



## Callings in career: A typological approach to essential and optional components

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### ABSTRACT

A sense of calling in career is supposed to have positive implications for individuals and organizations but current theoretical development is plagued with incongruent conceptualizations of what does or does not constitute a calling. The present study used cluster analysis to identify essential and optional components of a presence of calling among 407 German undergraduate students from different majors. Three types of calling merged: “negative career self-centered”, “pro-social religious”, and “positive varied work orientation”. All types could be described as vocational identity achieved (high commitment/high self-exploration), high in career confidence and career engagement. Not defining characteristics were centrality of work or religion, endorsement of specific work values, or positivity of core self-evaluations. The results suggest that callings entail intense self-exploration and might be beneficial because they correspond with identity achievement and promote career confidence and engagement while not necessarily having pro-social orientations. Suggestions for future research, theory and practice are suggested.

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### Introduction

In recent years, there has been increased scientific interest in the perception of having a calling regarding one's career, or “work that a person perceives as [her or] his purpose in life” (Hall & Chandler, 2005, p. 160). It has been argued that a sense of calling is the ultimate form of subjective career success and an important promoter of career metacompetencies, such as identity and adaptability (Hall & Chandler, 2005). A sense of calling is also regarded as an important source of meaning and purpose in work, and it corresponds with the emerging interest in positive organizational scholarship whose purpose is to investigate the conditions that enable employees and organizations to thrive and reach their full potential (Cameron & Caza, 2004; Steger & Dik, 2010; Wrzesniewski, 2003). Supporting the proposed positive effects of a sense of calling, empirical research has shown that there is a positive relationship between work and life satisfaction, meaning in life, career decidedness, career choice comfort, self clarity, choice-work salience, work enjoyment, and positive affect (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007, 2010; Steger, Pickering, Shin, & Dik, 2010; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997).

Despite these promising results, there is still disagreement over what exactly defines a sense of calling. For example, for Dik and Duffy (2009), it entails an external summons, which distinguishes it from the notion of vocation. However, Hall and Chandler (2005) and Elangovan, Pinder, and McLean (2010) propose that a calling can also stem from within and originate from intense self-reflection. Likewise, several notions stress the importance of other-directed and pro-social values as a part of one's calling (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Elangovan et al., 2010), while others do not consider this to be a defining component (Hall & Chandler, 2005). In order to advance our understanding of calling in one's work and career, it seems necessary to clarify the concept.

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The present paper makes a contribution to this emerging literature by proposing and empirically investigating the notion that a sense of calling ought to be approached from a typological perspective. That is, we propose that there are different types of callings for different people. We propose, and subsequently empirically demonstrate, that some key components are present among all types of calling, while others are true for some but not others. In this way, the present study contributes to a greater conceptual clarity of what may or may not constitute a sense of calling, which can guide further research and practice in this area.

### *What constitutes a calling?*

In its earliest forms, calling has been perceived in a religious way as a summons by God for a religious life and, later, as a calling for whatever honest work one might be supposed to do (for historical overviews, see [Dik & Duffy, 2009](#); [Elangovan et al., 2010](#)). Until today, calling has been defined by some as a call to serve God or as a summons by God to a particular career ([Dalton, 2001](#); [Davidson & Caddell, 1994](#)). However, most current conceptualizations of the construct acknowledge that religiosity is neither necessary nor sufficient to experience a calling in work. [Hall and Chandler \(2005\)](#) define a calling as a sense of purpose, that is, the work one was meant to do (p. 155), and as work that a person perceives as his purpose in life (p. 160). As such, they propose a secular view of calling, where (a) the source of calling comes from within the individual; (b) the calling serves the individual and/or community; (c) the calling is identified by means of introspection, reflection, meditation, and/or relational activities; and (d) the meaning of a calling is enacting one's individual purpose for personal fulfillment.

While the possible secular nature of one's calling is also acknowledged by [Dik and Duffy \(2009\)](#), they differ in some important aspects from the secular notion proposed by [Hall and Chandler \(2005\)](#). In their conceptualization ([Dik & Duffy, 2009](#)), a calling is distinct from a vocation. Both entail an overall sense of purpose and meaningfulness. However, a calling is distinct from a vocation in that it emerges from a transcendent summons, experienced as originating beyond oneself. This summons does not need to be experienced as stemming from God but can also stem from the needs of society or a serendipitous fate. Another defining component of calling (and vocation) for [Dik and Duffy](#) is that it holds other-oriented values as the primary source of motivation. In this way, they define calling as "a transcendent summons, experienced as originating beyond the self, to approach a particular life role 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" ([Dik & Duffy, 2009, p. 427](#)). They further propose that a calling is an inclusive and cross-culturally relevant construct that involves an ongoing process of evaluating the purpose and meaningfulness in one's work and is not immediately and finally discovered. Moreover, their definition implies that every person can potentially have a vocation and that a calling can occur in every legitimate area of work ([Wrzesniewski et al., 1997](#)).

Still another conceptualization has been proposed by [Elangovan et al. \(2010\)](#). For them, calling is "a course of action in pursuit of pro-social intentions embodying the convergence of an individual's sense of what he or she would like to do, should do, and actually does" ([Elangovan et al., 2010, p. 430](#)). Importantly, their conceptualization does not include the focus on an external summons as proposed by [Dik and Duffy \(2009\)](#). They suggest ([Elangovan et al., 2010](#)) that callings have three fundamental features: (a) an action orientation reference to the course of action used to enact one's calling and not just being an attitude or perception if it; (b) a sense of clarity of purpose and personal mission; and (c) pro-social intentions.

As can be seen from these recent conceptualizations, there are some similarities, as well as significant differences, in what does or does not constitute a calling. All of the definitions seem to agree that a sense of calling entails a sense of purpose and meaning in work. However, they disagree over whether a calling stems from an external summons or can also come from within the individual as a result of intense self-reflection. Moreover, many see pro-social values and goals as a defining component. However, for [Hall and Chandler](#), this only applies to a religious notion of calling and not to their proposed secular view, where callings might also serve the individual.

In an attempt to provide clarity to what people actually perceive as the meaning of a calling, [Hunter, Dik, and Banning \(2010\)](#) asked 435 U.S. undergraduate students how they would define "calling", what it would mean for them to approach their career as a calling, and whether and how calling would apply to areas of life other than work. Their results showed that for many students, calling was defined as including a guiding force, personal fit, eudemonic well-being, and altruism. Students further reported that approaching their career as a calling meant following the guiding forces, pursuing their interests, talents and/or meaning, displaying altruism, and showing effortless dedication. Finally, they noted that a calling could apply not just to work but also to relationships, to meaningful activities, to one's lifestyle/character, or simply to everything in life. [Hunter et al. \(2010\)](#) interpret these results as confirming [Dik and Duffy \(2009\)](#) definition of a calling as including an external summons, meaning, and pro-social goals. However, the results also suggest that this might be true for some but not other participants, where calling might have a different meaning and connotation.

It seems clear that if we want to meaningfully proceed in the scientific investigation of calling and careers, we need a greater degree of conceptual clarity of the defining characteristics of callings that apply to all people, as well as the components that might be true for some but not others. The present study makes such an empirical investigation based on a person-centered typological approach. This approach assumes that study participants can differ significantly in the constructs of interest and that subgroups should be identified ([Molenaar, 2004](#); [Vondracek & Porfeli, 2002](#)). Conversely, the dominant variable-centered approach (e.g., correlation, regression, factor analysis, and structural equation modeling) relies on mean patterns and relationships among variables that are true for the "average" participant of a study. Given the diversified nature of the conceptualization of calling in its current state, this approach might therefore blur important individual differences. Many studies on calling and career ([Dobrow & Higgins, 2005](#); [Hunter et al., 2010](#); [Novak, 1996](#)) have used qualitative methods to tap individual and diversified meanings of calling. However, these approaches are limited in that they cannot provide exact numerical and statistical analyses of common and

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