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Calling and work-related outcomes: Career commitment as a mediator

Ryan D. Duffy [a,*], Bryan J. Dik [b], Michael F. Steger [b]

[a] Department of Psychology, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, 32601, USA
[b] Department of Psychology, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, 80523, USA

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ABSTRACT

The current study tested the hypothesis that experiencing a calling to a particular career would relate positively to work-related outcomes, and that these relations would be mediated by career commitment. Using a sample of 370 employees representing diverse occupations at a Western research university, results supported these hypotheses as calling moderately correlated with career commitment, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment and weakly correlated with withdrawal intentions. Career commitment was found to fully mediate the calling–job satisfaction relation, partially mediate the calling–organizational commitment relation, and act as a suppressor in the relation between calling and withdrawal intentions; calling was associated with somewhat greater withdrawal intentions once a person's level of career commitment was taken into consideration. These results suggest that career commitment may represent a critical link between calling and work-related well-being. Implications for research and practice are explored.

The notion that work can be a "calling" seems an increasingly popular concept in the current milieu, given the proliferation of books, websites, and slogans (e.g., Monster.com's "Your calling is calling") related to the concept. The use of "calling" to describe one's work has a long history; dating at least to the 16th century, theologians and scholars from various traditions have examined the notion that the full range of occupations can have spiritual significance and be approached as a calling. Although no consensus definition exists of the term, a recent review by Dik and Duffy (2009) combined key elements of previous definitions and described a calling as, "a transcendent summons, experienced as originating beyond the self, to approach a particular life role (in this case work) in a manner oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation" (p. 427). According to this definition, individuals with a calling to a particular area of work perceive it as coming from a force "beyond the self' (e.g., God, a social need, a family legacy); includes a sense that work can be helpful to people or the broader society, even if indirectly; and suggests that a calling helps facilitate a broader sense of purpose in life. This approach also conceptualizes calling as an ongoing process rather than a one-time event; as a continuous variable that applies to individuals as a matter of degree, rather than as a binary concept that one either experiences entirely or not at all; and as something that people may currently experience ("presence" of calling) or may be seeking ("search" for calling).

The increased popular use of "calling" has been paralleled by increased attention to the term within positive psychology, vocational psychology, industrial–organizational psychology, management, and sociology (see Bellah et al., 1986; Dobrow, 2007; Duffy, 2006; Duffy & Dik, 2009; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Elangovan et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). Indeed, it is becoming increasingly important to better understand the contemporary relevance of calling and to evaluate how having a calling may affect the experiences of working adults. The purpose of the current study is to explore the extent to which the presence of a calling relates to positive work-related outcomes and to examine one potential mediator, career commitment, to help explain these relations.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: rduf@ufl.edu (R.D. Duffy).

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Research on work as a calling

The literature on measuring and assessing perceptions of work as a calling is limited, but growing, with vocational psychologists mainly studying the role of calling among adolescent and young adult populations and I/O psychologists and management researchers studying the role of calling among adult populations and in the workplace. Two early studies by Davidson and Caddell (1994) and Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) surveyed working adults representing diverse occupations and asked them to read three different paragraphs relating to potential views of the working role, one of which was framed by the authors as a calling. In each study, those endorsing a calling were more satisfied at work and in their daily lives. A more recent study by Peterson, Park, Hall, and Seligman (2009) used the same methodology as Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) and found calling to moderately correlate with work zest and life satisfaction and strongly correlate with work satisfaction. Other studies have targeted employees within particular occupational groups. For example, a study by Bunderson and Thompson (2009) with zookeepers found that the extent to which participants endorsed a calling moderately correlated with occupational identification, occupational importance, work meaningfulness, and perceived organizational duty. Dobrow (2007) found that among musicians, perceptions of calling were related to level of involvement in music activities, enjoyment of practicing, having parents involved in the arts, and enjoyment of socializing with other musicians, but not to ability level or demographic variables. Collectively, results from these studies suggest that adults who view their career as a calling appear to have higher levels of well-being, work satisfaction, enjoyment of their work, and occupational commitment. Such results are consonant with the theoretical work of Elangovan et al. (2010) and Hall and Chandler (2005), whose conceptual models of calling in organizational contexts predict such relationships.

A similar set of studies on this construct has used populations of college students still preparing to enter the working world in earnest. Duffy and Sedlacek (2010) distributed the Brief Calling Scale (BCS; Dik, Sargent & Steger, 2008) to first year college students to explore the degree to which students endorsed this term and to investigate its relation with well-being. Items from BCS-presence subscale were, “I have a calling to a particular kind of work” and “I have a good understanding of my calling as it applies to my career.” Over 35% of participants responded “mostly true” or “totally true” to each of these items, suggesting that a substantial segment of undergraduate students endorse this term. Additionally, having a calling was found to weakly correlate with life satisfaction and moderately correlate with life meaning. These latter results mirror findings by Steger, Pickering, Shin, and Dik (2010) who found similar relations to life satisfaction and life meaning.

Other research using undergraduates has examined how calling relates to career outcomes, such as decidedness, self-efficacy, and vocational self-clarity. Duffy and Sedlacek (2007) found the presence of a calling to strongly correlate with career decidedness, choice comfort, and self-clarity and moderately correlate with choice-work salience. Using these same instruments, Steger et al. (2010) found calling to moderately correlate with decidedness. Additionally, Dik, Eldridge et al. (2008) and Dik, Sargent, and Steger (2008) found the sense of a calling to moderately correlate with positive work-related outcome expectations and weakly correlate with career self-efficacy and intrinsic work motivation.

In sum, these results suggest that for working adults and undergraduate students, greater endorsement of work as a calling may relate to favorable career and well-being outcomes. Specifically, those more likely to endorse a calling may be more satisfied with life and work, may view life as more meaningful, may be more decided and committed to their careers, and may be more committed to their organizations. However, research exploring organizational outcomes is limited and the studies that have been completed have suffered methodological limitations (e.g., examining calling as a categorical instead of continuous variable or examining adults from only one occupation; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Davidson & Caddell, 1994; Peterson et al., 2009; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). In the next section we review literature that links related constructs to positive organizational outcomes in an effort to build hypotheses and explore how calling may be distinct from similar variables.

Broader context and related constructs

We conceptualize a calling as defined in the manner proposed by Dik and Duffy (2009), namely as a sense in which (a) one feels called by some external, beyond-the-self force, to a particular career in a manner that (b) is a source or expression of one's broader sense of meaning and purpose in life, and that (c) views the needs or benefits of others as a motivating force. Clearly, components of this definition overlap with previously established areas of research. At a global level, research on calling fits within the larger context provided by theory and research on meaning in life. Scholars following the tradition of Frankl (1963) have agreed that part of living the good life is living a meaningful life, in which people are able to make sense of their experiences and frame their activities and goals in light of a sense of purpose. Steger (2009) noted that these two fundamental functions, comprehension and purpose, form the basis of life meaning, and they have been extended into a model of meaningful work, which is closely related to calling (Steger & Dik, 2010). Experiencing meaning in life correlates with a broad spectrum of benefits, including fulfillment and satisfaction (Reker & Wong, 1988), subjective well-being (Emmons, 1999), enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and physical health (Steger, Mann, Michels, & Cooper, 2009). Despite such consistent relations between meaning in life and beneficial criterion variables, *sources* of meaning are rarely investigated. Meaning in life likely is derived from activity across a range of life roles, although work has been identified a particularly likely candidate for spurring meaning and purpose (Ryff & Singer, 1998).

A second area of research, still broader than research on calling per se, has focused on meaningful work (see Steger & Dik, 2010, for a review). Typically, researchers interested in this construct have investigated proxies of meaningful work, such as intrinsic work motivation (e.g., Amabile, Hill, Hennessey & Tighe, 1994), the importance of work in the context of life (e.g., Dubin, 1956), patterns of subjective work meanings (e.g., Brief & Nord, 1990), and work engagement (e.g., Stairs & Galpin, 2009). Some have explored characteristics of jobs that make work meaningful (e.g., Hackman & Oldman, 1976); others have investigated work meaning displayed