondents were employed in a wide range of occupations prior to becoming ordained. Of these respondents, 98.7% indicated that they were successful in the prior occupation and 90.7% indicated that they had enjoyed their prior occupation. This was an unexpected finding because most models of adult occupational change indicate job dissatisfaction as a primary motivation for change. Slightly more than half of the respondents indicated that their previous career choices were limited due to gender-bias.

Section 2: Patterns of Experience: Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with statements from the interviews and career theory. Of the fourteen statements in this section, there was lack of agreement with six statements, four of which were drawn from the interview analysis. Two additional questions, items 15 and 20, were designed to compare current feelings of occupational confidence with prior occupational confidence. Surprisingly, 62% on Item 15 and 73% on Item 22 indicated

less self-efficacy when comparing their ability to succeed in ministry tasks to their prior occupation. This does not indicate that the participants do not have confidence in their ability to perform ministry only that they have less confidence when compared to their prior occupation.

Also in this section, Item 23 asked the participants to indicate whether they considered their change from their previous occupation to ordained ministry to be a career change; 64% indicated that they did consider it a career change. This differed from the interview participants, the majority of whom indicated it was not a career change. Item 24 asked for an explanation for the yes/no response to Item 23 and the response were categorized. The primary reason given for career change was that the work tasks are different. The two main reasons given to indicate that this was not a career change were: 1) because it is a calling and 2) there was continuity in occupational choices, thus ordained ministry was the next step in the sequence.

Section 3: Motivation for Ordination: In this section, participants were asked to indicate the primary and secondary motivational factor in their decision to be ordained. Responding to God's call was selected as the primary factor by 66% of the respondents with a further 20% selecting call as their secondary motivation. Encouragement from other people was endorsed by 23% of the respondents as their secondary motivation. The data was reanalyzed removing call to make visible other motivational factors. Authenticity (becoming who I am really meant to be) and the encouragement of

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others emerged as the most significant. Authenticity, other people, and call emerged as the most significant motivational factors. These findings are analogous to the findings of the interview analysis where Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, and Transpersonal emerged as the major categories and causal conditions of the Path of Vocation.

Section 4: Resistance to Call: Only 11% indicated that they experience no resistance to the call. The largest number (27%) indicated moderate resistance. Self-doubt, life-style concerns, and the church's resistance to women's ordination were the most often selected reasons.

Sections 5 and 6: Demographic Information: Pre-and Post-ordination demographic information was collected. This information allowed me to determine if any demographic characteristics created a significant difference on other items on the questionnaire. No significant differences were found based on age, marital status, children, ethnicity, year when ordained, or geographic areas.

### Discussions/Conclusions

The overarching purpose of this research project was to discover the experience and meaning of voluntary career transitions for women in middle adulthood. Specifically, this study was designed to focus on a select population of women, those who were employed in a secular occupation and voluntary left that occupation to seek ordination as an Episcopal priest. Some studies have been conducted with clergywomen, but none specifically looked at the occupational change process and meaning of this experience to the participants within the context of middle adulthood, career development theory and research, and intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal perspectives.

In this research, the interviews of eleven participants were analyzed from a grounded theory approach and narrative analysis. The initial analysis of the interviews formed the basis for the development and distribution of a survey instrument to a sample of Episcopal clergywomen in the United States. The responses from a final sample of 236 respondents were analyzed to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings through triangulating the interview responses and the survey data.

During the process of this research, a shift occurred in my thinking. When the first interview participants spoke of vocation, I assumed that it was merely a semantic difference between vocation and career, in that they were substituting a theological word for the secular words career or occupation. Vocation was repeated numerous times both within interviews and across all eleven interviews. When I developed the survey, I utilized the word vocation at times so that the survey would be in the language of the respondents.

As I listened again and again to the interviews and analyzed survey responses, I began to realize that vocation was much more than a mere semantic difference. Whereas one individual might identify themselves by their profession, such as accountant or carpenter, vocation was more than a role which one assumed for eight or ten hours a day. Rather vocation had both intrapersonal dimensions and transpersonal dimensions in that, as one participant phrased it, "the collar is always on, I am priest is always a priest. It is who they are at

a level of "being" rather than "doing" work. I would suggest that vocation is not limited to religious careers, but there is other work which transcends the role of occupation and is essentially identified with the person at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal levels of being. Future research on occupations such as poet, writer, musician, physician, or teacher may also reveal the path of vocation for persons within these occupations.

The final piece which shifted my understanding of this process of vocation occurred during a conversation with psychologist and author James Finley, Ph.D. I was expressing the concern to him that while I am studying vocation and call, I didn't seem to have one or even a clear direction as to what occupation I should pursue after graduation. In the discussion which followed this comment, we dialogued about the nature of call and vocation. Dr. Finley suggested that "we are called to be who we are" and we are called "to return to that moment in which we are truly ourselves by removing obstacle to that awakening" (personal communication, November 2, 1998).

Dr. Finley further suggested that "vocation is what you bring to life". Many of the interview participants commented that vocation is not what you do, it's who you are. If vocation is who you are and what you bring to life, then it may be enacted in a specific occupation. For some, the path is identifying their authentic self and then realizing a specific occupation in which they can authentically live their lives. Others are unable to identify a specific occupation in which they can enact their vocation but vocation permeates all that they do because it is who they authentically are.

Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory method of asking questions of the data, after coding for content, exposed my assumptions about occupation, career, and vocation. Once these assumptions were exposed in combination with the previously described evolution in my thinking, I was able to hear what the participants were communicating to me about the meaning of this vocational path in their lives. This approach led to the development of a paradigm model of vocation. This paradigm model developed from the

Core Category of Vocation, with major categories of Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, and Transpersonal. Concepts and categories initially identified and subsequently redefined became subcategories of the three major categories of Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, and Transpersonal.

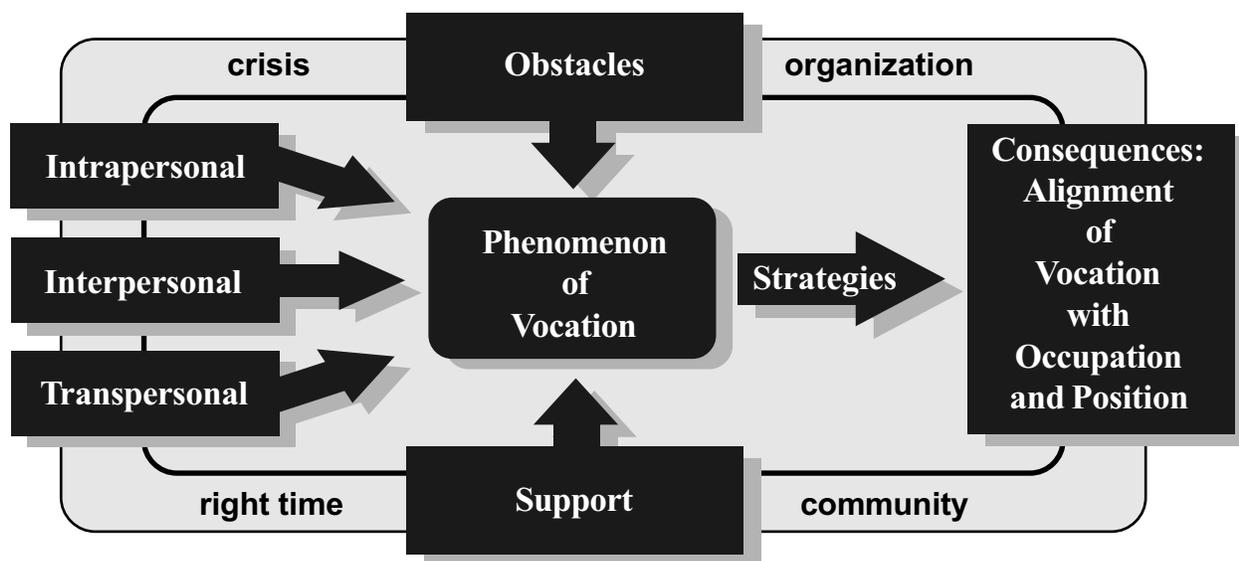
The proposed paradigm model of the Path of Vocation is:

(A) Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Transpersonal awareness leads to (B) Vocation which occurs within the context (C) of the community, right time, organization, crises, or job dissatisfaction which is affected by (D) the intervening conditions of support/obstacles by the individual and others which are modified by the (E) strategies of seeking support, addressing family concerns, continuing even with self-doubt, and following the steps in the ordination process. The consequences (F) of these strategies is the alignment of vocation, occupation, and position, and ordination as a priest.

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Although limited in its ability to display the dynamic process and phenomenon of Vocation, the following is a graphical representation of the Path of Vocation



Identity/authenticity, other people, and call were identified as the most significant motivational factors in the survey responses. These are analogous to the finding of the interview analysis where Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, and Transpersonal are the major categories and a causal condition in the Path of Vocation. The reasons for resistance to call, as described by the respondents, supported the identified intervening conditions of support and obstacles by themselves and others, thus linking the Intrapersonal and Interpersonal aspects and the links between those two categories and the Transpersonal aspects of the path of vocation. Vocation is expressed and practiced in the incarnation of the transpersonal in both the intrapersonal and interpersonal.

So, why do people change from a career or occupation to a vocation? At some point in their lives an individual experiences a unitive moment (the transpersonal) which some would call God, label as a peak experience (Maslow, 1964), or in some other manner identify this moment as transcendence beyond the ego-centric self. It is this moment which these clergywomen identified as a divine call from God. This may have been a one-time event or an evolving process, during which the person comes to identify who they authentically are at the level of being. This call (the Transpersonal) emerges from and is enacted in the Intrapersonal and the Interpersonal as the individual pursues their path of vocation. It is the Transpersonal which makes the transition to a path of vocation different from other occupational changes. The Transpersonal awareness which transcends the ego and awakens the challenge to change, impacts the intrapersonal and interpersonal life and are thus enacted in an occupation.

I would suggest that this Path of Vocation is enacted in the following phases which have an iterative relationship. In Phase One, one comes to a point in her life where she is aware of a unitive moment which transcend ego-centric awareness. This awareness brings one to, as Teresa stated, “do I want to do health care for the rest of my life or is there a deeper dream?”. In Phase Two, the individual posits some tentative ideas which suggest possibilities of enacting one’s

authentic being in an occupation, or even as a way of life, which includes paid work. These tentative ideas often occur intrapersonally but at some point involve dialogue with a trusted other. In Phase Three, the individual considers her vocation within the context of her life responsibilities, interrelationship with others, and within the cultural context, which in this instance would be the local congregation and larger diocesan organization. To continue with Phase Four, the individual must come to a point where she feels her only apparent option is to say yes to the transcendent in order to authentically live her life. When this decision is made, the individual seeks to acquire the necessary training, education, and certification/approval to enact her vocation in an occupation. Phase Five is the trial period of identifying and working in a particular job which allows her to enact her vocation in a specific manner. Phase Six is the intertwining movement of job growth and transition within the context of the Path of Vocation. This is a lifelong process and is described by the participants as an on-going daily call to authenticity rather than to an image or a role.

#### Summary

This study sought to understand the meaning and experience of women’s career transitions in middle adulthood. Due to the population selected, the focus of the study shifted. This shift evolved from the participants’ understanding of the meaning and experience of the transition from a secular occupation to ordained ministry. As the repetitive concepts formed into categories and these categories developed into a paradigmatic model, the Path of Vocation emerged. This research needs to be considered for its applicability to other populations such as different occupational groups, men as well as women, differing denominations, different socio-economic levels, and to include more people of color. In a field of career psychology, this research was a first attempt to fill the gap in knowledge of the transpersonal dynamic in career psychology.