



Perceiving a calling and well-being: Motivation and access to opportunity as moderators

Ryan D. Duffy^{a,*}, Jessica W. England^a, Richard P. Douglass^a, Kelsey L. Autin^a, Blake A. Allan^b

^a University of Florida, United States

^b Purdue University, United States

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined moderator variables that may accentuate the effect of perceiving a calling on well-being amongst a large and diverse sample of working adults ($N = 746$). Drawing from Self Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) and the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT; Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016), perceiving a calling was hypothesized to have greater effects on wellbeing for individuals with greater calling motivation and access to vocational opportunity, as assessed by income and work volition. Three moderated, multiple mediator models using structural equation modeling were run to test these hypotheses. Specifically, life meaning and living a calling were positioned as mediator variables in the relation of perceiving a calling to life satisfaction and the paths from perceiving a calling to the mediators were proposed to be significantly moderated. Calling motivation was found to be a significant moderator for both paths, supporting propositions of SDT. As the motivation to pursue one's calling increased, the direct effects on life meaning and living a calling and the indirect effects on life satisfaction were stronger. Income was also found to be a significant moderator, supporting propositions of the PWT, but only in the relation of perceiving a calling to living a calling. It was proposed that work volition—a variable related to the perception of vocational opportunity—may be better positioned as correlate of calling variables versus a moderator variable affecting the impact of having a calling. Practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The link between feeling a calling to a particular kind of work to life satisfaction—and the reason why these two variables are related—has been well documented in a series of studies (e.g., Duffy, Allan, Autin, & Bott, 2013; Duffy & Dik, 2013; Steger, Pickering, Shin, & Dik, 2010; Yoon, Daley, & Curlin, 2016). When someone has a calling they are believed to feel drawn to a career that is both personally meaningful and prosocial in nature (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Hagmaier & Abele, 2012), and individuals with a career calling tend to be happier due to enacting that calling and experiencing heightened life meaning (Douglass, Duffy, & Autin, 2016; Duffy et al., 2013; Steger et al., 2010). However, a missing piece of this equation concerns an understanding of the types of individuals that are more likely to reap the benefits of a felt calling. Although research with a large sample of working adults in United States has demonstrated that 50% feel a calling (Duffy, Autin, Allan, & Douglass, 2015), only a portion live out or derive meaning from this calling, likely decreasing the impact a calling has on well-being (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015; Duffy & Autin, 2013; Duffy, Bott, Allan, Torrey, & Dik, 2012; Duffy, Douglass, Autin, England, & Dik, 2016).

* Corresponding author at: University of Florida, Department of Psychology, PO Box 112250, Gainesville, FL 32611, United States.
E-mail address: rduf@ufl.edu (R.D. Duffy).

In the current study, we draw from two perspectives to explore potential moderator variables in the relation of perceiving a calling to living a calling, life meaning, and in turn life satisfaction. Grounded in Self Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000), we examine how the *motivation to pursue a calling* may serve as a critical link between these variables, such that individuals who are more motivated to pursue a felt calling may be more likely to experience heightened well-being. Additionally, grounded in the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT; Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016), we examine whether variables that allow for *access to vocational opportunity*—specifically higher levels of income and work volition—may strengthen the relation from feeling a calling to well-being. Results from this study may have important implications for practice, advancing our understanding of the types of variables that may strengthen the impact of calling on well-being and can be targeted with clients who feel called to a particular occupation.

2. Calling and life satisfaction model

Scholars researching calling have emphasized the importance of differentiating the ways the construct can be approached (Duffy & Dik, 2013). Specifically, individuals can be a) searching for a calling, b) perceiving a calling, and c) living out a calling, all of which are typically assessed on a spectrum. Searching for a calling reflects the degree to which one is seeking to find her or his calling whereas perceiving a calling reflects the degree to which a calling is currently manifesting itself in one's approach to work. Living out a calling reflects the degree to which a felt calling is currently being enacted in a specific job. The distinction between perceiving a calling and living a calling is especially important, as scholars have consistently demonstrated these are not the same constructs and tend to only correlate around the 0.50 level (Duffy et al., 2013; Duffy & Autin, 2013).

The positive association between perceiving a calling and life satisfaction has been established across student (Duffy, Manuel, Borges, & Bott, 2011; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010; Hirschi & Hermann, 2012; Praskova, Creed, & Hood, 2015a; Zhang, Herrmann, Hirschi, Wei, & Zhang, 2015) and working adult (Duffy et al., 2013; Peterson, Park, Hall, & Seligman, 2009) populations. Several studies have examined specific mediators that might explain the relation of perceiving a calling and life satisfaction. For example, Duffy, Allan, and Bott (2012) and Steger et al. (2010) each found life meaning to be a significant mediator, suggesting that the reason why those who feel a calling may be happier is because they experience greater meaning in life. Other research by Duffy et al. (2013) highlighted living a calling as a potential mediator in the link between feeling a calling and life satisfaction. Specifically, the authors noted that many individuals may not have the opportunity to live out a felt calling, and demonstrated that living a calling mediated the link of perceiving a calling and life satisfaction. In other words, the reason those with a calling were happier may be because they were actually living out that felt calling.

A recent study by Duffy, Douglass, Autin, England, and Dik (2016) integrated each of these potential mediators into one model. The authors tested a model, which included life meaning and living a calling as simultaneous mediators of the perceiving calling–life satisfaction link with a large and diverse sample of employed adults. The authors found each of these variables to be significant mediators, and after accounting for both mediators, the relation between perceiving a calling and life satisfaction was not only diminished but also reversed to be significantly negative. This indicated a suppression effect and provided strong evidence that the positive life satisfaction impacts of a felt calling exist only so long as individuals are living it out and are experiencing life meaning. This exact model was later replicated in a study with retired adults (Duffy, Torrey, England, & Tebbe, 2016) and an analogous model will be examined in the present study. Building from these findings, we hypothesize that perceiving a calling will be positively related to living a calling (*Hypothesis 1*) and life meaning (*Hypothesis 2*); living a calling (*Hypothesis 3*) and life meaning (*Hypothesis 4*) will be positively related to life satisfaction; and life meaning and living a calling (*Hypothesis 5*) will each significantly, fully mediate the link between perceiving a calling and life satisfaction.

3. Moderators in the life satisfaction model

As research advances our understanding of the link between calling and well-being, it is important to assess whether specific variables serve to accentuate these effects. Namely, do certain constructs exist that strengthen the relation between perceiving a calling and the two key mediator variables: life meaning and living a calling? Finding such moderation effects may be helpful from a practical perspective when working with individuals who want to maximize the well-being benefits of a felt calling. In the following section, we draw from two larger theoretical frameworks—SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and the PWT (Duffy et al., 2016)—to investigate whether the motivation to pursue a calling and/or access to vocational opportunity act as moderator variables within the life satisfaction model.

3.1. Self determination — a motivational perspective

Feeling a calling to a particular career becomes increasingly more significant as individuals pursue their career goals and search for meaningful work (Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010). One's calling can represent a type of goal that he or she must proactively pursue, and the motivation to move toward this goal can be understood through the core ideas of Self Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Within SDT, it is theorized that human motivation toward completing a goal is at its peak when individuals experience competence (i.e., self-efficacy toward the activity), autonomy (i.e., personal control over the activity), and relatedness (i.e., experience of human belonging and connection; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000) around that specific goal. According to SDT, being motivated to pursue a goal will maximize effort and energy around that goal, which increases the chance of goal attainment and, in turn, heightens well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Interestingly, these ideas also represent a cornerstone

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