CALLING ATTENTION TO 20 YEARS OF RESEARCH: A COMPREHENSIVE META-ANALYSIS OF CALLING

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ABSTRACT

This study provides the first comprehensive meta-analysis of the relationship between calling and its central constructs. This approach sheds light on what we know, as well as what we do *not* know, about calling's relationships with a range of outcomes, antecedents, and correlates to outline an agenda for future research.

INTRODUCTION

The question of how people derive meaning from their work has drawn considerable attention from management scholars (for reviews, see Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). People are driven to find meaning, in work as in life (Michaelson, Pratt, Grant, & Dunn, 2014); yet, recent changes in the way work and careers are organized in the current economy can challenge such attempts (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2018; Sennett, 1998). Work can provide different types of meanings, such as being a means to a financial end or as a fulfilling end in itself (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). In particular, what has captivated both scholars and practitioners alike is how people come to view their work as deeply meaningful and as holding a great deal of significance and centrality in their lives (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003)—that is, viewing work as a *calling*.

Wrzesniewski and colleagues (1997) first introduced the notion of calling into the organizational behavior literature two decades ago as one of three orientations (along with "job" and "career") people might have toward their work. Those with a "calling" orientation find their work to be morally inseparable from their life, intrinsically rewarding, personally fulfilling, and central to their identity (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1996; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Scholars have built on this work to flesh out what it means to experience a calling (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011). Calling research has proliferated to the point where scholars have recently worked to synthesize the extant definitions of calling (e.g., Dik & Shimizu, 2018) and provide conceptual reviews of the literature (e.g., Thompson & Bunderson, 2019).

Callings matter in part because they are typically regarded as being linked to highly positive outcomes. Given the deep sense of passion, meaningfulness, and contribution that can accompany a calling, positive benefits can accrue both to employees experiencing strong callings and to their employers (e.g., Dik & Duffy, 2009; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Nevertheless, research on calling is not all positive, leading scholars to conceptualize callings as "double-edged swords" (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). The same qualities that make employees with callings so valuable may also lead to negative consequences, including being exploited by management (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009) and engaging in well-intentioned but counterproductive work behaviors (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017).

Taken together, several key theoretical tensions—reflecting points of sustained debate about callings—emerge in this area. The first and foremost of these tensions concerns the double-edged nature of calling—that is, the extent to which callings are "bright" versus "dark"—for people's work, careers, and lives (Lysova, Jansen, Khapova, Plomp, & Tims, 2018; Thompson & Bunderson, 2019). The other four tensions concern whether callings are self-focused (e.g., personally meaningful) versus other-focused (e.g., make the world a better place) (e.g., Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Thompson & Bunderson, 2019); whether there are different outcomes of experiencing versus searching for callings (Duffy & Dik, 2013); whether callings truly differ from related constructs, such as work engagement and job satisfaction (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Wrzesniewski, 2003); and whether callings relate differently to work and career versus non-work outcomes. These five theoretical tensions indicate the need to take stock of the calling literature, both to evaluate where the extant empirical evidence stands and to guide research moving forward. Yet, while conceptual reviews have been conducted recently (e.g., Duffy & Dik, 2013; Thompson & Bunderson, 2019), a comprehensive quantitative review has not yet been conducted.

Thus, we attempt to address this gap—and, so, speak to the five theoretical tensions above—by conducting the first comprehensive meta-analysis of calling, thereby pushing forward research on calling and, more broadly, on the meaning of work and careers. Our analyses encompass the most frequently studied constructs across 201 quantitative studies of calling and thus present a wide-ranging set of meta-analytic results about the calling literature. In so doing, we seek to answer the following two research questions about calling: (1) *What do we know?* What are the dominant patterns of results for calling, especially in relation to its outcomes? Do moderators like study design and sample characteristics affect these patterns of results? (2) *What do we still* not *know?* What are the critical gaps in our understanding of calling, and what future research would help address these gaps? Our analyses provide a constructive critique of extant research that we hope will shape future calling theory and research, and practical recommendations about callings at work.

THEORY

A Comprehensive Conceptual Model of Calling

In developing our conceptual model, we identified the constructs most frequently studied in relation to calling: *outcomes* of calling, which fall into several broad categories, including psychological, behavioral, and other-oriented outcomes; *antecedents* (i.e., constructs treated by studies as precursors of calling) and *correlates* (i.e., constructs for which studies did not provide strong theoretical arguments for ordering, often control variables). We explore *moderators* of calling's relationship with other constructs, namely characteristics of the studies (e.g., study design, sample composition, and type of national culture) that might affect the generalizability of these

relationships. To classify constructs into our framework, we followed the primary studies' predominant treatment of the relationship between calling and these constructs. We present full theoretical explanations and hypotheses for each category in the full paper.

A Resource Theories Framework

To develop our general predictions regarding calling's links with other constructs, we draw from a resource theories framework in which people strive to obtain, retain, and foster those things they centrally value for survival purposes (Hobfoll, 2002). These psychosocial resources may be tangible, such as physical assets and material goods, or intangible, such as personal characteristics or energies (e.g., time, knowledge). Taken together, resource theories may lead to divergent predictions regarding the various links of callings to other constructs outlined in our model. The intense and consuming nature of callings may mean that they require substantial resources to pursue. Strong callings may thus *deplete* individuals' resources, leading to a range of negative outcomes. Alternatively, the sense of fulfilment, passion, and meaningfulness callings provide may not deplete resources and instead may help people conserve or even generate additional resources. People with stronger callings may also be less vulnerable to resource loss as well as more capable of *conserving, replenishing,* or even *generating* resources, thus leading to a range of positive outcomes. We test these two competing predictions using our resource framework theorizing.

METHOD

We conducted a comprehensive search to locate all published and unpublished studies on calling, including research databases, conference programs, "forward searching" for articles that cited key calling scales and/or studies, and relevant listservs. We included studies in the meta-analysis if they met five criteria: 1) be empirical and quantitative in nature; 2) measure individuals' calling (using any measure or scale); 3) report sufficient information to allow effect size computation; 4) be written (or translated) into English; and 5) be conducted in our study timeframe (March 1997-January 2018). Using these criteria, our overall sample consisted of 201 papers, comprised of 240 independent samples (total sample size across studies = 185,857; the full paper lists all included studies).

We developed a comprehensive coding scheme of various relevant features of the studies, including several aspects of calling, the constructs measured in relation to calling, and characteristics of the studies or samples we examine as moderators. In particular, we assigned each outcome, antecedent and correlate variable ($n = 2{,}118$) into a higher-order variable category, grouping like with like, based on consulting the original studies (e.g., we assigned variables like "job satisfaction," "satisfaction with domain," and "work enjoyment" to the variable category "job satisfaction and enjoyment"). We rank-ordered these variable categories by frequency and analyzed those most commonly tested in the calling literature: 42 categories, comprised of 1,254 variables.

We conducted our meta-analyses using Comprehensive Meta-Analysis (CMA) Version 3 software's random-effects model (Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins, & Rothstein, 2013), following the Hedges and Olkins (1985) approach. Our analyses included one meta-analysis apiece for the relationship between calling and each of our 42 variable categories. To explore moderators, we conducted a series of subgroup analyses using the mixed-effects model in CMA. To compare calling with searching for calling, we conducted additional meta-analyses of the relationship between searching for calling and each of the variable categories with sufficient data ($n = 11$).

RESULTS, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSION

What We Know about Calling

Our results, which we present in detail in the full paper, shed light on five major theoretical tensions in the calling literature. First, regarding calling's dark versus bright side, our results support the notion of callings as double-edged swords (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Lysova et al., 2018). On the bright side, callings were positively associated with a host of positive psychological work, career and life outcomes, including job and domain satisfaction, work engagement and involvement, and well-being, as well as other-oriented psychological and behavioral outcomes. Interestingly, we found that callings were slightly more important for eudaimonic well-being (i.e., well-being concerned with self-realization and meaning, in our variable category "psychological well-being," $r = .45$) than for hedonic well-being (i.e., well-being concerned with happiness and pleasure, in our variable category "subjective well-being," $r = .28$) (Heller, Watson, & Ilies, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2001), reflecting calling's significance for deeper growth-oriented rather than more fleeting, pleasurable types of happiness. Also on the bright side, counter to our expectation, callings were related to lower work-family conflict.

On the dark side, callings were associated with greater challenge stressors, which prior research suggests should lead to greater strain (e.g., burnout and exhaustion; Bliese, Edwards, & Sonnentag, 2017). Interestingly, though, we did not find support for the relationship between calling and strain; to the contrary, stronger callings were associated with *lower* strain ($r = -.23$, $p < .001$)—and, moreover, callings were not associated with hindrance stressors ($r = -.06$, $p = .29$), which obstruct growth and accomplishment. Our findings suggest that people with stronger callings may face more stressful work conditions, yet at the same time, these strong callings may buffer the effect of workplaces stressors on strain—resulting in people with stronger callings being better able to handle these conditions, possibly because they construe stress more positively in the first place. Nevertheless, the reverse causal direction is also possible, such that challenging professions could lead people to rationalize their experiences by viewing their work as a calling. We encourage additional research on the dark side of calling, which has been explored in previous studies (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Lysova et al., 2018), but was largely not borne out in our meta-analysis. These findings generally support the theorizing that callings can be thought of as a resource, or as something that generates, rather than depletes, resources.

Second, regarding calling's self- versus other-focus, we found that more calling research has assessed the relationship between calling and self-oriented constructs than other-oriented constructs. This is surprising considering the strong "other"-orientation adopted in many conceptualizations of calling (e.g., Dik & Shimizu, 2018). Overall, our analyses demonstrate that calling was linked to both self-focused (e.g., job and domain satisfaction, perceived ability, core self-evaluations, and intrinsic motivation) as well as other-focused constructs (e.g., other-oriented psychological and behavioral outcomes, both at work and in life). Calling was at times more strongly related to self-focused outcomes (e.g., job and domain satisfaction) than to other-related outcomes, suggesting the need to loosen the assumption that callings "must" be other-oriented by definition. We also note the unexpected finding that callings were (weakly) positively linked to higher, rather than lower, extrinsic motivation. This finding is in contrast to previous suggestions that people with strong callings make a trade-off between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Wrzesniewski, Schwartz, Cong, Kane, Omar, & Kolditz, 2014). We found that people with stronger callings are both more intrinsically and extrinsically motivated—though to a lesser degree

extrinsically, in line with recent theorizing arguing that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are not necessarily at odds with each other (Amabile & Pratt, 2016; Howard, Gagné, & Bureau, 2017).

Third, regarding whether searching for one's calling provides the same benefits as actually experiencing a calling, our findings reveal that they yield different outcomes, thus indicating a dark side for the initial stages of calling development. We found an overall pattern in which callings were linked with numerous positive outcomes, whereas searching for a calling did not yield these same benefits—and in some cases, was even associated with negative outcomes. For instance, people with stronger callings experienced *less* strain, but people who were searching for a calling experienced *more* strain. Thus, while the ultimate experience of callings is largely positive, the process of searching for a calling is largely negative, often entailing hardship and and exhaustion. Nevertheless, intriguingly, we found that the search stage itself, while stressful and unpleasant, was actually perceived as meaningful and as intrinsically motivating.

Fourth, we addressed the tension around calling's discriminant validity from comparable constructs such as job satisfaction, work engagement, and career commitment. We found correlations ranging from .46-.61, thus indicating that, while related, calling is indeed distinct from these constructs. Further, calling's correlation with intrinsic motivation was .26, in line with the discriminant nature of calling and intrinsic motivation (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), yet is much lower than might be expected given the inclusion of intrinsic factors in several definitions of calling (e.g., Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010; Cardador & Caza, 2012). Calling is also distinguishable from the other two work orientations. Although calling and career orientation are conceptually orthogonal, our meta-analytic results suggested a weak positive relationship ($r = .11$, $p = .07$). While calling and job orientation are conceptual opposites, we did not find as strong a negative relationship as expected ($r = -.47$, $p < .001$). Taken together, these results provide considerable evidence for calling's construct validity.

Lastly, we found that the impact of experiencing a calling toward work can be felt not only in the proximal domains of work and career (e.g., job and domain satisfaction, career commitment) but also in the more distal realm of life as a whole (e.g., psychological and subjective well-being). This indicates that rather than affecting only the expected work and career outcomes, calling's impact is quite far-reaching and can spill over between domains (Hirschi, Shockley, & Zacher, 2019). Overall, the magnitude of the effect sizes for work and career outcomes versus life outcomes was roughly comparable, though the largest effect sizes belong to the psychological work and career outcomes categories. We also examined the extent to which the patterns of findings were contextually dependent, and found that across our three moderators—study design, sample composition, and type of national culture—our main analyses are robust.

What We Still Do Not Know about Calling: An Agenda for Future Research

Answering the question of "why?" Our comprehensive results provide considerable insight into the relationships between calling and a large number of constructs and also shed light on five theoretical tensions in the calling literature. Nevertheless, one important gap in the calling literature concerns the question of "why"—that is, why or how is calling linked to many positive constructs and a few negative constructs? We proposed two general contrasting predictions based on a resource theories framework (e.g., Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018), namely that either calling serves to conserve or even replenish resources (e.g., meaning, mastery), which should yield positive outcomes, or calling depletes resources, which should yield negative outcomes. Our pattern of results suggests that callings, in general, are either best considered a resource in themselves or as a path to generate and replenish other resources. Moreover, our results suggest

that calling may create a positive spiral among resources, similar to the notion of resource caravans in which resources are positively linked to each other (Hobfoll, 2011; Hobfoll et al., 2018), thus partially explaining why calling is positively related to such a wide-ranging set of positive outcomes at work and in life in general. There are, however, a few notable exceptions.

First, we found a positive relationship between callings and the "good" type of stressors, challenge stressors. Yet because these stressors still deplete resources (LePine, Podsakoff, & LePine, 2005), people with stronger callings may experience resource depletion. Second, people with stronger callings were more involved in calling-relevant activities, which may contribute to resource gain (e.g., by helping people gain social support), but also to depletion (e.g., spending time or money, such as paying for training). Third, despite their passion and likely high resource investment at work, our findings indicate that people with stronger callings do not earn greater income. Fourth, stronger callings were positively linked with other-oriented outcomes in both work and in life. People with stronger callings may thus be vulnerable to depleting their own resources in the name of serving others—an honorable quality, but also potentially leading to burnout (e.g., Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). Lastly, the more negative results we found for searching for calling suggest that, unlike experiencing a calling, the search process entails investing and using resources, which might lead to resource depletion (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Put simply, people searching for a calling may encounter considerable hardship and deprivation until their search ends. Our findings thus suggest that resource theories may be a useful and novel theoretical framework through which to view future calling research and, so, serve to deepen our understanding of *why* calling relates to other constructs as it does.

Addressing what was not there in calling research. In addition to the theoretical gaps identified above, our quantitative survey of the calling literature allowed us to identify variable categories in which we expected to see studies, but were altogether absent or too limited in numbers to include in the present meta-analysis. Broadly speaking, we strongly encourage future research to expand the range of outcomes considered, particularly ensuring that both the bright and dark sides are included as well as extending the limited number of quantitative studies of searching for calling and unanswered callings. Our meta-analysis also points to the need for a clearer understanding of calling's antecedents. Lastly, our findings highlight the importance of examining the temporal aspects of callings such that we build on our scholarly understanding of change in calling, which has primarily focused on early career, to establish a fundamental understanding of calling's evolution over the full adult career and life span (cf. Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, & Nesselroade, 2000): that is, callings that are not fully there yet (i.e., are being searched for, are unanswered, or are in the process of developing), how callings initially develop, how they evolve, sustain or even decline over time, and then disappear (Dobrow, 2013; Maitlis, 2009).

Conclusion

This comprehensive assessment of two decades of quantitative research on calling rigorously synthesized what we know and do not know about calling against the backdrop of five theoretical tensions in the calling literature. We found, by and large, that callings are even more positive than expected, but primarily for people fortunate enough to be experiencing them. People searching for callings do not reap these same benefits. We hope our findings will shape future calling theory and research, and, ultimately, guide practical recommendations about callings in the workplace, our careers, and lives more generally.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS